

Q&A

WITH

COLIN CHURCH

RECIPIENT OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (OBE) BY QUEEN ELIZABETH II IN 2017

Conservationist Colin Church talks about the Rhino Ark and the Conservation of Kenyan forests in an interview with **Kari Mutu**

Rhino Ark was established in 1988 as a charitable trust to help save Kenya's Black Rhino population in the Aberdare ecosystem. It was formed initially to assist the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to build an electric fence along sections of the Aberdare National Park on its Eastern Salient which has the highest concentration of wildlife and borders directly onto farmland.

What made Rhino Ark successful?

Rhino Ark is a totally Kenyan conservation and fundraising mechanism. Kenya is fortunate to attract many foreign-funded conservation organisations but Rhino Ark is an endemic effort which has developed enormous clout thanks to the Kenyan public. My belief is that when you sell this mechanism of Kenyans self-starting a significant conservation initiative, people internationally will listen more carefully.

I always say that the Rhino Charge competition for fundraising is one golden egg, but you can't depend on it entirely. There are four other golden eggs in total. One is the Government which in 2006 committed to a "shilling for a shilling" - Rhino Ark donations and matching Treasury funding. It was a turning point because Government funds for fence materials started to flow in. The Government has been amazing but you've got to be very energetic in chasing after them because there is an awful lot more that can happen. A third egg is 'corporate Kenya' which is not really being focused on as a prime source target.

And the fourth egg the overseas donors, because these mountain ecosystems are so precious to Kenya but are outstanding international heritage sites.

In 2012, we set up an independent assessment of the value of the Aberdares and it came up at \$590 million. The valuation of ecosystems is terribly important and the Aberdares is still the only ecosystem in Kenya that has had an independent assessment undertaken. Without such, then other land use or land lease planning, such as the highly contentious SGR (Standard Gauge Railway) routing through Nairobi National Park, cannot withstand pressures from state planning authorities who are not provided with the real values of such ecosystems.

Are more home-grown solutions needed for conserving Kenya's forests?

Absolutely. Think of organisations such as Friends of Karura Forest which is a stunning success. It's all been locally engineered and runs now as a private-public partnership with KFS (Kenya

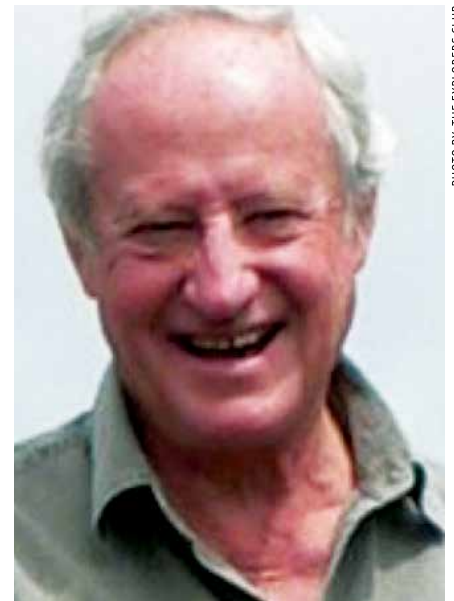


PHOTO BY: THE EXPLORERS CLUB

Forestry Service) supporting the whole process. I think Rhino Ark really pioneered this concept but has a much broader remit dealing with all the big mountains. We've just set up an association in Eburru called Eburru Rafiki.

What is Eburru Rafiki about?

Eburru Rafiki is the registered CBO (Community-based Organisation) launched last year and supported by

people living right next to the forest. I'm on the committee as the chairman. We are there to support KFS, KWS (Kenya Wildlife Service) and Rhino Ark, similar to what Friends of Karura Forest do. Small activities have started such as planting trees, clearing the forest tracks, searching for funds for a proper gate and anything that raises funds for strengthening the community outside the forest. In September, we launched a community-awareness campaign with posters and presentations to the five CFA (Community Forest Association) centres around Eburru. Stakeholders have also been working on the Eburru Participatory Forest Management Plan (PFMP). This will give a stronger management framework.

What benefits have the communities around Eburru gained from the fence?

Eburru doesn't have elephants which are perceived to be the biggest culprits of crop raiding. But the fence is keeping other animals out of the shambas such as buffalo, bushbuck, and porcupines. It's a very simple concept like with the Aberdares. You provide the forest-edge communities a benefit, which is the fence, and their crop value, their security value, land value escalates. Within the closed forest canopy, the wildlife can come back and there is a value to that too. Whilst the Rhino Ark electric fence has dramatically reduced unrestricted entry to Eburru Forest there remain abuses and management weaknesses.

What sort of abuse is still happening within fenced forest areas?

Poaching and illegal logging continue though considerable effort is being put in by KFS and its partners, including Rhino Ark, to seek out illicit activity. Rainfall is the principal benefit for forest edge farmers to create higher incomes from their own land and to grow woodlots for their own needs. More support and a stronger security umbrella is needed to ensure that the wildlife, especially,

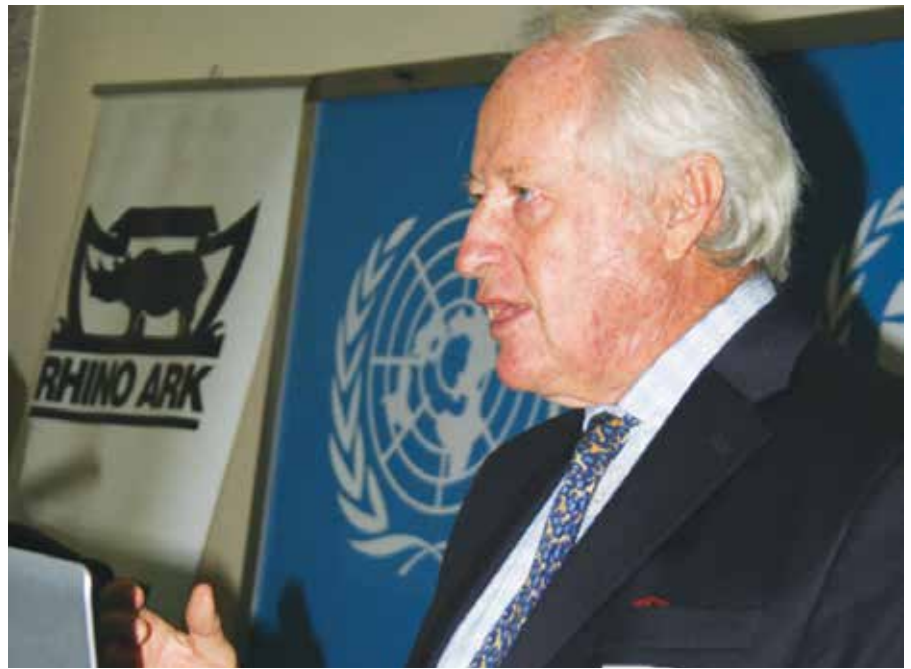


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the Eastern Mountain Bongo, are able to re-generate. Security is key to Eburru. Illegal persons inside the forest have twice attacked members of the Bongo Surveillance Project (BSP) monitoring the small, threatened group of bongos still in Eburru and caused serious human injuries. The situation has improved tremendously but we still have a lot of abuse.

One area I personally feel needs serious review, though it will not change overnight, is forest livestock grazing. The Forest Act allows for non-exploitative, non-detrimental activities under clear protocols of agreement between KFS and the CFAs. Historically, forest grazing is what has been done but it is a questionable use of a forest resource. Cattle and wildlife both carry disease and are thus detrimental to each other. Forest grazing costs more in supervision time, livestock remain exposed to predator attack and stock theft, and in many cases grazing areas [have] poor quality grass. In the long run, it is something that the CFAs will have to face. Forest edge farmers should be encouraged to practice zero grazing as it is more cost efficient and gives better returns. Grass harvesting in the periphery, in the fence-edge open

fields under close supervisory controls, can contribute to the zero-grazing principal. Wildlife benefit from healthy regenerating grass shoots thus enabling both zero grazers and wildlife to gain grass value.

What more should be done for conserving Kenya's mountain forests?

Each mountain ecosystem which is completed needs to continue as a public-private partnership. The communities around them must have an active role and we need individual trusts for each area. The template for it has been established, particularly for the Aberdares, with a management board that comprises of KFS, KWS, representatives from the community, Rhino Ark, and an independent chairperson for each.

Then they would begin to stand alone and to get funding, partly from the Government, partly from Rhino Ark and from elsewhere. If Eburru is to position itself as a nature reserve in a state forest then discussions need to continue with forest users to ensure all detrimental activities are prevented. It also needs to happen with Mt Kenya and doesn't need to wait until the fence is complete. ●