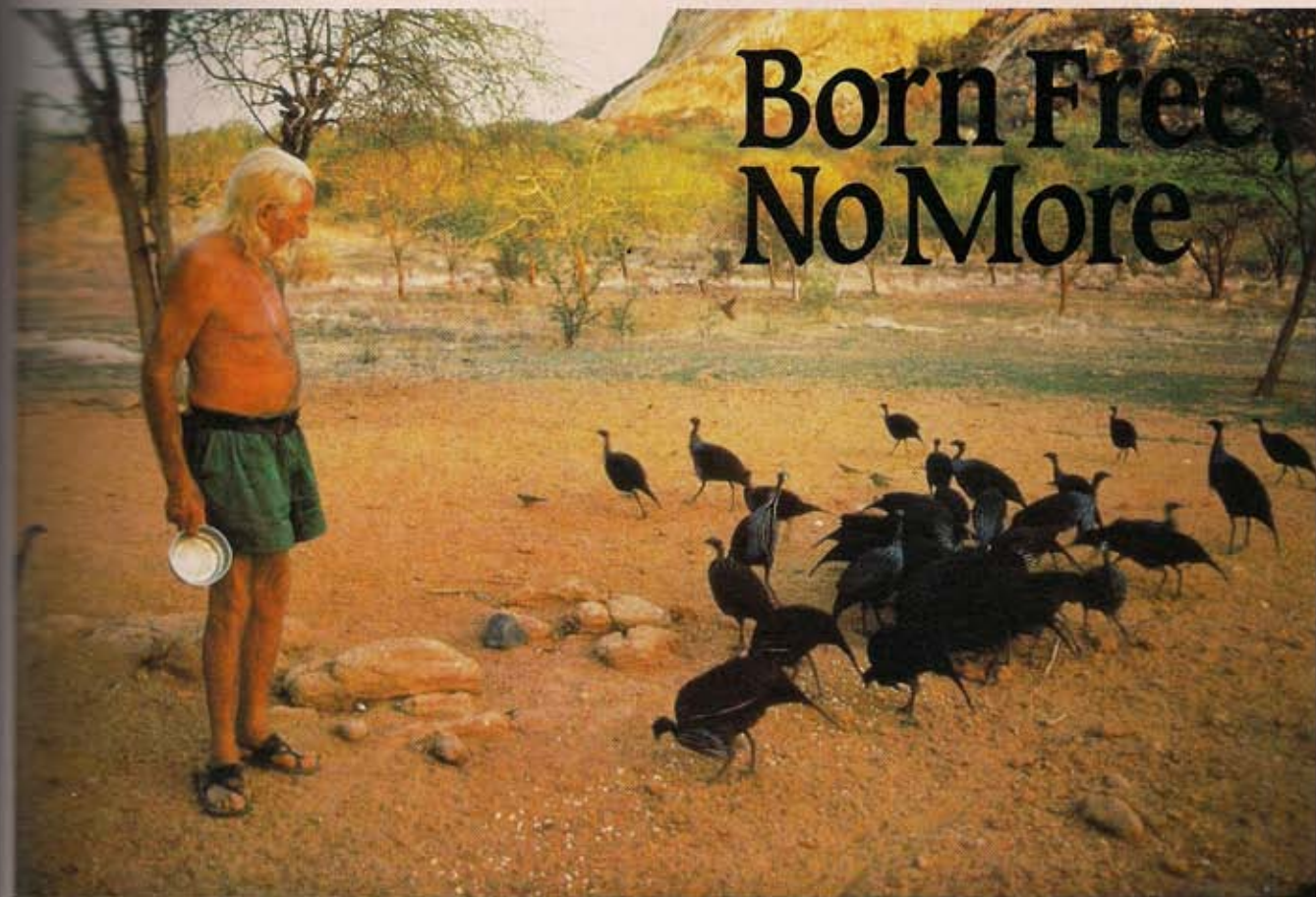


Born Free No More



Now in his eighties, leonine in his own majesty, George Adamson watches the steady erosion of his private Eden — its wildlife raped by poachers, its land despoiled by pastoralists.

By Dan Stiles.

Kora National Reserve, 1,500 square kilometres of thick *Acacia-Commiphora* bush, the epitome of what Hemingway called 'a million miles of bloody Africa', is facing a crisis.

Before 1970 it was just part of a vast expanse of *nyika* — thick thorn scrub — in eastern Kenya, extending from the coast to the highlands. In that year retired game warden George Adamson, also known as 'Bwana Game', settled at the foot of a great rock inselberg called Kora in the middle of the bush near the south

bank of the Tana, Kenya's largest river.

Under the supervision of George's late brother, Terence Adamson, a campsite, access roads and an air strip were laboriously cut into the stubborn bush. There was plenty of game — elephants, antelope, leopard and an estimated 2,000 rhino. Now not a single rhino is left and, because of poaching, the few small elephant herds are so terrified that they scamper off into the thick bush at the first whiff or sight of man.

George Adamson settled out in the middle of nowhere for a purpose — to release orphaned and half-tame lions into the wild which had been denied them. He started with part of the cast of the famous film, *Born Free*, based on the book written by his late wife Joy. For the next nine years he continued rehabilitating and releasing former zoo lions and overgrown pets — until the Kenyan wildlife authorities stopped the programme after repeated maulings, one of them fatal.

But George still lives on at Kampi ya Simba — Lion Camp — hoping to stay in touch with his former charges.

His biggest success, however, came in 1973 when Kora was declared a National Reserve. Theoretically, its

wildlife and their habitats were now safe from man.

But Somali pastoralists, searching for scarce grazing for their cattle, and poachers in search of ivory or rhino horn, are no respecters of game sanctuaries or the law.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, illegal grazing and poaching in Kora has increased steadily. Animal populations have been greatly reduced; their numbers scarce enough to imperil the survival of some species.

Yet satellite photographs indicate that Kora is still in better shape than the surrounding land, particularly to the south and west, which is occupied by shifting *Wakamba* cultivators.

Nonetheless pressure is mounting on Kora from all sides and within — pastoralists converging from the north and east, farmers from the south and west and now dams are planned on the Tana, Kora's northern boundary, and downstream.

It is feared that the reservoir created by the Kora Falls dam will inundate Kampi ya Simba. The access roads, power lines and irrigation schemes will certainly signal Kora's end as a natural habitat. Because of the pressure for land to accommodate Kenya's fast-growing population, in

1986 the President abolished by decree the adjacent North Kitui National Reserve — perhaps a harbinger of things to come for Kora.

Dams and reservoirs will wreak a tremendous change in the fish life of the Tana, which has more than 20 species as well as crocodile and hippo populations.

More critically, it will affect the broad, riverine forest which is the home of the rare, endemic Tana River colobus and mangabey — found nowhere else in eastern Africa — not to mention waterbuck, kudu, elephants and other animals that depend on the forest during drought.

It is not known, either, how these developments might affect the natural biogeographical boundary formed by the Tana which separates the Burchell's and the Grevy's zebra, the Beisa and fringe-eared oryx, the Maasai and the reticulated giraffe and the Maasai and Somali ostrich.

Is Kora worth saving? On the face of it many may not think so. During the 1983-84 drought the barren, twisted Commiphora gave it a sinister, nightmarish aspect. The glaring sun smothered everything in oven-hot air.

But after the rains the land was transformed.

Carpets of white and purple morning-glory flower, *Astipomoea hyoscamoides*, and blooms of heavy-scented yellow or white *Acacia*, abuzz with flitting bees, sprouted miraculously along with millions of fresh, green leaves. The seemingly dead and sterile landscape sprang to life and another ragged cycle began anew.

Thanks to the energy and imagination of Professor Malcolm Coe, an Oxford University zoologist, much more is known of Kora. In 1983 and 1984 he led an ecological research expedition, co-sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society and the National Museums of Kenya, headed by Richard Leakey, which made an extensive study of the flora, fauna and soils.

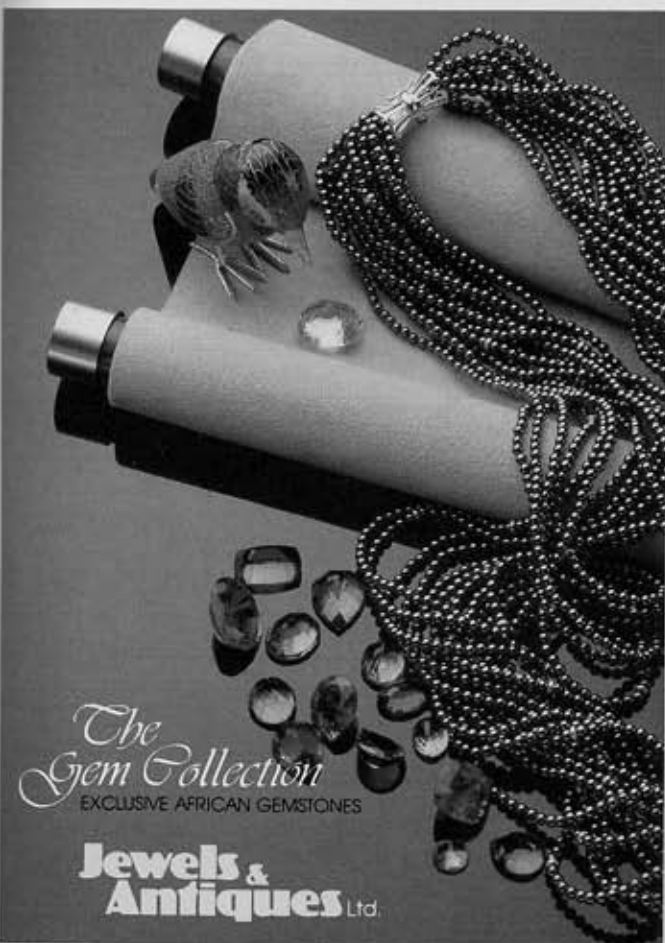
Even though the *nyika* lacked the spectacular natural beauty and massive wildlife herds of the savannah, or the intrinsic interest of strange tropical alpine plants found on Kenya's mountains, Professor Coe recognized that it held a secret of its own.

What was in this monotonous bush? What made it tick, and what could be done with it?

Studying Kora during a terrible drought was not easy. Many creatures had burrowed away to wait for the next rains. By literally digging around and devising ingenious schemes to attract insects and animals, a great deal was discovered.

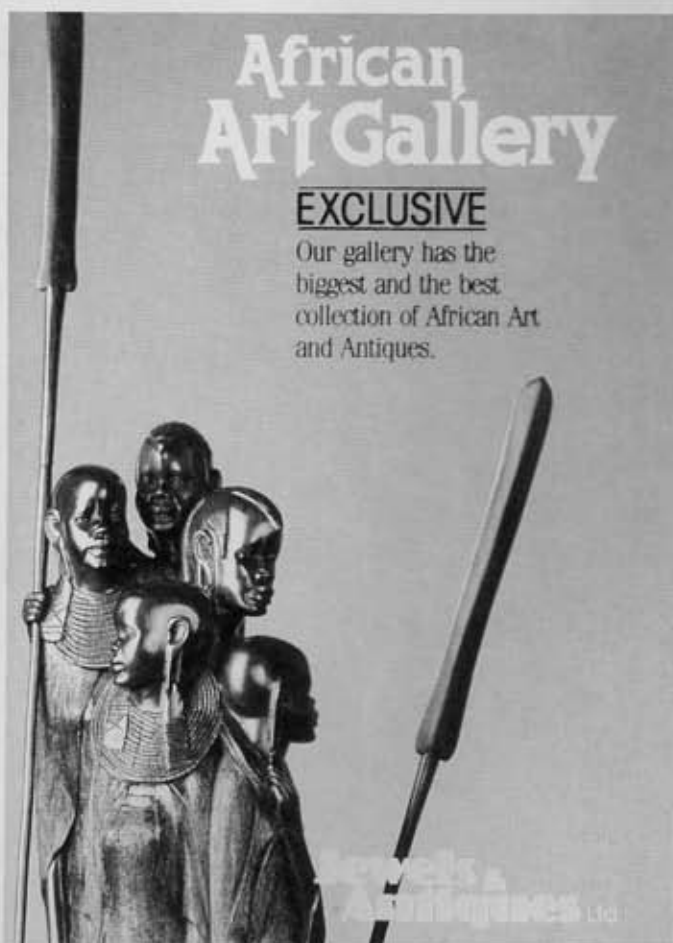
One of the most interesting discoveries was that of Professor Coe on one of the inselbergs, 'Islands in the bush' as he calls them, near Kora Rock. After rain, pools form in shallow pans on the rock surface. Myriads of short-lived fungi, insects, and arthropods — including shrimp — live in these ephemeral pools, attracting small mammals and birds which feed on them. In a week, a mini Garden of Eden grows around one of these shallow pools.

Since most research was conducted during the drought, this important micro-habitat ecosystem was dormant. So Professor Coe set out to mimic nature, periodically hauling jerry cans of water onto the inselberg and pouring it into runoff depressions to form pools.



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Sure enough, life sprouted, beginning with green fungus, and the rest followed. The edge of the pool even became a valuable trapping spot for rare, nocturnal rodents.

Another interesting study by Dr. Peter Waterman, a phytochemist from Strathclyde University, Scotland, involved many gum and resin trees, including the producers of the Biblical frankincense, *Boswallia neglecta*, myrrh, *Commiphora myrrha*, and henna, *Lawsonia inermis*. He began a laboratory study analyzing chemical components of the substances. There is great potential in the use of these gums and resins in the pharmaceutical, perfume and emulsification industries.

Specialists also studied the geology and geomorphology, the varied insect life — including seven species of scorpion, one of them more than 20 centimetres (eight inches) long — large and small mammals, birds, reptiles, molluscs, and plants, of which 275 species were identified. Even archaeology has its place in the scientific research of Kora. Remains of 'Galla graves' lie along the Tana, which will be inundated by the dam reservoir, and Stone Age remains were found on and around the inselbergs. None of these cultural sites has been seriously investigated.

The research surprised even Professor Coe. He had no idea the nyika was so full of life and variety. And Landsat pictures from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Centre showed that Kora National reserve was relatively unspoilt compared to the

degradation of the surrounding land. Few areas of this type of habitat have been left unoccupied in Africa.

The Kenya Government, environmental NGOs, and donors to the Tana River Development Authority — like the World Bank — should look closely at the viability of preserving Kora as part of Kenya's national heritage.

All might regret the sacrifice of this last repository of *nyika* genetic resources. And Kora does have potential as a research area and perhaps, for those who have seen it all, as a tourist attraction — even though the main reason for its creation has disappeared.

George Adamson's lion rehabilitation programme was stopped nine years ago, although a similar exercise for leopards, run by his former assistant, Tony Fitzjohn, continued. At least a hundred visitors from around the world, many of them journalists and film makers, came to Kora every year, fascinated by both programmes. But Fitzjohn's project was also closed down by the Kenya Government two years ago.

Now Kora has been chosen as one of three study areas to test a methodology for studying desertification in a joint United Nations Environment Programme — UNEP — and Kenya Government project. If it is protected, Kora can act as a control area for comparison with the surrounding land which is occupied by man. If Kora remains intact, it can serve to show accurately the effects of climatic influences — as

opposed to mankind's — on the environment.

The studies of Peter Waterman, too, could lead to important discoveries for the use of gums and resins in medicine and industry, thus making a valuable contribution to the economy.

And Kora still serves as a wildlife sanctuary. If anti-poaching measures are strengthened the Reserve could even act as a conservation area for endangered species like the rhinoceros, eventually becoming a reservoir for restocking and protecting threatened wild animals.

It would be ironic if some of these were lion and leopard acquired from zoos and circuses, restarting what George Adamson began in 1970. If that should be so, I hope that George's knowledge, learned from years in the bush with his lions, will be used by those who follow.

As the sun rises over Kora, casting a golden glow on Kora Rock and Kora Tit, George wakes to the harsh caws of Crikey and Croaky, resident ravens. He feeds the guinea fowl with sunflower seeds, shared with buffalo weavers, superb starlings, and tree squirrels, as he has for so many years gone by.

Today Kora still looks much the same as it was long before George was born more than 80 years ago. With minor variations it has looked the same for many thousands of years.

That living continuity with the past, and Kora's ecological integrity, deserves its place in the future, too.

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