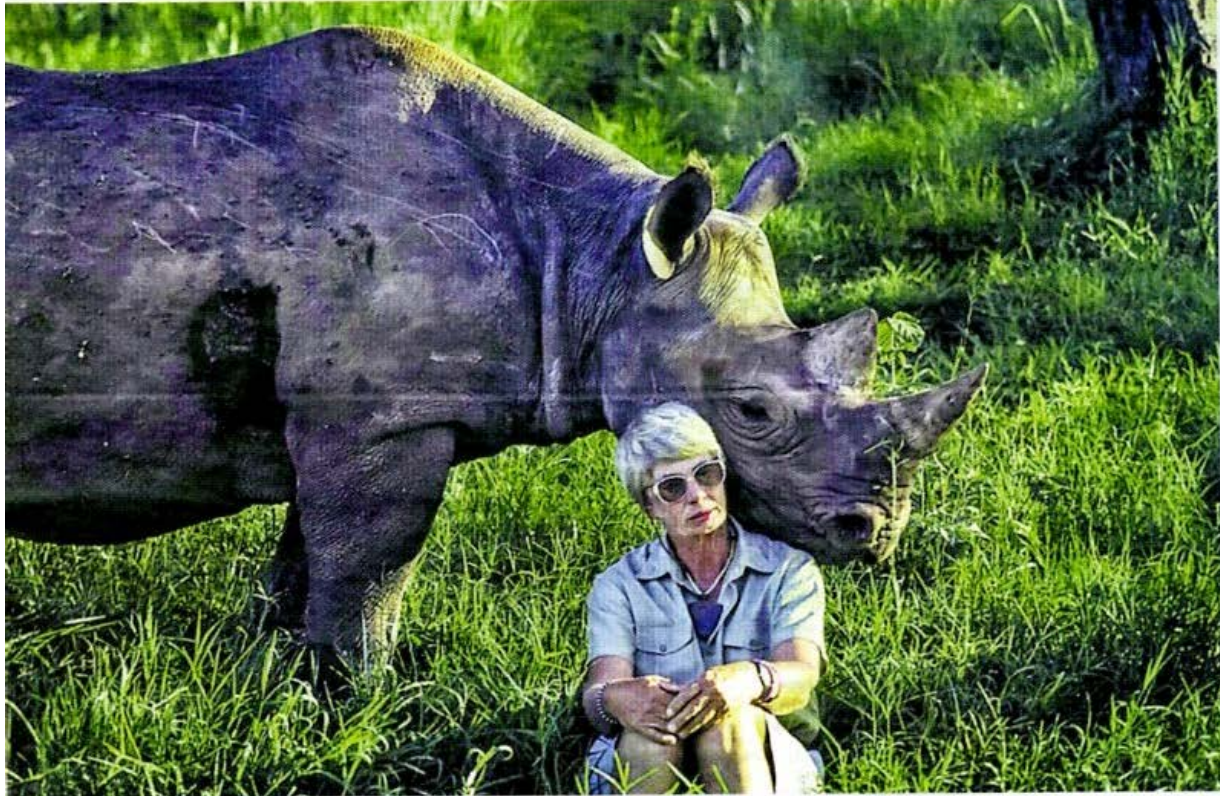


Anna Merz

Fearless conservationist who devoted much of her life to saving the endangered rhinoceros in Africa



Merz with a hand-reared female rhino: she was at ease with the animals, understood their keen intelligence and challenged the myth that they are bad tempered

Anna Merz was known by her many friends and colleagues as the "mother of rhinos". She devoted much of her life to their conservation in Africa, and especially to that of the black rhinoceros, which had been poached almost to the point of extinction.

She was a founder of one of Kenya's most successful conservation projects at Lewa Downs. As the population of the species in the country plummeted from 20,000 to 300 in the 1970s, she worked with an old landowning family to turn their farm into a private sanctuary which now has ten per cent of Kenya's 600-strong black rhino population.

Formerly a cattle ranch, Lewa, lying among the foothills of Mount Kenya, had been owned by the Craigs since the 1920s. The population of black and white rhinos in the area had been in decline since the early 20th century when they were hunted by European settlers. But by the 1970s poaching threatened to destroy numbers completely, with whole herds sometimes killed at a time. Once so numerous that it was said one might encounter a dozen of the solitary animals in a day, the black rhino was estimated to have decreased by 40-90 per cent in some regions of Africa and disappeared altogether in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia.

In 1983 Merz, who had retired to Kenya from Ghana, where she had worked in the game department, used her own funds to help to turn 5,000 acres of David and Delia Craig's farm

into a rhino sanctuary, named Ngora Sergoi. They hoped that by protecting the habitat, working with the community and providing vigilant security rhinos could be bred in numbers great enough to one day repopulate north Kenya, an ambition still at the heart of the sanctuary's work.

A year later, Ngora Sergoi received its first rhino, a white male given the name Mukora. Merz and the Craigs recruited game trackers, vets and bush pilots and were given permission by the government to trace and round up sur-

She risked her own safety as armed gangs targeted sanctuaries

viving rhinos in the area to bring to safety. Four years later Lewa had 16 rhinos, five of which had been born there. With more space needed, they doubled the size of the sanctuary and, in the 1990s, it expanded again to 62,000 acres, to take in the whole of Lewa estate, as well as areas of private land and national forests, and became established as the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. The sanctuary became one of the best protected; two-metre-high fences were established, rangers employed and herdsmen supplied with radios.

Wildlife flourished although poaching remained a threat. On her daily patrols to monitor the rhinos Merz

risked her own safety as armed gangs began to target sanctuaries and parks to kill rhinos and remove their horns, increasingly in demand in Asia. But, as colleagues observed, only a bullet would stop her and the rhinos at Lewa remained largely unharmed until recently as the poaching crisis continues. Merz was adept at escaping trouble, on one occasion killing a cobra with a rake after it spat poison at her eye. Fortunately, she wore glasses.

Merz was always at ease with rhinos and friends recalled her walking with one as calmly as if it had been a dog. She was determined to rehabilitate the image of the rhinoceros as bad tempered and solitary. And in a book she published about her work, entitled *Rhino: At the Brink of Extinction*, she described their keen intelligence, social structures and methods of communication.

She hand-reared several including a female, Samia, who was a central character in *Rhino*. The calf would even sleep in Merz's bed, causing, she said, matrimonial difficulties. Merz was determined to reintroduce her to the wild, sitting with the small rhino as it familiarised itself with giraffes. Samia later mated and lived in the wild but the two would often meet on Merz's walks. One morning Merz found her dead, with her calf, after being pushed over a cliff by an aggressive bull. Soon afterwards, Merz retired from Lewa.

Anna Merz was born in England in 1931, and moved between London and

Cornwall during the Second World War. She studied politics and economics at Nottingham University, before reading for the Bar at Lincoln's Inn. However, her adventurous nature soon led her to Ghana, where she married twice, owned a crankshaft grinding workshop, developed a love of riding, worked as honorary warden in the game department and took off on expeditions across the Sahara and around Uganda and northern Kenya.

In 1976 Merz and her second husband, Karl, retired to Kenya where she began working with the Craigs. She lived at Lewa for 15 years from 1981, finally retiring with her many dogs to South Africa. She was a member of the board of the International Rhino Foundation, and lectured and wrote articles to raise funds and awareness about the rhino. Lewa has been a favourite place of the Duke of Cambridge since he spent a gap year working there and he visited to celebrate his engagement.

In recent years, Lewa counted 70 black rhinos, as well as 56 white rhinos, a large number of endangered Grevy's zebra and abundant birdlife, elephants, buffalo and lions. On the morning of Merz's death a rhino calf was born.

Her first marriage to a Swiss, Ernest Kuhn, ended in 1969. She then married Karl Merz, who died in 1988.

Anna Merz, rhino conservationist, was born on November 17, 1931. She died on April 4, 2013, aged 81