

Our Board Member, William Pike speaks candidly to Dr. Richard Leakey, the Chairman of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) about the threats facing wildlife conservation in Kenya and his view of the future.

William: You have just taken over the Chairmanship of KWS. You are returning to where you were just over 20 years ago. What has changed since you were last in KWS?

Richard: There are a lot of changes but the most important point to bring out is when the new (Wildlife Conservation and Management) Act came to force in 2013 the then board of trustees was dissolved and the trustees were excused of further responsibilities. The government did not appoint a new board and although the legislation speaks very precisely clearly about the governance of KWS being in the hands of a board appointed by due process, from January 2013 until April 2015 there was no legal board and the actions of KWS were controlled by a committee of civil servants chaired by somebody from the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources.

In the intervening period KWS had been run more or less like a department of Government rather than a state corporation that had its own responsibilities. So it's changed from being a viable parastatal in 1993 when I left it to a rather poorly managed informal state corporation being run by government when I came back.

William: You are a personal appointment by the president and he wants you to save the day. You and the board have put in Kitili Mbathi as the Executive Director of KWS. What do you want Mr Mbathi to do, what do you expect from him?

Richard: Well before we go there we've got to take a look at where we were when the board started its operations. The organization was heavily indebted, the organization was effectively bankrupt and we did not have funds to pay many of the outstanding obligations. We were owed considerable sums of money by customers and our staff numbers had ballooned to a point where staff salaries and benefits were consuming close to 65 – 75% of our budget which was untenable. So it's against that backdrop that we selected a director general who had the experience and the stature and initially get KWS back into a viable operating mode, to begin developing strategies for clearing out debts, for getting paid for what we were owed. And for ultimately looking at whether we need a staff component that is as large as it has become.

“...we selected a Director General who had the experience and stature to get KWS to develop strategies for clearing out debts,”

Richard Leakey

William: Are the staff numbers larger than in your day?

Richard: The numbers of persons employed are double what I left in 1993

William: And how does the output compare to 1993?

Richard: The revenues have increased dramatically because of putting the fees up but although the revenues are up, the expenditures are way out of proportion to the revenues. They have been operating on a deficit budget for a number of years and this is unacceptable. So the new DG 's primary responsibility is to get control over the administration, financial management and public profile. Obviously within that, there's a wildlife component that's very important but with the best will in the world, a conservationist without a budget couldn't do anything to save the elephant.

William: How long do you think it will take to complete this KWS rejuvenating process?

Richard: We have to put back in place effective financial control, budgeting measures, procurement measures, staff discipline and retraining and re-bonding of the people who work for us. In addition, we have to raise a lot of capital to do the things that we need to be doing, but I do not believe we can apply to international donors, particularly the multilaterals such as the World Bank or the AU, if on scrutiny they find us to be totally out of control or with a massive debt that we are not attempting to straighten out. So once we've got the management straight and we've got a programme that can be shared with potential donors, then I think we will be taken more seriously when we seek capital injection, probably in the range of between 300- 350 million USD.

With that we will then rebuild our plant in the industrial sense, we would address the tragic conditions of staff housing where rangers are living in hovels, we would address the complete collapse of our infrastructure in terms of vehicles, roads, building equipment, and we would look very carefully at where we can put game proof fences that cannot be penetrated in or out so that we can stop once and for all and permanently the continuous stress of human wildlife conflict.

This is draining our public image with politicians in Parliament. It's totally unnecessary for people to have to constantly battle elephants from eating their crops and it's clear that fencing will stop it. We proposed this in 1993 but there was a great deal of opposition in those days to fencing. I think the world has changed since and that a systematic programme to fence those areas that can be fenced without destroying natural movement or migrations would make a lot of sense but it's a very costly affair to build fences that can't be penetrated.

William: The argument against fences is that it turns a wildlife area that's being conserved into a zoo

Richard: That's a legitimate observation except that the zoo in a place like Tsavo is thousands of square kilometres. You only notice the fence when you go in or out. Places like Nairobi Park which are largely not fenced on one side are now surrounded by private residences.

They have become islands whether they are fenced or not. It's ridiculous to go on pretending that they are not fenced. They are fenced by agricultural schemes, highways, roads, railways, private property owners. It's absolutely clear that they are essentially fenced but there isn't in many cases the barrier that stops the conflict. If we put the barriers we can move forward.

William: The Wildlife task force report last year found that there had been a break down in confidence between the public and KWS, because the public felt that KWS was not protecting them or not listening to their problems with wildlife outside the parks or reserves.

Richard: There are about 46 million people living in Kenya. It's a very small population that have wildlife conflict, but if an elephant kills somebody or ruins their crops or a lion eats their cattle, it gets headline news so it is exaggerated by news selling headlines. It is a problem but it's not a national problem of the kind that the headline sometimes suggests. Climate change is much more frightening I think.

William: With the massive population growth in the country, even with fencing will the parks be sustainable in the long run?

Richard: Parks will only be sustainable if Kenyans want them to be sustainable. Middle class Kenyans who own TV sets watch international soccer, international vanity shows and news but none of them watch wildlife programmes because they've never been put on air in this country. When the " Marsh" Lions were poisoned and the Western audiences learned of the poisoning, they were up in arms, publicity everywhere. Kenyans did not know who these lions were because they've never seen them. It was the English population which has seen them in the last five or ten years with The Big Cat Diaries.

The only thing that Kenyans know about lions is that they eat people's cattle; they've never grown up with these characters in their home. Once we start giving the average wananchi access to the pleasure and joy of watching documentaries in the comfort of their home and realizing that wildlife has personality, wildlife has character and a soothing recreation potential then I think the Kenyan public will be as excited about protecting the parks irrespective of the population crisis. They will say build cities, build jobs but don't have poor people living with poor cattle roaming over everything and destroying it with no benefit. Pastoralists don't pay taxes; they have huge wealth that destroys the parks.

William: In many cases those huge herds of cattle do not actually belong to pastoralists, they belong to politicians who are employing the herdsmen.

Richard: irrespective of the ownership of the cattle, it is evident that they are doing huge damage to the wildlife and I believe that KWS has a mandate to try and straighten this out. It's not the population that's overrunning the parks, it's a few herders employed by big barons to feed their cattle. It can be controlled if the political climate for wildlife is enhanced.

William: It's all very well to watch something on television but it's much better to actually visit the park. What is KWS doing to ensure that Kenyans actually visit their own natural heritage?

Richard: As an organization we have been very lax about promoting local tourism. We've put prices of our lodges, accommodation facilities, and transport and park entrance fees out of reach of people living on average middle class income. Obviously parks cannot be overrun with hundreds and thousands of

people every day but there are many things that could be done that are creative and positive that haven't been done. I believe the new KWS board will push the management to bring this forward.

William: What's your opinion of the Standard Gauge Railway that suddenly in a new design is going to make a huge loop in the middle of the Nairobi park.

Richard: First of all the SGR shouldn't have gone through Tsavo in the way it did. It has done a lot of environmental damage but that was an issue that had been concluded before the board came into business.

"The SGR shouldn't have gone through Tsavo in the way it did. It has done a lot of environmental damage..."

Richard Leakey

William: Would you have preferred it to run along beside the road?

Richard: There are a number of places that it could have run which would have far less damage but that's a closed chapter now. We have mitigated where we can with underpasses and bridges and fences. We have to deal with the situation now.

In terms of phase two which is to run from Nairobi to Malaba via Naivasha, the Kenya Railways Corporation and the Ministry of Transport have floated proposals of a route that in one instance will run a huge loop through the Nairobi National Park. The board of KWS made it clear from day one that this will be totally unacceptable and we were opposed to any railway encroachment on the Nairobi National Park as put forward in that particular document which got wide circulation.

Our proposal is that for the railway to go North, it must first go South to Athi River and then loop around the park and make its way up towards Ngong and into the Rift Valley. It is a longer route but there is far less disturbance on that route.

Our concern is that to suggest a single track on a bridge crossing the park at a high level could perhaps be accommodated in terms of movement of wildlife. But one track will not suffice 30 years from now because Kenya is growing, our import export is going up. We are building the railway because we want to transit goods from Central Africa, Southern Sudan and Ethiopia. The one track proposition that they are talking about today will multiply into a multiple track proposition in 30 – 40 years' time. We cannot allow that risk to take root. Therefore, even though we can see the logic of saving Kenya's taxpayer money today on a one track solution, not the loop but an alternative crossing point, we will remain absolutely opposed to it because it can never accommodate the traffic that economists and others predict 30 years from now. Therefore we must stay out of the park whether there is room for two or

three tracks in due course. If it means moving the container depot from where it is to Athi River, then this is something the government has to consider. That park should be there for city dwellers to enjoy 50 to 100 years from now and it can be.

William: The geothermal project in Hellsgate has destroyed the vultures nesting site. Is that another case of development conflicting with conservation.

Richard: We are comparing apples with oranges there. The Nairobi National park is a very different proposition in terms of its iconic value as a small conservation central park in the city of Nairobi. It is unique in the world. The Hellsgate experiment went horribly wrong over the last few years but I think they have removed the well overspill that was causing the vulture's damage. KenGen have undertaken to be considerably more compliant with our requirements

William: Is that because you got tougher with them?

Richard: It's up to our stand but they are showing signs of being much more willing to listen. A lot of damage has already been done but by the same token I would ask the world at large to consider that we are an energy deficit country. If we are going to avoid depending on hydrocarbons, the two sites that have massive geothermal potential must be exploited. It makes no sense for 45 million Kenyans to say to them that a number of vultures have lost their bedding place. Now I like vultures and it's a shame that they got disturbed but it's not necessarily the end of the vulture and it also is not the way that KenGen will continue to operate.

William: On the coast KWS have been a bit lax on illegal fishing in Watamu but more seriously NEMA authorised sand dredging in Diani which has damaged the reefs in KWS areas. Is controlling the negative effects of development at the coast part of your remit?

Richard: The main part of our remit at the coast would be the Marine national parks. It's rather biased to think that you can sustain a National Park ecology in the water without adequate zoning processes around the buffer zone. KWS has never had, nor does it have, the resources to go beyond these boundaries it is hard enough control the things within its boundaries. There has been very little discussion between NEMA and KWS on issues of this kind and this is a reflection of poor leadership at the ministerial level. We've got to all of us put a lot more effort in recognizing that the parks, the water towers, the forests, they are all ultimately to serve the people of Kenya.

William: The president appointed you as the Chairman of KWS and it appears that he wants to be stricter or stronger in protecting and conserving the environment. Will you only look at fighting battles within the KWS area or would you like to use your influence for instance to get NEMA more serious because you can basically get a NEMA permit for almost anything.

Richard: I have heard many criticisms of different components in the national picture. KWS has clearly got a very big outreach, we interact with communities, the county governments, security components we have quite long arms. We are under resourced and poorly led. I am not so sure that I would agree

that it was a good thing to be appointed by the President, I had a very happy peaceful life. However, I am up to the task he gave me and I think he was and is very sincere in wanting to get things back on track. I gave it an undertaking that for at least for three years I would do my level best with the experience and the contacts that I have to try and deliver something that would make it better. Now, I am just one man who just had his 70th birthday and there's a limit to what a person like me can do alone, but I am getting great support not only from the president but from a number of different ministries and I interact now with a lot of ministries where there is need to interact ; Roads, Railways, Forests, Tourisms, local government , and county governments.

I wanted a DG who had the command and experience to be able to interpret board wishes by similarly being able to interact at a high level. This is a man (Kitili Mbathi) who has been a very senior banker and he has access to virtually anybody in this country in his own right, not just because he is Director. This is what an organization like KWS needs, an ambassador or a spokesperson who is strong and unflinching in pursuing what needs to be pursued. It just can't be Leakey. We have to pass the baton.

William: KWS is classified as a security agency and sits on various security committees inside government. Armed poaching is a threat to national security. It is organized crime and often linked to terrorism financing. To what extent does poaching pose a threat to the national security?

Richard: It is untenable to think that armed men without government control could be anything but a threat. How big the threat is at the moment? I would think not high KWS will remain very engaged with its security capacity but I want to emphasise that as a state corporation rather than a department there are natural limits to how far we should ourselves be prepared to go. We cannot call out a battalion of reservists. We are a relatively small force and need to focus on our primary concern to safeguard the protected areas in terms of the wildlife and our visitors. We need to safeguard incursions by herdsman and we need to safeguard our areas from poachers, not just of Elephant and Rhino. So KWS is part of the security approach in this country but it's a very small player that has been quite effective because the training that our men and women have got in bush craft. We can be used to infiltrate certain areas where some of the other boys have not quite had the same training, I would much prefer to see our rangers carrying a whistle and a nature guide to tell our tourists that you are looking at a spotted barbet

William: If a foreign tourist is reading this interview how safe is it to visit Tsavo or another park?

Richard: As we speak I don't think there's any reason to think they would be at more risk than they would be in going to Paris. Terrorism is a fact of life today its not just a Kenyan problem, the Kenyan ability to foil terrorism is not something we boast about as its confidential but as the Americans have said many times and the French and the British, the only thing the public hears about is when the terrorists get a win. They don't hear about the losses that terrorists suffer. The same is true in Kenya. There are countless occurrences when if the public knew they would feel very differently but we can't boast about our successes. However I can say that as Chairman I have taken a very close look at our security approaches in the parks. It's not perfect but it's certainly much better than I expected initially.

William: Back to the issue of fencing; when would you like to start some fencing and where would you like to start?

Richard: There are some fencing going on: the Daphne Sheldrick appeal, World Wildlife Fund, and a number of NGO's that have put in money into fences. These fences are good for a couple of years. They are electric, they stop easy movement but they are not barriers that you cannot cross. I would like to think that we will eventually put up chain link fences with alarm and supervision systems which you simply cannot cross. Now that will start when we get the money. We will start raising money in the next six months after we have got ourselves cleaned up.

William: Where do you think the fences are most urgently needed?

Richard: We are concerned about the security of Elephants and Rhinos but particularly Elephants. Tsavo borders Tanzania. Tanzania lost a great number of Elephants in the last couple of years. Those people are probably poaching now in Mozambique but that's not a bottomless pit. The big tusked will soon run out. We have a lot of good elephants in this country and I think we need to start with our most sensitive areas where we don't have cross border rights. Where we have animals slipping out and coming back, we need to keep our animals in and keep their people out. From Lake Jipe up along the Tanzania border all the way up to the North end of the Chyulus. Then I would like to fence off human settlement around the Tsavo West ranches and the Taita Taveta area.

William: And what about the North border of Tsavo where so many Somali pastoralists come in?

Richard: It is a concern but they are easier to deal with because they do not have an international frontier that they can escape over. We will do that as a second priority. The Aberdare fence is completed and is under maintenance. They are fencing Mount Kenya now and Meru. These are ongoing but I would like to see a replacement of this type of fence with a much stronger more permanent asset.

William: You are about to become a Hollywood legend. Angelina Jolie wants to direct a movie about your life. There were rumours the South Africans were trying to grab it. Can you reassure us that it will be made in Kenya.

Richard: I don't control anything in this regard but from the discussions that I have had the intention is that the movie will be made. Secondly if it's made it should be made in Kenya and the principals are committed to doing everything in their power to do so. Kenya had a very tough regime for film makers in terms of taxes. This matter was put to the President last year and he said that if a big movie of this kind would be made in Kenya, he would waive all of the irritating fees and license blockages that the film industry has had to contend with in the past. The Kenya ambassador to the United States went to California and reassured them in the name of the president that all obstacles to making the film here would be moved. So I am as confident as any man that if they do finally make the movie, it will be here.

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Richard Leakey

William: And have you seen the script?

Richard: Scripts in Hollywood change and get edited but the intention that the story will be my life with the origin of humanity as well as my life in conjunction with the Elephants.

William: Not politics and being beaten by police at demonstrations?

Richard: Certainly not, that's all out of my life

William: But it got you onto the pages of the papers across the world

Richard: Well that was politics, I was playing politics too.

William: And you are now completely out of politics

Richard: Any human being who has been in politics can never expect to be totally out of it. Yes, I am in touch, I know what's happening, I have friends. My opinion is sometimes sought but I am not an active player and I don't think I'll ever get to that position again.

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