

Kenya:

The Bus rolls on

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The Laikipia Wildlife Forum's Environmental Education Bus lumbers through small villages and townships. All along the route it causes excitement, a flurry of waves and calls. It seems to be a real symbol of community education in action.

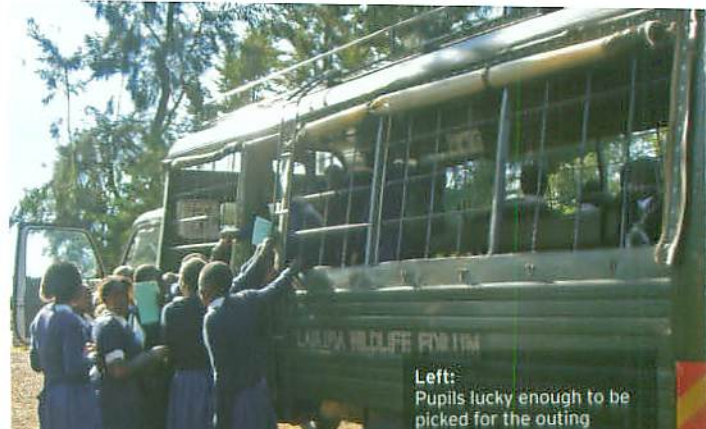
My trip with Ephantus Mugendi Mugo, the Environmental Education Officer, was to one of his outlying catchments, where the drive was so long that we went the night before, ready for an early morning start. Wherever the Bus arrives, it is treated as an event involving the whole community, not just the 30 or so pupils that have been lucky enough to be picked for the outing. Parents, teachers and other pupils linger as Ephantus gives his introduction.

The pupils from the school that I went out with were remarkably well behaved; quiet and shy, listening intently but reluctant to participate. Perhaps my presence had something to do with it. Clutching their LWF Field Exercise books and their sun visors, they boarded the open-sided Bus for the long, dusty drive to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy. One of Ol Pejeta's draws is the habituated rhino Morani, an adult male black rhino, hand-reared and unable to make it on his own in the big bad world of rhino territorialism. He now enjoys his own 'territory', a huge fenced-off paddock, where the Ol Pejeta game scouts can always find him.

As we approached Morani's paddock we followed the game drives, the youngsters slightly more animated as they spotted herds of zebra and giraffe. On leaving the Bus we walked single file down a trail with an Ol Pejeta game scout to find Morani. As this was close to midday, he was



ALL IMAGES: MAGGIE ESSON



Left:
Pupils lucky enough to be picked for the outing

Far Left:
Ephantus give his introduction

Below:
Morani, enjoying a snooze

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enjoying a snooze. The pupils had the really magical experience, as I did, of approaching a fully grown black rhino for a quick pat, while Ephantus did his bit for rhino conservation with a well-planned talk.

The small education centre in the Conservancy provides Ephantus with much-needed resources - various skulls, bones and feathers - an opportunistic collection of biofacts. Here the pupils touched and explored while listening to Ephantus explain about classification, top predators, grazers and browsers; everything fitting neatly into the school curriculum and thereby providing valuable teacher back-up for the schools. The exercise books were frequently consulted and ticked.

This is just another day for Ephantus, long drives punctuated by bouts of teaching, over 100 schools visited each year. The opportunity to go on a school trip is highly prized and when, later in the week, I was out with one of the Community Liaison Officers, this opinion was reinforced. Again we had a long, dusty ride to a remote community conservancy, this time in a Landrover. The dirt track (I won't honour it by calling it a road) was nonexistent in places, lost to erosion or disappearing into mudflats. It was a tortuous, featureless drive, save for the ever-brooding presence of Mount Kenya on the horizon. Eventually we arrived at our destination, a small Maasai settlement. Ephantus had previously managed to get the Bus out there and, weeks later, the event was still one of the highlights of community life.

Without direct experience of the harsh landscape, living conditions and the remoteness of the communities, it's difficult to comprehend the significance of a visit by Ephantus and the LWF's Education Bus. This occasion affords a unique opportunity for the children who are fortunate enough to get a trip and some excellent teaching. It also impacts on multi-generational close communities, where children act as powerful message multipliers.

Chester Zoo helped purchase and equip the Bus, fund staff salaries and the LWF offices, and we are pleased to be able to support such an important education initiative in Kenya. We are also funding workshops with pupils and teachers in 2006, which will review the past two years' programme, and help plan the next phase.

Funds

Save the Rhino International is now fundraising for the EE programme for 2006 and 2007. Capital International has just given a grant of £6,549 to cover the EEO's salary for 2006. The Astor Foundation has given £1,000 and the Allan and Nesta Ferguson Charitable Settlement £5,000 towards the cost of the EE Bus for 2006. Tristan Voorspuy and George Stephenson ran the Lewa Marathon to raise a further £2,500. We now need approximately £5,000 to cover the rest of the 2006 EE programme. "Save the Rhinos", the EAZA Rhino Campaign 2005/6 is targeted to raise the whole of the funds required for 2007.

