

WHEN

Clues:

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IS THE

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When the summit is for real.

When the snow line is as accessible.

SECOND

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Lewa Downs a new conservancy

Story and photographs by Louisa Lockwood



From the rampaging bull elephant to the craftsman - the Lewa Downs Conservancy regards wildlife issues with a broad eye.

Above: 'Samia', the black rhino hand-reared by Anna Merz.

LEWA DOWNS IS PROBABLY MOST well-known for its population of breeding black rhinos, and especially Samia, hand-reared from her birth in 1985 by Anna Merz. Samia's story, told by Anna Merz in *Rhino at the brink of extinction*, (1991) gave people a unique insight into the varied social network and communication methods of rhinos through a sensitive portrayal of Samia's character and other rhinos in the sanctuary at that time.

In April 1995, Samia gave birth to a male calf sired by Kenu; she proved to be an excellent mother which is not always the case with hand-raised animals. However only eight months later Lewa suffered the tragic death of both Samia and her calf. All we know is that after meeting with Kenu on top of a cliff they had gone over the edge, leaving worldwide supporters of Lewa Downs greatly saddened.

Samia was certainly the most outstanding character of Lewa, but there are others who exemplify some of the challenges facing the managers of this large and beautiful area of East Africa.

The 39,000 acres of Lewa Downs is halfway between Nanyuki and Isiolo, from its gentle slopes there are stunning views of Mount Kenya with its iced peaks and of the Samburu Plains and their mountains such as the dramatic, flat-topped Lolokwe. The land was originally bought, piece by piece, by Alec Douglas, a pioneer from South Africa who established a cattle ranch there in 1922. In the 1980s

the land was still predominantly a cattle ranch with herds of up to 4,000 head of boran cattle a year, but today the story is very different. A series of significant steps has led to a change in focus - wildlife and its conservation are now top of the agenda.

Rhinos . . .

Anna Merz's proposal to the Craigs for use of 5,000 acres for a rhino sanctuary was one of the most important steps. In 1982 she audaciously approached the family, and the following year the first sanctuary specifically for rhinos in Kenya was fenced! Two years later the sanctuary held 15 black rhinos, translocated from around the country. Over the years rhinos have come from many diverse areas; Kitengela, Shaba, Solio Sanctuary, Sangare Ranch (Aberdares), Nakuru, Ol Joge Ranch and from the remnants of the Matthews Range population. There have even been odd catches from northern Kenya, such as Kenu who was captured in Marsabit in 1993.

Through Anna's tireless work for these highly endangered animals the sanctuary has increased in size and number, in 1988 the 5,000 acres were doubled and when the rest of Lewa Downs was fenced in 1994 the rhinos had access to the whole 39,000 acres. Today the area for use by wildlife also includes Ngare Ndare Forest Reserve which adjoins the southern boundary and has added 15,000 acres to their rangeland. Ten years after the first rhino introduction they numbered 21, and in that same period there were 13 births - a measure of the rhinos' adaptability to their new territory.

In 1984 two male white rhinos were introduced and today the whites number 19, there have been seven births so far. New bloodlines have come from South Africa when five sub-adults were bought at the Natal Parks Board annual auction in 1993.

Of only 1500 black rhinos left in the world, 420 of them are in Kenya - a significant range state indeed. At Lewa there have been introductions and translocations to achieve genetic variety and the best sex ratio for reproduction. As both the white and black populations are young, the best ratios have not yet been reached, which makes the total of 20 births very promising. An objective is to reach a stable or core population of 50 rhinos which is thought to be the minimum for a genetically viable population, such as in Nairobi National Park.

. . . And Other Animals

Lewa has a very (some might say overly) healthy population of the reticulated giraffe. Masikio was the friendliest of them all and that is because he was once rescued from an erosion gully, so deep that only the tips of his horns could be seen. By slinging

a rope around his waist he was hauled out with a tractor, for a few days after the rescue his ears drooped so sadly that he earned his name (*masikio* means 'ears' in Swahili).

The reticulated giraffe is now restricted to a range of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia and is important to Lewa in the light of Lewa's new legal status as an operating conservation area.

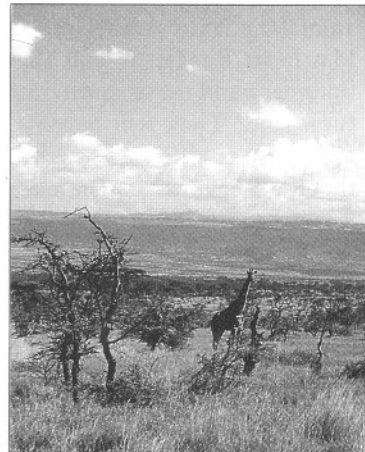
On the 20th February 1995 the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy was formally registered and incorporated under Kenyan law as a non-profit making organisation. The Conservancy is run by a Board of Directors who dictate all policy. The Conservancy's aims are; ' . . . to develop agricultural and pastoral activities in conjunction with wildlife management, to manage and conserve wildlife resources, to promote a good coordination of land use with a view to minimising conflicts between wildlife conservation and human settlement, to

protect and encourage the species rhinoceros, together with endangered and other species, to foster the development of environmentally sensitive tourism, . . . to collect

and utilise revenue and to raise funds for the establishment and maintenance of a wildlife conservancy to be run at all times on a non-profit making basis.'

Far left; An acacia tree bark stripped by an elephant's tusk.

Left; Giraffe browsing on Lewa.



There are several activities that are being undertaken to this end, not least is the conservation of threatened species. However, the giraffe do pose a problem for Lewa as they are destructive feeders stripping bark from the acacia trees and causing them to die.

The sheer numbers of giraffe (200+) are just too many and they have to be controlled. Attempts to exclude them from the land by driving them outside the fences have not been fully successful, some translocations have taken place but this is a very costly operation and has to be repeated every few years, the most efficient method is a careful culling programme and this in fact is what currently happens under the guidance of Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS).

This same dilemma is being played out in many parts of Africa with other species, most notably the elephant. Lewa itself also suffers from elephant pressure but there is no simple answer. The elephant compete for browse, water and territory with the rhinos - and the Lewa sanctuary was established for the rhinos who have priority.

Before fences and shambas covered the land, the elephant migrated in the dry season right across Lewa and up to Mount Kenya, moving back to Samburu and further north in the rains. Today however they can only move as far as Lewa which has to support a population of about 230 animals in the dry season. A 30-metre gap in the 160 kilometre fence has to be left along the northern boundary for the elephants' return, otherwise they would move southwards and destroy shambas and threaten human life.

Even in the wet season there is little respite as there are 15 resident bulls who spend their time around the swamp and the western Marania River. Bored bulls have dug up water pipes and been a general nuisance to walkers and vehicles. Electric wires have been strung up in strategic areas to protect buildings and over-used habitat.¹ However an electric fence can be overcome as tusks are insulators. One cunning character, having rampaged across Lewa in 1988, had his tusks shortened which effectively stopped him pushing his way

'Visitors would be unlucky not to see the odd elephant or two wander by along the swamp, passing shy waterbuck and impala lurking amongst the bushes and curious vervets overhead'

through any fencing. However, Gilbert, named after that year's hurricane, brought two others bulls with him from Samburu and having instructed them in the art of de-fencing, stood to one side while they did the dirty work!

The Craigs have always recognised the importance of their neighbours in their support of wildlife conservation and the elephant situation has to be carefully monitored. A 'home range' programme has just begun, one elephant from each of seven family groups has been radio-collared and when they next leave Lewa one group will not be allowed back. Will they join the Laikipia herd of up to 2,500 animals and move north into Samburuland and the Matthews Range, or will they follow the Lewa boundary and move south onto populated agricultural land? They will be very closely watched to avoid any conflict. As for the resident bulls, now that KWS have experience in translocating elephant it may be possible to move some to a national park.

Other protected species on Lewa include the highly endangered Grevy's zebra which is now only found in the wild in northern Kenya and a small part of southern Ethiopia. Lewa is estimated to have 10-15% of the total world population. Amongst the less commonly seen antelope Lewa has the dramatic straight-horned oryx with their black 'war paint' markings and the large eland.

The swamp has been put to good use by an introduced population of sitatunga, semi-aquatic antelopes from Kisumu, Lake Victoria, in 1990. They are notoriously shy creatures but at least nine calves have been seen and despite a natural loss to leopard an estimated 12-15 sitatunga are currently living in the swamp. An earth causeway has been

built through the tall reeds leading to a rickety wooden blind, to glimpse your sitatunga it is best to be there very early in the morning.

Other swamp lovers are the small herd of buffalo, recently expanded by seven tame ones from Lake Chem Chem Sanctuary with more to come from Ol Pejeta Ranch. In February I saw an aardvark very near the swamp on the Marania River and during the day in the same area there were over a hundred migrant European storks, flashing white amongst the vibrant green reeds.

Tourism

The advantages of maintaining populations of elephant and giraffe have to be considered in light of the funds Lewa needs to generate - it is an interesting economic circle, if wildlife cannot benefit Lewa Downs more than it detracts from it, then in the long run it will not survive.

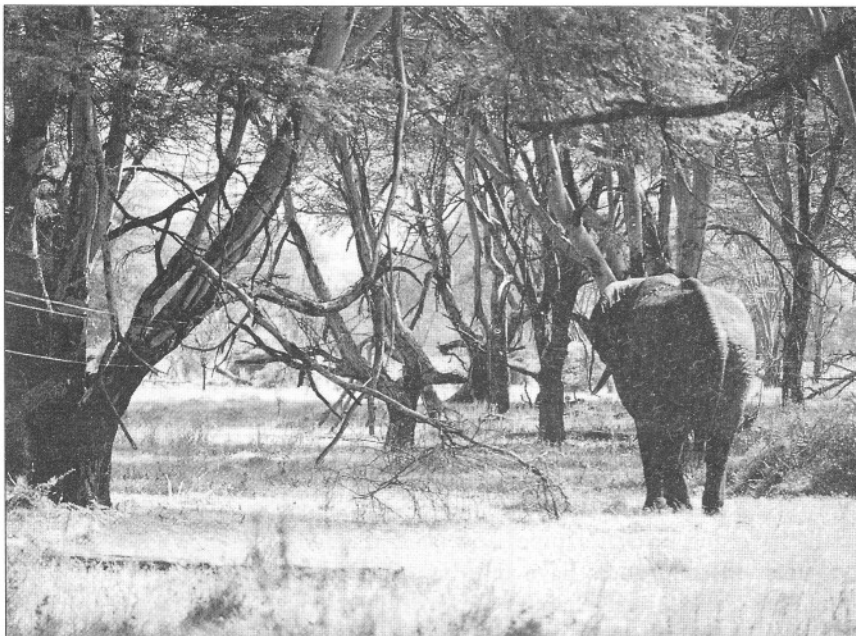
To date over 70% of the cost of running Lewa is met by donations, which is not a sustainable situation. However, with the formal registration of the Wildlife Conservancy, activities are expanding. Revenue is collected from Ian Craig for grazing rights and the farm lease, but there is greater potential in the tourism sector. Facilities have recently expanded to allow 60 people a night (the rational is that 10 vehicles is a maximum at any one time); Wilderness Trails (owned and run by Will and Emma Craig) has accommodation for 20 people, Savanna Safaris' newly opened Lerai Tented Camp has 24 beds and other non-permanent sites are used by safari operators. Wilderness Trails and Lerai Tented Camp pay a monthly fee and a percentage of their earnings to the Conservancy.

The Conservancy Centre

Perhaps the most interesting new development is the Conservancy Centre; opened in October 1995 it is the focal point for all visitors to Lewa through its small and charmingly presented museum which should be an obligatory first port of call for everyone. A makute-roofed open area is furnished with large tables - slabs of wood from fallen trees roughly shaped and beautifully polished. The shade above ones' head and the surrounding cool mature trees would be enough to keep most people there all afternoon, the temptation becomes too much when faced with the restaurant and the prospect of watching busy guinea fowl and mud-bathing warthogs close to. Visitors would be unlucky not to see the odd elephant or two wander by beyond the protective wire along the swamp edges, passing shy waterbuck and impala lurking amongst the bushes and curious vervets overhead.

Functions at the Conservancy Centre have so far included Conservancy and Wildlife Forum meetings; successful lunches for visitors have also helped to raise awareness, Anna Merz or one of the Craig family take the time to explain Lewa's aims and to entertain guests.

Below; This elephant is kept out of the Conservancy Centre area by the electric wire on the left of the picture.. He has come from the swamp which is to his right.



Not Just an Island

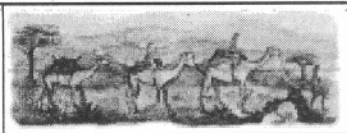
The Wildlife Forums have been instigated by KWS and aim to draw together local landowners in exploring ways of maintaining their wildlife populations to their own benefit. These ideas are very much a part of the Lewa Downs Conservancy's aims as those involved are acutely aware that Lewa cannot exist successfully as an island, every one of the activities on Lewa has an impact and direct connection with the people on neighbouring lands. A fundamental impact is that Lewa employs 152 people, with a further 100 at the lodges, which makes it the largest single employer in Eastern Province according to the Provincial Commissioner. At Wilderness Trails there are established independent carpet and furniture-making workshops, and of course all the local shopkeepers benefit too.

One particular enterprise involves the local schools; four primary schools border Lewa and the Conservancy has a bursary scheme for the top four children at Standard 8 whereby their full secondary education is funded. 'Bricks and mortar' are also important and with British Army assistance, overseas funding and grants, visitors, an American fund-raising organisation and other inputs, desks, textbooks, blackboards, shoes and sports equipment can be provided. Roads and buildings are also on the agenda.

These schemes are all part of the message that wildlife can benefit people. Two schemes in particular with great potential for the future widening of Lewa's activities, are addressing this. Both schemes are reaching beyond the fenced boundaries and with the support of KWS are liaising with local landowners and their communities for the conservation of their natural resources.

Il Ngwesi

Il Ngwesi is a group ranch on the north western border of Lewa Downs with its own committee for generating tourism revenue. So far they have allowed camel safaris on to their wild and stunning



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land. Currently camel parties camp in a dry river bed at the foot of Ngare Ndare Mountain, there will soon be a choice of accommodation with a 8-bed lodge being built through KWS funding. Elephant migrate across the land and soon giraffe may be translocated from Lewa. Other plans include a road, which the British Army could help with, there is already an airstrip. Everything is expected to be ready for expanding the tourist potential by September 1996.

The Lewa Conservancy provides practical support in the form of accounts, overseeing revenue, camping accommodation, and unquantifiable support through expertise, political representation and contacts - all modelled on experience from Lewa. A longer term objective is to see Lewa's northern boundary of fencing come down . . .

The Matthews Range

North west of Archer's Post lies the Matthews Range, once a stronghold of Kenya's black rhinos but today mostly devoid of wildlife due to poor security. Organised ivory poaching had also cleared the area of elephants by the late 1980s. This unhappy situation is now being addressed by the Namunyak Wildlife Conservation Trust, which Ian

Craig helped to establish together with the Hon. Sammy Leshore and Paul Lerangato.

The land Lewa is concerned with is owned by the Sarra Sabache Group Ranch and initially the Samburu viewed the idea of a conservation trust with deep suspicion. As progress was gradually made their wariness has given way to enthusiasm and real involvement. It would be a grand achievement to re-establish a secure rhino population in the area with rhinos from Lewa. The Trust currently has 15 employees whom mainly operate as an intelligence unit, they are in radio contact with Lewa and with KWS's local anti-poaching unit. The second step is to generate revenue from tourism under various schemes. Support has come from local MPs, KWS, Chris Thouless (a wildlife consultant) and one particularly generous donor who kick-started the whole project.

Much of the breadth of Lewa's new vision can be gathered from the Conservancy Centre's museum and the obviously careful management of the land with its well-maintained water holes and strategic elephant and giraffe exclusion areas. So while any visitor will be awed by the rich colours, long views and precious wildlife they cannot fail to appreciate the sensitivity and far-sightedness that has created this ecosystem's delicate balance and enabled them to experience something unique and, with continued good will, something sustainable. ¶

¹ A common view has been that elephants alone are to blame for the decline in acacia trees on Lewa. However research is needed into the relationship between acacia, elephant and the longhorn beetle who makes its home in the acacia. Present habitats have been ravaged by longhorn beetle and previously by over-browsing by giraffe. Elephants appear to select branches and trees weakened by the beetle and thus may actually lengthen the lives of some trees, elephants may also hasten re-growth of new acacia stands.
Reference: Dee Raymer