

OTHER BOOKS BY ERIC ROBINS

*Animal Dunkirk*  
*The Congo River*  
*White Queen in Africa*

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# THE EBONY ARK

Black Africa's Battle to Save  
its Wild Life

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# Exit Obongi

Not every rhino protected by Man ends its days in peace.

"Obongi", one of Africa's best known wild animals, had a double chance of survival—and lost.

Nine years ago, her mother died in the West Nile district of Uganda. The calf was rescued from poachers and reared from infancy by game rangers within the protective boundaries of Murchison Falls National Park. I saw her, tame and warm-hearted, at that time.

At the end of her bottle-feeding, Obongi, a lonely and affectionate white rhino named after the spot where she was born, was turned loose from her pen. For a while she lived near an airstrip in the park. But, with her excursions along the dusty runway, she soon became an aviation hazard.

She refused to leave, however, until her closest friend, an African baggage porter, moved house to a nearby ranger post.

"Obongi never lost her affection for rangers and visitors of all colours and nationalities," said a park official. "She became so attached to humans during

her years in the park that she seemed to think she was one of them."

Once in the early days she playfully tossed a tourist, but, duly admonished by her protectors, never repeated the incident.

Though living in the bush, she returned regularly to the ranger post, and retained her fascination for the park's crimson fire engine and tourists' cars. A notice which was put up near Obongi's haunts read: "Visitors are warned that while this animal is not in the least dangerous, her habit of rubbing against vehicles is not in the interests of paintwork, wing mirrors or number plates."

It was the friendly rhino's trust in human beings that sealed her fate.

Early in 1969, a gang of rhino horn poachers who crossed by dug-out canoe from her early childhood area of West Nile, brutally speared Obongi to death. The killers—in her eyes trusted human beings—had no difficulty in getting close to her for the deed. Her moaning and terrified 19-month-old calf (which later settled with a group of rhino in the park) ran off to safety.

Ambushed by sickened and angry African game rangers, members of the gang—who were all subsequently sentenced—abandoned Obongi's huge body on a bank of the Nile without being able to slash off the object of her death sentence, her long, curving horn.

She was murdered, like vast numbers over the years in Africa before her, because of a persistent illusion among people in the Far East that powdered rhino horn—taken like snuff or sprinkled on food—is a powerful sexual stimulant and an elixir of youth. The myth arose from the phallic symbolism of the horn,

and it has brought the giant, armour-plated African survivors of the Prehistoric Age to the brink of extinction.

Obongi's only rhino rival in popularity had been Gladys who lived in Kenya's Amboseli Reserve. Although she was every inch a rhino and had an amiable nature, Gladys was a freak in the animal kingdom. She had a horn nearly 6 feet long, believed to have been the longest ever known for her species, and zoologists and naturalists and just plain curious people came from all over the world to Amboseli to see her and slap her hide.

Gladys had a friend, another female rhino named Gertie, whose horn was a mere 54 inches long. Roaming together, they were the greatest tourist attractions Amboseli had ever known.

There was consternation among the African staff one day when Gertie disappeared, apparently abandoning her bull calf they had named Pixie. The youngster was immediately taken over and cared for (it seemed almost by tacit arrangement) by Gladys who by then had lost a foot and a half—the tip broke off among the thorn bushes—of her magnificent horn. Two weeks later, Gertie lumbered proudly back to foster-mother Gladys. She was leading a newly-born female calf.

While Obongi's fame was still mounting 600 miles away, poachers claimed Gladys.

Four men speared her to death when patrols of game rangers in the reserve were bogged down following heavy rains which had turned the countryside of volcanic ash from Mount Kilimanjaro into a quagmire.

The semi-naked poachers hacked off her prize horn, and also cut off a flattened ear, a distinguishing



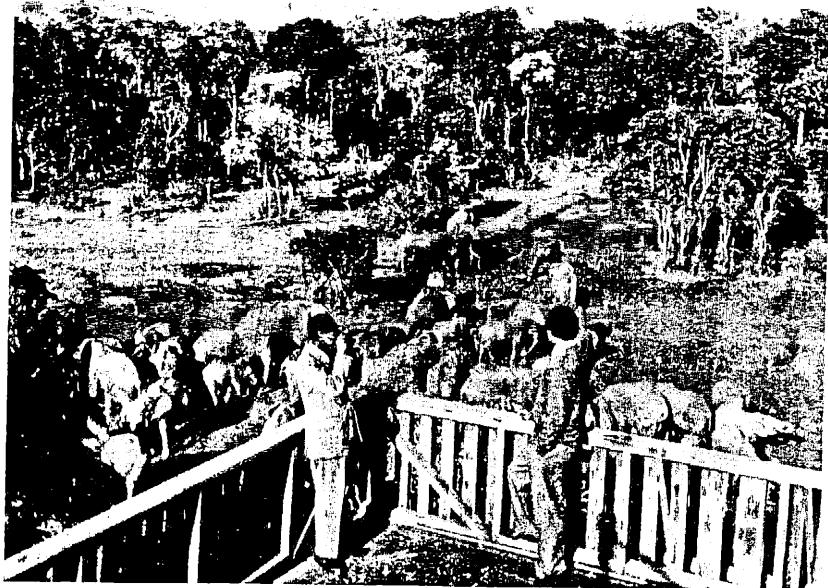
Norman Myers

A leopard with its antelope prey in the fork of a tree.



*Marion Kaplan*

A line-up of giraffe in Kenya's Masai Mara Game Reserve.



*Kenya Information Services*

One of Kenya's Cabinet Ministers, Dr. Julius Kiano (with camera), at Treetops.

feature, to hide the identity of their well-known victim.

The cunning gesture did not save them from vengeance. Enraged Masai guardians of Amboseli quickly traced the culprits and brought them to judgement. Each was sentenced to three years in gaol.

Campaigns in recent years (coupled with exports now of crushed reindeer antlers from Alaska and stag horns from Russia to help satisfy the aphrodisiac markets from Bombay to Peking) have cut down the rhino horn trade to some degree. For all that, the indigenous wardens keeping Africa's big game alive remain gravely concerned over the threat to the sorely depleted rhino populations by illegal hunters—forming the first stage of supply to amorous ancients in the Orient. The rhino's numbers today total but a minor proportion of its original, "Dark Continent" strength.

Governments in East Africa hold periodic auctions of rhino horns (which, actually, consist of thick, matted hair fibre and hide) seized from native poachers, or taken from poached, officially culled or fatally sick or mortally wounded animals.

Being both myopic and a sound sleeper, the rhino can be fairly easily slaughtered by an experienced poacher.

Each horn ranges in weight, according to age and type (there are the black and the square-lipped "white" rhinos), from 3 to, say, 12 pounds. The buyers at these sales are nearly always Asians, openly in the aphrodisiac business, and the average price obtained is about £5 a pound.

It is the cruel, clandestine trade which has reduced the rhino's numbers to a few thousands, and these in the main are now given the maximum

possible protection by African game guards in national parks and other sanctuaries.

On a drastically shrunken rhino-horn market, the prices paid to Kenya coast Asian or Arabic middle-men, the underground agents for rich, unlicensed importers on the other side of the Indian Ocean, are now as high as £10 or £15 a pound. The poacher is generally given only about 10% of these sums, but to him even £20 represents considerable wealth and a good reward for all the risks of killing.

In a recent year the vulture-encircled carcasses of 135 poached rhino were found in Kenya alone by game wardens, rangers and scouts. Yet it is believed that the number lost to poachers' spears was nearly twice that grim figure. In one area of the country, thirty dead rhino—only their horns missing—were discovered within a period of only two months!

A Kenya game warden, who has spent much of his life hunting rhino poachers, said: "We have naval gunboats on patrol, but the coast is heavily indented with lonely creeks. This has always made the smuggling out of rhino horns and elephant tusks a fairly easy matter.

"They are brought down to the coast, hidden in the bush or under the mud floors of huts by the poachers themselves or middle-men. Later, the horns and ivory are collected by other persons in the ring—and are taken out to sea at night—through the perilous surf—by African fishermen paddling dug-out canoes.

"The trophies are then quietly hauled aboard dhows bound for Persia or other vessels going to the Far East. By a series of devious routes they find their way, as packets of grey powder, to their customers: and

at a mighty big profit to the swarthy syndicates organising the whole sorry affair."

There have been times when up to half-a-ton of rhino horn from poached creatures has been stacked in the Kenya Government's sentry-guarded ivory warehouse in Mombasa, a smuggling hotbed. Customs men there who opened the suitcase of an Indian passenger staggering up the gangway of a Hong Kong-bound liner found it contained a pair of sandals, a prayer mat and a dozen rhino horns.

Cut up, the horns make half-pound handles—at £15 each—for Arabian daggers, guaranteed to kill an enemy.

In a spectacular and intensive combined operation carried out by the Kenya Game Department and the police in July of 1968, game trophies worth £52,000 were recovered in Mombasa from unlawful traders. The campaign led to the seizure of 7,000 pounds of ivory; similar quantity of rhino horns, mainly from the white species; 3,000 pounds of hippo teeth (they are used to make the "ivory" souvenirs sold to gullible tourists) and ten leopard skins.

Where the possession of an illegal trophy concerns an elephant, rhino or leopard the penalty in the Republic of Kenya is a £1,000 fine or five years' imprisonment.

African police and their colleagues in the Game Department had spent three weeks, working day and night, on their round-up—which was one of the biggest of its kind ever mounted. They searched hundreds of crates and sacks in and around the port area used by international shipping, and made a series of raids on both the homes and office or shop premises of suspects.

The first evidence of this highly organised racket

involving poachers in mid-Africa, Arab masterminds in Uganda, pawns on the Kenya coast, and receivers in Aden, Djibouti and Dubai involved some stolen crates recovered from two Asians in the old Arabic quarter of Mombasa. On opening the crates, the police found a number of rhino horns which the local game warden identified as probably having belonged to white rhino in Uganda, the Congo-Kinshasa or the Sudan.

In the "Arabian Nights" dhow-port area of Mombasa the game warden and a police inspector then searched a house and store yard and found eight boxes marked "Produce of Uganda". They were consigned to Dubai aboard one of the blue-water dhows. The owners protested volubly that the crates contained a sweetmeat substance called "jaggery", as stated on the consignment note. The game warden opened the crates with a jemmy, and discovered a valuable collection of ivory pieces. (Those from big tusks still go to America for organ and piano keys; to Britain for billiard balls. Medium tusks—between 20 and 40 pounds—are constantly in demand in India where at the time of her marriage a woman must have several ivory bangles which are smashed when she dies or re-marries. Small tusks go to Hong Kong for carvings. Chopsticks are made from the hollow nerve.)

The early investigation in Mombasa led to the discovery of similar crates being sent from the Ugandan capital of Kampala, where one of the principals behind the trade was an Arab posing as a legitimate businessman. He was arrested by the Uganda Police on the information received from Kenya, but escaped to the Middle East while on bail during his trial.

Further detective work in Mombasa—still a well-

used outlet in widely spread ivory and rhino horn smuggling operations despite the vigilance of the various African authorities—set the Game Department men and the police on a long and tortuous trail leading to warehouses in the crowded modern harbour of Kilindini. At one warehouse, leased by a clearing and forwarding agent, they found forty-three crates stencilled as containing either "jaggery" or "pineapples". They were packed with illegal game trophies.

At another berth, fourteen boxes containing bloodied trophies were taken possession of by the raiding parties.

In all, the investigations led to the recovery of ninety-nine crates. And it was found that the same operators a year before had sent ninety-one boxes to the same destinations in Dubai, Djibouti and Aden. The Uganda Customs documents were forged, and all the crates falsely marked.

The trophies seized in this highly efficient operation amounted to 5,171 pieces (more than the Kenya Game Department handles in several years) and represented 250 elephant, 700 rhino, 200 hippo, and the ten leopards.

In Kenya at that time there were only six white rhino. These had been brought in from outside the country, and put in a game reserve.

All the recovered trophies have been auctioned, with the exception of the rhino horns. The sale of these may be spaced out over a number of years—to help satisfy the market and keep others, like Obongi's calf, alive.

agreed on the priorities of survival for the creatures of the jungle, bush and savannah.

It is heartening to record that, in large measure, the retreat of wild animals has been held; and it is Africans who have stemmed the drain in blood and bone.

Efforts being directed to the encouragement of participation by African tribesmen in the protection of the national parks and game reserves are slowly bearing fruit, especially now the admonitions regarding conservation are expressed by their own people at the top and not some expatriate white *baas*.

The ranks of animal lovers in the African nations become greater with enlightenment, and with every new generation.

An African administrator claims that his people have always had a deep, latent feeling for animals, adding: "The best expression of this is in a rich folklore, full of charming stories. With education comes a deeper interest, and consciousness of a national heritage."

But having had to live his own tooth-and-claw existence during the course of a rugged upbringing, not every ordinary African is as yet a natural sentimentalist about wild life, appreciating both its beauty and value.

It is plain, however, that a steadily rising number among scores of millions are determined that their sweeping game sanctuaries from the Sahara to the Zambezi shall not wither and die.

## Epilogue

In this book, I have swung a broad spotlight across the animal realms of mid-Africa.

Here now, for tomorrow's far-reaching traveller of modest means who will join the low-cost, mass flights to this Continent, the beam is narrowed to focus on some of the star game sanctuaries, as regards the beauty of their settings and the abundance or variety of their inhabitants, which have not yet been mentioned in detail.

The list—but a token guide—also notes one or two hitherto unpublicised protection areas now being brought into existence as whole-hearted attempts are made to draw certain lesser-known animals back from the brink of oblivion. Such new havens are the order of the hour throughout Africa.

### *Botswana*

Chobe Reserve (in the green northern part of this country which is the size of France): Large herds of elephant; lion families; leopards; black rhino; buffalo; sable antelope; eland; kudu; waterbuck;

ostrich; zebra; impala; Chobe bushbuck, giraffe and gemsbok, or oryx.

Notes: Three or four years ago, United Nations' ecologists maintained this lowly nation contained "the largest concentration of plains game in Africa". It is President Khama's aim to keep it that way, and his current Five Year Plan provides for a buoyant tourist industry, based on this broad spectrum of wild animals, and for the building of well-appointed hotels and tourist lodges. These are to be owned or managed by Africans who will also run photographic and hunting safaris.

Black-maned lions are to be found in the Ngamiland controlled hunting area.

One tribe maintains its own 700-square-mile wild life reserve called Moremi. There are rare species of gazelle to be found in this energetically protected tract of forest, desert and swamp as well as lion, rhino, elephant and leopard. While the animals are conserved, fee-paying tourists help to fill the tribal coffers. The graceful klipspringer antelope, the giraffe and the cheetah are among the animals declared Royal game in this country.

### *Ethiopia*

Awash National Park (800 square miles) is newly established, and the first of its kind in the "Land of Sheba". It is within easy driving distance of Addis Ababa, the capital, and has a good selection of game such as cheetah, gazelles, leopard and elephant. The latter were re-introduced to the area.

Notes: Game wardens are stationed in several lonely areas of this rugged land to protect wild

animals and two more national parks are being created. One is set in a rugged mountain area exceeding the Grand Canyon in its grandeur, and the principal species it will safeguard are the Abyssinian wolf (otherwise known as the Simien fox), the Walia Ibex, and the Gelada baboon. The disappearing Walia Ibex had been gravely threatened in the district by poachers using old Italian military rifles and tribespeople rolling boulders down cliff faces on to the antelope-type animal. It is stoutly built as a supply of meat, and has massive horns.

The Nyala antelope is protected in another mountainous district.

Thirty-five species, including the Colobus monkey whose numbers have been so grievously reduced in the past to provide rugs and other decorations, are now classified Royal game, and special permits—rarely granted—are needed to hunt any one of them.

### *Kenya*

One of her latest Nature reserves to be designated is the Shimba Hills (47,550 acres) near the coast where the sable antelope is under special protection. This follows the discovery that only sixty sable remained, less than a quarter of the 1960 count. They were featured prominently in *LIFE* magazine of December 5, 1969.

Another such reserve, Marsabit, is the home of some of Africa's few remaining big tuskers with ivory weighing over 100 pounds. At the other end of the scale, Kenya is a refuge of the four-inch-long Golden Mole.

The Game Department has also mounted rescue

operations where Roan antelope and situtunga were under threat.

Note: "Animals," President Kenyatta told me, "are part and parcel of the prosperity of our country, and of Africa in general."

African businessmen are already running safari companies in Kenya, and soon there will be black "white" hunters.

### *Malawi*

The Malawi National Park consists of 325 square miles on the Nyika plateau in the northern region. It contains big numbers of plains game, including zebra, eland and Roan antelope, with the occasional pride of lion or a leopard to prey on them.

In half-a-dozen game reserves and controlled areas throughout the country there are elephant, buffalo and several species of antelope and buck. The lonely Nyala antelope is a special attraction in one of them. Its head was recently featured on a local £1 stamp.

### *Tanzania*

Serengeti (the country's only national park at the time of independence): Lion, elephant, hippo, rhino, klipspringer, dikdik, oribi, warthog, reedbuck, waterbuck, Roan antelope, wildebeest, zebra, Thomson's gazelle, Grant's gazelle, topi, buffalo, giraffe, impala, leopard, eland and many others. One unfortunate poacher there served as a grim warning to others. He fell on his own poisoned arrows while being chased by a field force, and was dead within half-an-hour.

A number of the animals in Serengeti appear to

acknowledge the African rangers as their protectors. One two separate occasions, old bull buffaloes have made their way to them when the time came to die. One lay down six feet from a rangers' hut. They tried to raise him, but he refused to leave them and died during the night. An official report on the incidents stated: "One can only surmise that, feeling death close, they feel safer near human beings than in the bush where hyena and lion would tear them to pieces."

Selous Game Reserve (15,000 square miles, and claimed to be the largest of its kind in the world): Photographic safaris are conducted there, and its forty hunting blocks are alternated for use. In the reserve are lion, elephant, leopard, rhino, buffalo, and some of the equally prized trophies such as sable antelope and the Greater Kudu. It has 900 miles of tracks for fly-in hunters. The reserve is an example of how hunting and conservation can be reconciled by supervision. But the man it remains named after epitomises the colonial figure largely blamed by Africans today ("We have killed wild animals out of hunger and necessity but not for a mere urge to create carnage and wanton destruction") for the ravaged ranks of the animals. Frederick Selous, naturalist, explorer, big-game hunter extraordinary and soldier, rode down elephant on horseback. He shot as many as 30 elephant a day with muzzle-loading rifles; and when his horse could no longer follow the herds, he would pursue them on foot, clad only in a shirt and a pair of sandals. His grave in the reserve is near where he fell during the 1914-18 war.

Rwaha National Park boasts herds of the Greater Kudu.

With the formation of a national park of 720

square miles on the higher slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania in a matter of a few years has added seven new parks to its roll of conservation.

The most novel and remote of her reserves is named Gombe Stream, 15 miles north of Kigoma on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika. Proclaimed for the protection of one of the last troops of chimpanzees in the country (their companions there are Red Colobus and putty-nose monkeys), Gombe Stream was the scene of experiments which gained wide fame. The researchers were able to show how sixty to eighty chimpanzees in Gombe (said to be the closest animal to Man) can think constructively—fashioning collected strips of grass into “fishing lines” and poking them down holes to catch ants, making sponges from chewed leaves and grass to mop up water—and so on.

Another small Tanzanian reserve (52,269 acres) is a non-predatory island in Lake Victoria where, among rain forest and in grassy glades, live chimpanzees which are being returned to the wilds from zoos in Europe. New arrivals, it seems, find it hard to adapt themselves to drinking water, after being used to sipping cups of tea daily before crowds of laughing spectators. There are also rhino and roan antelope on the island.

Notes: Perhaps the most enchanting of Tanzania's game reserves is the one which is the smallest. And it is privately owned and maintained. A mere 30 acres in size, it is situated just off the main road between Arusha and Moshi, and was started in 1961 with an antelope and a couple of crown birds. It is now a wild life wonderland in a flamboyant tropical setting. Zebra, giraffe, waterbuck and birds live in an open compound, separated from visitors only by a large, hidden ditch. Elsewhere, a Thomson's gazelle, free to

wander where it likes, might be seen lying in the shade of a python's or the lions' cage while a few yards away a reedbuck relaxes beside a rhino's enclosure. At weekends, Africans make up the majority of visitors (“I suddenly realised when I started the sanctuary how few of them have the money or the time to see the animals which are Africa's greatest attraction,” says the owner), and wrapt boys and girls can be seen feeding nuzzling gazelle, stroking the satin feathers of a crippled, tame eagle, or romping with a lion cub.

Lone specimens of white giraffe with no markings of any sort have been seen in Tanzania and northern Kenya.

A tribal chief is the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Tanzania National Parks.

### *Uganda*

The Maramgambo Forest at the southern end of Queen Elizabeth National Park is a chimpanzee sanctuary.

Note: The Chanler's reedbuck, which has a shrill whistling call, is among the novelties to be found in her national parks.

### *West Africa*

This half of the Continent can show the visitor quite a few oddities in the animal kingdom—friendly and brash wild gorillas; the cane rat which looks like a hamster, runs like a pig and is more of a porcupine than a rodent; murderous, untamable hunting dogs from which even leopards will retreat; the yellow-backed duiker, which has straw-coloured hair along

the back to its rump and makes a nest under fallen trees in thick forests, and the African skunk known as the zorilla, striped in black and white along its back and popular with country Africans as a swift killer of poisonous snakes.

*Zanzibar Island*

One of the last homes on earth of the Red Colobus.

*Zambia*

Kafue National Park (8,650 square miles): Lion, buffalo, and a great variety of antelope, gazelles and buck including the rare blue-backed duiker.

Livingstone Game Park (300 acres): Lion, rhino, giraffe and antelope can be seen against the majesty, and double rainbows, of the Victoria Falls, along with schools of protected hippo in the Zambezi River. Sumbu Game Reserve (in the north, on Lake Tanganyika's Kasaba Bay): Hippo and elephant.

The Luangwa Valley Game Reserve: Black rhino, lion, Cookson's wildebeest, leopard, Thornycroft's giraffe, zebra, antelope, and an extensive elephant population. Tourists, escorted by an African armed guard, are allowed to follow the game on foot; photographers can get thrilling close-ups of Africa's biggest animals. Most evenings, groups of elephant move from any denuded part of the reserve to feed an adjacent licensed hunting area. Well aware of the danger of lingering, they return to the reserve each day before dawn.

Notes: Near the main camp in the Kafue National Park stands a 100 feet tall sacred tree where long ago warriors tested their spears before battle. Several

spear-heads can still be seen embedded in the trunk, and poker-faced African guides go through the ceremony of invoking the Spirit of the Tree and asking its permission for parties of game-viewers to pass.

Zambia offers the world's only recorded white impala, a ghostly albino flitting between the trees. It is also the locale (in the remote Bangweulu Swamps where Dr. Livingstone's heart was buried) of the black lechwe which has been on a Swiss-published international list of species in danger of extinction. The little-known puku (antelope) is also protected in Zambia. These graceful animals have a marked sense of territory. When the young are born, they are hidden in long grass and the mothers never move more than a few hundred yards away to feed. Efforts to translocate puku from riverine plains in Zambia have failed. Those which have been immobilised with tranquilliser darts and taken by African game officials to other districts have made their way back to their home territories. One female escaped by leaping an eight-foot high fence and joined other puku, homing strongly on their old habitat through miles of thicket.

Note: One of the most enjoyable, and, perhaps, safest means of getting close-ups of animals is from boats, and this can easily be done on the Zambian side of Lake Kariba. Parts of the shoreline have been declared reserves where elephant, lion, buffalo, rhino and other game—reduced in an "Animal Dunkirk" operation from shrinking islands in the floods when a dam wall was built across the Zembezi ten years ago—live out their destined spans, safe from Man-made disasters.