

## Markus Borner, a life at the conservation front line



**Markus Borner**

Markus Borner was one of the most influential and far-reaching conservationists to have worked in Africa over the last half century. Many of the protected areas that have become icons of conservation in Africa benefited from his foresight and commitment to secure the long-term protection of wilderness and nature. During his 43-year career with the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) and later as an honorary professor with the University of Glasgow, he was instrumental in the establishment and development of protected areas across the continent. If one could lift the green polygons that demarcate the protected areas on a map of East Africa and carefully explore the history under each, one would discover Markus' fingerprints. His strategy was straightforward: empower field rangers and managers, develop strong political commitment from local government, and maintain an unapologetic rock-steady focus on conservation priorities. His conservation philosophy and infectious enthusiasm for wilderness raised the importance of wildlife habitats for many African governments. Through this he contributed to the preservation of the spectacular natural capital many of these countries are rightly proud of and continue to prosper from.

Markus was born and brought up, along with his three siblings, in Zurich, Switzerland. Like many biologists, a childhood fascination for reptiles, amphibians, and insects both captivated his imagination and led to formal study of the natural world. From an early age, it was clear where his priorities lay when he exchanged a valuable family stamp collection for a snake skin with a school friend. At the University of Basle, Markus conducted his PhD research on Sumatran rhinoceros, spending 3 years in their dense and rapidly depleting forests cataloguing their tracks and middens. He was immensely proud of the fact that he wrote his entire dissertation having only fleetingly observed a Sumatran rhinoceros's backside

disappearing into the darkness. The truth is he fell asleep in his blind during an observation session, a task we now leave to camera traps. His multiweek treks through the thick Sumatran jungle left him with a deep respect for forests, spirituality, and animism thanks to the tutelage of Pawang Hussein, a local tracker he lived and worked with for 2 years. This instilled in Markus a profound conservation ethos founded on the immeasurable importance of wilderness. Markus never returned to Sumatra but was deeply affected by the loss of the forests he once knew to the timber and palm-oil trade.

After obtaining his PhD in 1977, Bernard Grzimek of the Frankfurt Zoological Society sent Markus and his then-wife Monica to Rubondo Island in Lake Victoria, Tanzania. Markus delighted in telling his friends that when he thanked Grzimek for trusting him with the opportunity, Grzimek replied that it was Monica he trusted, not Markus. Nevertheless, Markus went on to have a strong relationship with Grzimek based on much mutual respect. It was here that Markus learned first the practical necessity of raising money and second how to nurture the seeds of conservation in other people's perspective of the world. On Rubondo the Borners were to assess the status of a peculiar menagerie of sporadically released chimpanzees rescued from circuses and labs, rogue elephants relocated from other ecosystems, African Grey Parrots confiscated from illegal wildlife traders, and rhinoceroses. Thus, started a life-long association with Tanzania, Grzimek, and FZS.

Following the war between Uganda and Tanzania, the Borners moved to the Serengeti to tackle an upsurge of poaching set against a backdrop of the degeneration of Tanzania's economy. The Serengeti station became Markus's home and office for the next 30 years. From his small and unassuming office in the bush he raised and allocated millions of dollars in conservation funds for projects across the continent. He developed deep and trusting relationships with Tanzanian conservationists, who shared his profound cultural beliefs and ethos for wild areas. Joe Ole Kuwai (a Maasai from the Serengeti region) and Gerald Bigurube (who went on to become the Director General of National Parks) were close companions and colleagues for many years, and together they influenced conservation strategies across East Africa. One of his greatest professional talents was to diffuse tense situations in government offices with humor.

Laughter echoed around the spaces he worked. His meetings were always punctual and always short, and if you were late you likely missed everything. When meetings with government officials were delayed, he joked that although the Swiss have watches, Africans have time.

Markus was not afraid of taking risks, and his projects were often centered in areas from which other organizations shied away due to civil unrest or economic crises. His restarting of FZS support to the Virunga National Park for the conservation of mountain gorillas filled a need created by the civil war in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As the international community was turning its back on Mugabe's government in Zimbabwe, Markus initiated a new partnership to support the little-appreciated but iconic Gonarezhou National Park. His concern for rhinoceroses and elephants led to extensive support for conservation programs in the Selous, Serengeti, Garamba, and North Luangwa ecosystems. Many of the areas where FZS provided support were also strategic locations for the protection of other endangered species, including African wild dogs (Selous and Serengeti), the highly threatened Ethiopian wolf (Bale Mountains), and chimpanzees (Mahale Mountains).

In all his endeavors he consistently empowered local people to fulfil their conservation visions. He was somewhat contemptuous of talkers, but intrigued by doers. In an era dominated by an ever-growing bureaucracy, he recognized the critical value of field conservation skills and prioritized support for people implementing programs on the ground. He refused to let projects stagnate and was unafraid to shake things up and realign programmes, remaining unrelentingly focused on the project's goals. Consequently, he sometimes lost friends and offended colleagues, but he also won the respect and appreciation of governments. He became a long-trusted advisor to the governments of Tanzania, Ethiopia, DRC, Zambia, and Zimbabwe and served on the International Union for Conservation of Nature specialist groups.

Markus led FZS into a new phase of ecosystem-based conservation in the early 2000s, during which time the depth of support expanded and the focus realigned on key biodiversity-rich wilderness areas. He would fly himself and partners to these areas in FZS' instantly recognizable zebra-striped Cessna aircraft. The growing conservation portfolio across Tanzania, Ethiopia, DRC, Zambia, and Zimbabwe added perspective to his conservation approaches and in particular an appreciation for the role of local communities in conservation. He became invested in community conservation strategies in Serengeti, Mahale, Bale, Virunga, and North Luangwa.

Markus had an unrelenting conviction in his arguments and a stubbornness that could sometimes provoke infuriation. As a being of passion and warmth, Markus despised boredom. His home was always the heart of the Serengeti for scientists, colleagues, and government staff

who worked in that small community. His hospitality was generous. Invitations to dinner were highly prized.

For Markus it was always about wilderness in its rawest form. He often reflected "the world would be poorer if everything had to be explained rationally." Success to him was knowing wilderness was there and secure. Seeing the signs of a silverback, smelling the presence of a bear, and feeling the turbulence behind a whale shark were singular affirmations of his conviction. His biggest legacy lies in those he nurtured and left behind. He knew he had been fortunate in his life's opportunities and loved to give others similar opportunities. Whether academics or conservationists, he touched the lives of scores of people who passed through his sphere of influence in Tanzania and elsewhere. He allowed his team and associates to grow and find their own style and space with little interference. Markus was a staunch supporter of young Tanzanian scientists, seeking out and creating sponsorship opportunities such as the Karimjee Jivanjee Masters Scholarship program at the University of Glasgow, that he established with his partner in later life, Professor Sarah Cleaveland. Markus received a number of awards, including the prestigious Blue Planet Prize (2016) that recognized his lifetime contribution to conservation science. He quietly shared, in a characteristically generous way, his prize money with the unsung heroes working to conserve African biodiversity. Following his retirement from FZS, the academic community at Glasgow provided him with new partnerships and friendships - hallmarks of the way he worked throughout his career.

He approached the last 18 months of his life, after being diagnosed with bone marrow aplasia (myelodysplastic syndrome) in a typically pragmatic way: raising funds, emailing partners, organizing meetings, and advising colleagues. He would refer to his disease as the "sneaky crocodile," not quite sure when it would finally strike, but grateful that it offered no possibility of senility and allowed him to make the most of his remaining time with friends and family.

It is hard to comprehend that such a larger-than-life character is no longer among us to fight so passionately for conservation. Markus's death is a great loss to the natural world. To his family and friends, his memory lives on indelibly in the wild places of East Africa, inextricably linked to shared and extraordinary experiences. Countless more will benefit from his legacy, not fully knowing the extent of his contributions. He would have wanted it that way.

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