



Camerapix

What makes Michael walk?

by Fleur Ng'weno

What powers this man in his crusade to save the rhino? Michael Werikhe doesn't even like to walk very much. But in this case, the ends justify the means.

Michael's love for nature took root at the edge of sea, like the mangroves and coconuts he climbed. At the turn of the century, his pioneer grandfather had traveled from his ancestral home in eastern Uganda to settle in the coastal town of Mombasa. As a child, Michael was left in the care of his grandmother in Mombasa, and as soon as he was old enough to walk alone, he began to explore the seashore, the old reef with its tidepools full of life, the mangrove swamps at the edge of the tide.

He brought home little animals, lizards, tortoises, and young or injured birds that he cared for until they were strong enough to fly. His passion for these living things was so strong that even his grandmother over-

came her prejudices and let him look after them at home. Brought up to fear snakes, he discovered that the snakes he met in the wild wished him no harm, and he began a lifelong fascination with them.



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Michael's interest in nature may be rooted in a lonely childhood, but he was never afraid to share his enthusiasm with others. At primary school in Mombasa, he persuaded the other children to care for animals instead of teasing them. The teachers took notice and helped him to start a tortoise pit for the school.

When the family moved to Nairobi, the teachers at Hospital Hill School encouraged him to bring animals to class and helped him to find information in books, although they sometimes despaired that he did not spend enough time on his other studies. Michael was good at sports and good at science, but often neglected the other subjects.

In Nairobi, Michael discovered the Snake Park at the National Museum, a short walk from school. Here were other people who liked snakes as much as he did! Soon he spent every spare moment there, and by the time he was twelve years old, he was treated like one of the staff.

Here was a herpetologist without a degree, but primary school leaving exams in Kenya do not test for herpetologists: Michael's grades were mediocre. He man-

aged to secure a place in a boarding school at the coast, which was at least a rich snake habitat. His snakes first met a hostile reception from the other boys, but Michael's powers of persuasion soon won them over, to the point that they even let him keep snakes in the dormitory, as long as he slept on the bottom bunk so that he could catch any that escaped! A whole class of boys grew up with an appreciation of snakes and their place in nature.

Secondary school exams do not test for herpetologists either, and after Michael finished school he was employed for a while at a beach hotel. Determined to work with wildlife, he found a job with the game department, and was sent to work in the government's Ivory Room. Before the ban on hunting in Kenya, elephant tusks and rhino horns were sold at auction in Mombasa. To the other people sorting the tusks and rhino horns, it was a job. To Michael, it was a chamber of horrors, the ghosts of rhinoceros and elephants that once walked in majesty in the wild.

Unable to bear it, he quit and went to work for a snake collector. This was a job he could do well, a job that kept him outside in the nature he loved. Then Michael discovered that the collector was exporting the reptiles abroad, and that many of them were dying in transit. This was a final disillusionment. He quit again, and went to work in a factory. At least that was clean work.

The factory was AVA, Associated Vehicle Assemblers, in Mombasa. The management was quick to note young Werikhe's interest in nature and gift for handling animals. They arranged for him to give talks to the workers about snakes, and soon put him in charge of the guard dog section.

He enjoyed the work, yet it was not enough for the young man with a dream. He read avidly, reading of man's inexorable destruction of natural habitats and the precipitous decline of the black rhinoceros, whose horns he had held in his hands. Like so many young people fired with the message of conservation, he wanted to *do* something. But what could he do?

The Kenyan government was doing something. It had banned hunting and equipped a strong anti-poaching unit. But still the rhinos were dying.

Conservation organisations were doing something. They were alerting the world to the plight of the rhino, and fighting for international regulations to ban trade in wildlife products. But still the rhinos were dying.

Werikhe saw the rhino as the focus of all the threatened wildlife that he loved. He had to do something. And so he decided to walk from Mombasa to Nairobi to raise funds for the rhino.

AVA was supportive and agreed to give him time off, but do you give money to any earnest young man who comes walking down the road? Not likely, so Werikhe decided to go to Nairobi and ask the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya for sponsorship. Nathaniel arap Chumo, the National Organiser, was suspicious at first; was this a

con-man? Once convinced of Werikhe's intentions, he introduced him to N.K. arap Rotich, the East African Wild Life Society's Executive Director, and a partnership was born between Michael and the Society.

With the support of EAWLS, the Wildlife Clubs, and AVA, Michael set off on the hot and dusty road, taking a snake with him as a talking point when he met people along the way. The rewards of that journey were much greater than anticipated. Much-needed money was raised for the rhino; but more, Werikhe stirred the interest of the people he met, and became, himself, representative of Kenyans committed to conservation. I care, he said, do you?

This was a turning point in the evolution of wildlife conservation in Kenya. Up till then, it had been widely assumed that most Africans did not know or did not care about conservation, although the parks, the reserves, the anti-poaching units, are largely manned by Africans. Now here was someone who was not paid to work for wildlife, but sacrificed his own time and comfort for the cause.

Swara readers know the rest of the story. Rhino poaching intensified as the demand for rhino horn dagger handles went up in North Yemen and the demand for rhino horn as medicine continued in Asia. The Kenyan government began a programme of rhino sanctuaries, aided by a consortium of conservation organisations.

Michael walked across East Africa, as you read in 'Michael Werikhe: Rhino Man' by Gavin Bennett in the July/August 1985 issue of *Swara*. He found an answering chord of sympathy among the people of the East African countryside. The money he raised supported research projects, an overhauling of the water system in the Nakuru Park sanctuary, and other equipment. But the poaching of rhinos in the wild went on.

Dr Esmond Bradley Martin and his colleagues started a promising campaign to reduce the demand for rhino horn at its

source. Research on the rhino and management of rhino sanctuaries increased, and hope rose for the rhino in Kenya. But pressure intensified on the rhino in Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Now Michael Werikhe is walking in Europe. Starting from Assisi in Italy, home of St. Francis of Assisi, considered by many as the patron saint of animals, he will walk through some of Europe's most scenic countryside and most polluted industrial cities. He is scheduled to be in Italy in May, Switzerland in early and mid June, Germany from late June to the end of July, the Netherlands from the end of July to late August, and Britain from late August to early September 1988. *Swara* readers are invited to meet him and even walk awhile! The walk is co-ordinated by the East African Wild Life Society and the World Wide Fund for Nature, so your local WWF office or EAWLS representative will have up-to-date information.

During 1987, Michael, now 31, was married to Helen. At AVA, he started an afforestation project, rehabilitating a water runoff into a little wetland with a series of five dams to clean up the water, and planting hundreds of new trees. As usual, he has enlisted the help and support of the neighbourhood.

I asked Michael what message he would like to leave with the readers of *Swara*.

'I would love to meet *Swara* readers in Europe,' he quickly answered. 'I hope they will send money to protect the rhino, and convince their friends to avoid buying ivory, rhino horn and other wildlife products. I hope they keep up their membership in the East African Wild Life Society, for without the members, there would be no *Swara*. And I believe that each of us can do something to save the rhino.'

Then Michael quoted his friend, the late Emanuelle Gallman: 'I wonder if our children will see the land as it is now, for can such beauty go unspoiled for long? I hope they will see it, and may in turn tell their children of the beautiful land and creatures of East Africa.'

