

In the footsteps of Mr Kech

Dave Stirling
Project Advisor

It's a bit of a cliché, but they don't make them how they used to. This definitely applies to Richard Kech, an officer in the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), who, at the relatively young age of fifty-five - and in my view still in his prime - was retired from the service.

At the time he was managing the Ngulia rhino sanctuary in Tsavo West and was by no means ready to return to his shamba to look after his cattle. I take some pride in being a reasonable judge of character, but I have made some glaring errors over the years, particularly when dealing with people in conservation. What struck me about Kech (he is always known just as Kech) was his dedication. He was determined to stay in the bush, sleep out and monitor the rhinos on foot wherever possible.

I quickly recruited him to become our first field officer and after some persuasion had him seconded to the KWS co-ordinating rhino monitoring units. In total he was in our employ for five years, three in Tsavo East and two in the Chyulu Hills. It wasn't an easy posting mainly because the KWS viewed his reporting to us with some suspicion and consequently made life difficult for him at times, but overall the rhinos benefited and the young rangers under his guidance came to respect him, calling him Mzee kifaro (rhino sage). His dedication continued and his only real complaint was to do with the high turnover of rangers where ever he taught. He could only hope that these men would take away what they had learnt and apply it elsewhere and I'm sure they went on to do so.

And so it was with a heavy heart that a few weeks ago, whilst in the Chyulu Hills where he had been working for the past two years, I had to let him know that we couldn't afford to renew his contract and that this time it really was time to head home. As befitted his good nature, he took it philosophically and was eternally grateful for the extra five years we had given him to continue working in the field. As a small token of our appreciation for all of his hard work, Save the Rhino had a plaque made to commemorate his work and presented him with a glass etching of a black rhino made by sculptor Malcolm Stathers: gifts that were presented to him on the morning that I left. The KWS rangers showed real surprise at the news of his retirement and one or two of them stood up to talk fondly of their teacher and the influence he had on them. My last words were to reassure everyone that this wasn't to be the last of Kech and that he would return from time-to-time on a consultancy basis and report progress back to Save the Rhino.

I suppose there must be more dedicated men like him out here, but I can't help thinking that it may be a while before we see the like of Richard Kech again...

Right:
Founder Director Dave
Stirling, with Kech.

Below right:
The rangers of the Kenya
Wildlife Service with Kech
and bottom L-R: Richard
Bonham, Dave Stirling
and Roger Wilkinson from
Chester Zoo.



PHOTOS: ROGER WILKINSON



Thanks!
Our thanks to Richard Kech, Field Officer for Save the Rhino International 2004-9, for all his work for us over the last five years. Kech is the only person we have ever employed directly in the field, and we are extremely lucky to have been able to make use of his expertise, experience and dedication to rhino conservation.
Asante sana Kech.

