

Anna Merz, Rhino Guardian and Champion, Dies at 81

By Douglas Martin

April 21, 2013

Anna Merz, who went to Kenya seeking a serene retirement but became so appalled by the slaughter of black rhinoceroses that she helped start a reserve to protect them, becoming a global leader in the fight against their extinction, died on April 4 in Melkrievier, South Africa. She was 81.

The Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, the reserve she founded, announced her death. She left no immediate survivors, but more than 70 black rhinos, including one born the day she died, continue to thrive in the sanctuary that she created to protect them from poachers, who kill the animals for their horns.

As a young woman, Mrs. Merz roamed the world and ended up in Ghana, where she married twice, ran an engineering firm and became active in wildlife conservation. She and her husband went to Kenya to retire, but her revulsion at seeing the carcasses of rhinos strewn about a national park, each missing its distinctive double horn, compelled her to change her plans.

She started looking for land to use as a rhino reserve and, after many rejections, found a patron, David Craig, who with his wife, Delia, owned a vast tract in the shadow of Mount Kenya. They agreed to set aside 5,000 acres for the project, which opened in 1981 as the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary. It has since grown to 61,000 acres through more land donations and was renamed the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in 1995.

Lewa's success helped the black rhino population double to 4,880 over the last decade, still a far cry from the millions that once roamed Africa. Lewa is home to 10 percent of Kenya's black rhinos, and its efforts have lent substance to the dream of returning the species to its former dominance in northern Kenya.

Lewa rhinos must be regularly resettled elsewhere because the success of the breeding program — the reserve's numbers grow 10 percent a year — has caused overcrowding and fights.

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Mrs. Merz's example has inspired other wildlife conservation efforts and has helped make the black rhino, which is still critically endangered, a global symbol of extinction prevention.

"I have met many remarkable animal specialists during my life, but none as extraordinary as Anna Merz," Desmond Morris, the zoologist and author, wrote in the foreword to her 1991 book, "Rhino at the Brink of Extinction." "What Joy Adamson was to lions, Dian Fossey was to gorillas, and Jane Goodall is to chimpanzees, Anna Merz is to rhinos."

Florence Ann Hepburn was born in Radlett, England, on Nov. 17, 1931, and moved between London and Cornwall as a child. A formative experience was seeing a museum exhibit on the dodo, which is believed to have become extinct in the 17th century. Another was being on a beach at age 9 when a German fighter plane attacked: a total stranger threw his body on top of hers and died saving her life.

She graduated from Nottingham University, studied law and traveled to exotic places before settling in Ghana. There she married Ernest Kuhn, whom she divorced in 1969, and Karl Merz, who died in 1988. Both husbands were Swiss.

In Ghana she trained and rode racehorses, rescued chimpanzees and was named an honorary game warden by the nation's game department. She and Mr. Merz moved to Kenya in 1976.

After securing the first 5,000 acres for the reserve, Mrs. Merz, using her inheritance, built an eight-foot-high fence, then began rounding up rhinos using helicopters and stun guns. She hired more than 100 armed guards, bought a plane for surveillance and built a network of spies to inform on poachers. Poachers, also armed, sell the horns largely to Asians, who grind them for folk medicine, and Arabs, who carve them to use as dagger handles. Prices for rhino horns can run higher than those for gold.

"These are very ruthless people," she said of poachers.

Mrs. Merz herself carried a gun and knife. Deborah Gage, a conservancy official in London, wrote in an e-mail that about a year ago Mrs. Merz heard a yelp and "went into the next-door room to find that a python had taken her favorite dog, so she grabbed her pistol, shot the python in the head and gradually unraveled it off her dog."

At first Mrs. Merz used her own money to finance the project, a total of more than \$1.5 million, but she came to rely on donations. The American Association of Zoo Keepers helped by raising millions for rhino preservation through its annual "Bowling for Rhinos" campaign. Winners spent a week with Mrs. Merz at her reserve.

Giving local people a stake in the reserve was crucial to its success. She employed them, built schools and medical clinics for them and helped foster the tourist industry. Besides rhinos, of both the black and white species, visitors come to see lions, elephants and other animals. Prince William of Britain and Kate Middleton became engaged in 2010 while staying at a cottage at the reserve.

In 1990, the United Nations Environmental Program named Mrs. Merz to its Global 500 Roll.

To Mrs. Merz, rhinos — far from being the stupid, aggressive, ill-tempered sorts many suppose — were, in her words, beautiful and elegant. She blamed their bellicosity on their poor eyesight, leading them to charge first and ask questions later. She found that rhinos have a sense of humor and that they communicate by altering their breathing rhythms. She read them Shakespeare to soothe them.

Samia, an orphan rhino whom she raised from babyhood, even crawled into bed with Mrs. Merz — not entirely to her delight. Samia would follow her around like a dog, even after leaving Mrs. Merz's immediate care and returning to the reserve, where she mated and had her own calf. If Mrs. Merz fell, Samia would extend her tail to help her up.

Not realizing how big she had grown, Samia once tried to sneak back into the house where she had been nursed and became jammed in the dining room door. Mrs. Merz had to pour a gallon of cooking oil on her rough skin to ease her through.