

Tony Fitzjohn—a voice for wildlife with a determination to restore degraded habitat for eastern black rhinos and other endangered species

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There are people who we have had the privilege to know, Tony Fitzjohn is truly one of them. Originally from England, his childhood left a lasting impression on him of the drab, dull suburban life of north London. He knew he wanted to get away, to find a home among wildlife that matched his wild spirit. He was

adopted as a baby, and never fitted into an urban life. He preferred to identify with the character Tarzan and his love of the African wild. A scholarship to Mill Hill School allowed him to discover some adventure in the Boy Scouts. In 1968, Tony, known as ‘Fitz’ to many was in his early twenties when he left England taking the steamer to South Africa but finding that too tame, made his way north, reaching Kenya where he met the famous George Adamson. George, a retired senior wildlife warden lived in the remote Kora National Reserve, an area of 1,788 km², situated 125 km east of Mount Kenya. George and his wife Joy were renowned for reintroducing captive lions and leopards into the wild, and their first book, *Born Free*, originally published in 1960 and made into a film in 1966, captivated the attention of audiences around the world.

George had settled down in Kora, happily in a camp with his brother Terrence. Their simple home had a dirt floor and I remember the outside loo seat was an elephant’s jaw bone. Fitz was captivated by George and chose him as his mentor for life. George embraced Fitz for his courage and stamina. They made a strong working team with Fitz living in Kora for 18 years, rescuing and patiently, sympathetically rehabilitating large cats and taking care of the wild dry bush country of Kora which they both loved.

The year 1989 was a turning point for Fitz. He moved from Kenya to Tanzania where the government had asked him to restore what was then the derelict Mkomazi Game Reserve, a 3,270 km² area of dry degraded land in north Tanzania, the southern end of the vast Tsavo ecosystem. Some felt it was a mission against the odds. Fitz, however, had guts and great talent in building infrastructure. He was also a powerful and charismatic personality and could relate to high-powered donors and officialdom as well as his workforce and the people of the area who all supported him. He was determined to make the daunting project work. But during his absence from Kora, George Adamson was murdered near his camp by Somali bandits on 20 August 1989. Fitz struggled with George’s murder and resorted to drinking heavily. He ended up in rehab. He emerged with even more drive and determination, and his life was to be transformed. A confirmed bachelor, he fell in love with Lucy Melotte, a young and beautiful English woman, and they married in 1997 and had four children—Alexander (Mukka), Jemima and twins Imogen and Tilly. He brought up his family in the bush, far from

the dreary trappings and hectic pace of modern-day life, and even further from favoured hospitals and schools. Together Fitz and Lucy were to restore Mkomazi Game Reserve from a desolate overgrazed tract of arid land, with nearly all its large animals wiped out by poaching, to a healthy acacia-commiphora habitat which once again attracted herds of elephants in the rainy season and enabled plains game to flourish. Fitz, with full scientific backing, reintroduced both African wild dogs and black rhinos into Mkomazi.

The eastern black rhino, *Diceros bicornis michaeli*, in the 1960s had numbered about 200 in the area, but by 1985 every rhino had been poached for its horns. Fitz embarked on an ambitious project to bring back the same rhino subspecies from a variety of locations, to improve breeding and genetic diversity. From 1997 to 2016, the first 15 rhinos were translocated long distances from Addo National Park in South Africa, and from European zoos and the UK under Fitz's watch, with their numbers growing to 35 by 2021. No poaching occurred during Fitz's tenure, thanks to his excellent motivated and skillfully trained staff who supported the involvement of local communities nearby. The villages received clean water, education and health facilities. The local people, thanks to Fitz's efforts, understand the value of Mkomazi and the rhino sanctuary within it, with benefit-sharing and projects that include *Rafiki Wa Faru* (Friends of the Rhino).

Fitz recognized the importance of wild landscapes and biodiversity in East Africa. He helped to secure two important areas that he cherished. The Kenya government gazetted Kora to national park status in 1989 and the Tanzania government gazetted Mkomazi to become a national park in 2008, so both are protected in perpetuity for their nations.

Fitz left Mkomazi National Park quietly in January 2020—the Tanzanian government had decided that his job was done, and that it was time for the government, with NGO support, to take over.

When I last stayed with him in Kenya a year before he died, Fitz, with his son Mukka was initiating the rehabilitation of Kora National Park. In the previous 30 years Kora had been devastated by uncontrolled grazing, poaching and deforestation for charcoal. He had travelled

full circle—back to the Kora he respected so deeply. He showed me his official papers allowing him to start this immense task, and he talked compellingly and with enthusiasm about this project as only Fitz could. Only three months later, in late July 2021, he was admitted to Nairobi hospital where they discovered a tumour on his brain. From there to England and finally to California, he was given the best and most recent cutting-edge treatment to fight the disease. As a friend remarked to me, if anyone could have beaten the tumour, Fitz would beat it. But it was not to be.

The Tony Fitzjohn George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust will continue his life's work helping to restore barren wastelands to magnificent landscapes for the benefit of large mammals—rhinos, elephants and of course people and biodiversity. Films and books about Tony Fitzjohn's remarkable legacy include *To Walk With Lions* (1999) and *Born Wild* (2010). No doubt he will inspire many, who will in the years to come, build on his amazing contribution to Africa's wild.