

DIARY JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2005

Update on Toki the cheetah

We have at last embarked on what I hope will be a long term project to continue following Toki the cheetah, the surviving brother of the two orphans we helped to rehabilitate to the wild. We arrived in Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya on the 25th January, and have been working with him ever since, following his daily routine and generally trying to help make plans for his future.

I sometimes ask myself if we can really justify the tremendous amount of effort, resources and emotion that have been and continue to be invested in one fairly small, Big Cat. Toki, the surviving brother from the cheetah twins that were brought to Lewa two and a half years ago has required an enormous amount of help over the past few months.

After his brother Sambu was killed by lions last May, Toki found himself confused and directionless. We decided then to break our own rules and to reintroduce a degree of human contact for his wellbeing. He continued to spend the nights out in the wilds, though for the first few weeks after losing his brother, he had the constant companionship from one of his guardians, primarily Stephen Nangunye whose devotion and care for Toki is unparalleled. Marguerite and I in the meantime had to go to the UK to complete the film we'd been making with the brothers over the past two years, and to prepare other projects. We were, however, in constant touch with Stephen and Ian and Jane Craig who run the Conservancy via SMS text, a wonderful communication



life-line to his progress and dilemmas.

After a few weeks of close contact, I suggested that, once again, observations of Toki should be made from a distance and that human contact should be kept to a minimum. This was put into place and all was well. For the best part of 6 months he lived wild and free in Lewa, making all his own kills and going wherever he

chose. This included, from time to time, him deciding to leave the Conservancy and enter into farming country. Though he never approached

other people during these "outings" we all felt that the risk to his welfare (and livestock) was too great and that he should be encouraged to return to the reserve. His rapport with Stephen made this possible. Stephen running, calling like a cheetah, followed by a well-grown male cat through smallholdings and past goat-herds must have been a curious sight!

In October of last year everything changed. As many of you will know, Toki was attacked and almost killed by the coalition of 3 male cheetahs that wander the conservancy. It was only thanks to Stephen's sensitivity and quick thinking that Toki survived at all. Still, he was very badly injured and many felt that he might never walk, let alone run again. I was in the midst of the filming trip to Antarctica whilst this drama unfolded, and can't begin to convey the sense of anxiety and helplessness I was going through receiving such awful news. That said, I knew that with the support of Stephen, Belinda Low, Ian, Jane and all at Lewa, he stood the very best chance of recovery.

...So is it all worth it?...

We returned to Lewa this January with some trepidation. What would we find when we were reunited with the cat we had already helped to nurture through 3 life threatening situations? What we found is the most magnificent success story. Toki has more than recovered from his ordeal, he has blossomed. We always feared that he would remain slight and frail from his difficult start in life, and that the attack would only exacerbate this. Instead we find a powerful cheetah, thigh muscles that were ravaged by cutting teeth are now strong and solid, back and shoulders flexible and full of grace. But there has been one major change. It is now undeniable that if he is left to his own devices he will be sought out once again by the 3 males, and quite probably killed. So a new programme has been implemented. Each day he is shadowed by Stephen or another guardian, and each evening we try to encourage him into an enclosure for his own safety. If he wanders outside the Conservancy a team is scrambled, including air support with a tracking device, to locate and recover him as soon as possible. He is killing for himself, powerfully and regularly. He continues to lead an all but wild existence, but with the constant stewardship of man. In the short term this will be his future.

So is it all worth it? I believe the answer is emphatically YES. Toki is more than just a cheetah, he is representative of the care and dedication Lewa Wildlife Conservancy lavishes on any project it is involved in. Once a commitment has been made, whether it be to a community project, rhino conservation, or helping to raise endangered orphans, Lewa never looks away from that commitment. We are discussing plans for Toki's future. In the short term it will remain as now, a cheetah living wild with the care of man. In the future, who knows? There may be opportunities to relocate Toki into a territory that does not have such strong competition from other male cheetahs, and to re-educate him regarding human contact. The 3 males in Lewa have reigned for many years. Their situation may change, leaving room for a new king. No one yet knows. What we do know is that we shall all continue to

support him and to give him the best possible quality of life, come what may. And we shall hopefully be able to record his story in film as well as words.

...All exciting stuff...

My life though, is full of contrasts. In just over a week I leave Kenya and travel to Borneo, to film bats and birds that inhabit a great cave system, soon after I shall be in the Scottish Highlands and after that, the high Arctic in search of White Wolves. All exciting stuff, that I shall fill you in on at the soonest opportunity. I am of course reluctant to leave Toki and Kenya, but I know his welfare is in good hands and that we shall continue to be in close touch until such time as we are able to return.

Website development

On a different note, we have been busy too with the development of the website. By the end of May, we should have many of the images I have the good fortune to capture as I travel the world, available as Art Quality prints. It's our hope that you will enjoy sharing these moments, and the opportunity to own them. I'll be in touch with all the developments very soon.

Warmest regards

Simon