

CONSERVATION CHARACTERS

KARL AMMANN

FELIX PATTON



is a rhino ecologist, who writes and broadcasts about the species from Africa and Europe. He has an MSc in Conservation

Biology and a PhD based on research into individual rhino identification and social behaviour. He is a frequent contributor to SWARA.

Karl Ammann is a wildlife photographer and filmmaker and conservation activist renowned for his pioneering work exposing the trade in illegal bush meat, reptile skins and, more latterly, the trade in rhino horn and the trade in live apes.

A native of Switzerland, Karl was born and grew up in St Gallen, one of the highest Swiss towns in the north east which receives a lot of snow in winter - a far cry from his current home bordering the lower slopes of the Mount Kenya forest (where snow has never featured!).

Having trained in economics and hotel management, Karl moved to Kenya in 1974 to work for the InterContinental Hotels group on new project development and marketing in Africa and worldwide. Weekends and holidays were often spent exploring the East African National Parks and game reserves from which grew a desire to spend more time studying wildlife behaviour. By chance an opportunity arose to research cheetahs. The Namibian government had an excessive number of cheetahs and had offered their surplus to Kenya. Before accepting the offer, it was essential to ensure that a potential introduction did not disturb the indigenous population.



Researching cheetah in Masai Mara, Karl and Kathy became professional wildlife photographers resulting in their first book 'Cheetah.'

So it was, in 1980, Karl left his job to live, with his wife Kathy, in Kenya's Maasai Mara to research, document and photograph cheetah behaviour. While in the Mara, Karl and Kathy became friendly with a number of wildlife photographers. Says Karl "we wanted to join in the conversations so soon learned the 'ins and outs' of aperture and depth of field settings and the like and began taking more





Top and below: A trip up the Congo river led to decades of investigating the bushmeat trade and rescuing distressed chimps.



professional wildlife photographs ourselves”. Alongside the research data gathered, Karl’s time in the Mara resulted in the publication of his first book ‘Cheetah’ in 1984.

Karl returned to work with Intercontinental Hotels where he met up with some of his Masai contacts who asked for help in developing a site in the Mara they had secured. This led to the establishment of an ecotourism camp in the reserve with Karl flying in regularly to supervise operations. Later, a second camp was started in the Virunga Mountains of Congo, the home of the gorilla.

But photography had become Karl’s first love so the camps were sold to enable more opportunity to travel. “I was searching for the wild open spaces and untouched wilderness and was

privileged to document what I found in a range of books, photographs and documentaries”.

On one of his trips, up the Congo river, Karl witnessed at first hand the commercial bush meat trade – the sale of meat of any wildlife species, including those threatened and endangered, especially elephant, gorilla, chimpanzee and other primates. It was from this experience that Karl became a conservation activist working tirelessly to bring the devastating effect of the bushmeat trade on especially the great ape populations to the public through photographs, books and film. Karl was also instrumental, in the mid 1990’s, for initiating the discussions which led to the establishment of the Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary on Ol Pejeta Conservancy in central Kenya.



Some of the tools of the trade for covert investigations.



Documenting and publicising illegal wildlife activity means employing the latest covert technology with hidden cameras and sound recording equipment. A typical piece of equipment employed by Karl is a sleeveless safari jacket with the lens of a hidden camera in the button hole of one of the breast pockets, a microphone sewn into the jacket lining attached to a digital recorder located in another pocket. Padding is put in the unused pockets to make the jacket look normal. A key fob camera, a cigarette lighter camera and a spectacles camera (see photos) are also easy to use tools. The latest camera is made to look like a mobile phone in a holder attached to the trouser belt. It can be hidden behind a jacket and as the dealer becomes more confident slowly exposed to start the filming.

Piecing together reliable information is a painstaking process. “The internet is a good starting point as there is a surprising amount of information about wildlife trade on it” remarks Karl. “Then you need a local fixer to make some preliminary investigations to determine who the main players really are”. When he started carrying out covert operations, Karl would pose as a tourist or buyer but now he says he is too well known. “Criminals are often suspicious of a foreigner posing as an innocent tourist while the inability to speak the local language can be restrictive” says Karl “and if I use my real name it is easy to find out about me on the internet”.

A local investigator/translator has to be employed who is often already involved with wildlife as a tour guide but it still takes time to find and train someone who can be trusted especially working in countries where bribery and corruption are second nature.

Often an interview is arranged with a trader and the person does not turn up or it turns out that the interviewee is only a middle man and not the principle so another appointment has

to be arranged for which a further trip has to be undertaken. The story emerges over time. The investigator has to film their encounter and afterwards write a translated transcript of the conversation. They may also have to return to the trader and buy some product that can be used as evidence albeit some enforcement agencies consider this to be entrapment.

Karl's most recent work on the illegal trade in rhino horn in Vietnam is a perfect example of the process. Originally in Laos filming illegal wildlife consumption activities in 2010, Karl was told of the sale of two tiger cubs to Vietnam. He employed a local translator to follow up the lead. The translator, who had previously trafficked wildlife and tiger bones, introduced Karl to some of the well-known dealers. Tiger cake (boiled down from tiger bone), tiger claws and teeth were generally offered but out of the blue one dealer also offered a slab of rhino horn. This set off further investigation into the use of rhino horn in old Hanoi town which resulted in documented evidence that whole horns were being bought



Karl's recent investigations led to exposing the demand for whole rhino horns by wealthy Vietnamese.

by wealthy Vietnamese. Powder from the horn was offered to guests as a detoxifier at parties and used to bribe officials (see SWARA July-September 2012). From one simple unrelated contact a whole new and developing market was uncovered and found to be the main reason behind the spike in rhino poaching in Africa.

Karl also found that small rhino horn pieces being offered to the general public as medicine were, in fact, mostly fake. An internet search showed up 35 dealers offering rhino horn. Subsequent visits in 2011 and 2012 to Laos and Vietnam have confirmed the original findings and found new rhino products on offer – wrist bangles (selling at

\$10,000-15,000 each), prayer bead bracelets and horn tip signature seals (see SWARA July-September 2013).

Having collected evidence of illegal activity, documented on film, you would expect the authorities to act quickly. Far from it. Preliminary details were presented to the illegal wildlife trade enforcement units of CITES, TRAFFIC and Interpol plus the South African HAWKS. CITES and HAWKS have still to get back to Karl! TRAFFIC wanted to bring in Chinese investigators and Interpol said they could not use third party material. A local enforcement team did raid the principle trader but he seems still to be trading as normal following the suspected payment of a hefty bribe!

A hurdle to getting the information Karl obtains widely circulated is that TV companies are reluctant to air wildlife documentaries which contain gruesome (though real) images and 'bad news stories'. At least the internet offers the opportunity to present the evidence to the wider public. As Karl says "the internet has offered people like myself the opportunity to voice points of view outside the 'conservation industry' and the envelope of mainstream media censorship".



Karl is not shy of challenging wildlife officials, face-to-face, with the results of his investigations.



Current investigations have highlighted the trade in live chimps to Chinese circuses.



One of the photographs that won Karl several 'Wildlife Photographer of the Year' awards in the category 'the world in our hands'.



Karl received the prestigious Genesis award for raising public awareness on animal issues.

Karl is currently helping to complete an international version of a film, originally produced for a German broadcaster, about the on-going ape trafficking from West Africa, the Congo to China and Armenia but after more than 20 years of uncovering atrocities with little action from the authorities he is becoming disillusioned. "Why is nobody hammering the key traders?" he asks.

As for his hopes for the future, his one wish is "to see a regular independent, third party audit of all the donor money spent on wildlife projects to document what works and what does not". Says Karl, "For all the donor money being raised in the last twenty years, wildlife trafficking, the bush meat trade and habitat destruction continues unabated and there is increased poaching of elephants and rhinos. We need to employ the limited resources to much better effect".

You can view Karl's latest documentary 'The Hanoi Connection' freely available on 'youtube' and can see and read more about Karl's work as a wildlife photographer and conservation activist on his website:

www.karlamann.com. ●