

AMOS

A HUNTING TRACKER'S SON TURNED CONSERVATIONISTS

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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.

Amos Njoroge Njege is a head driver/guide for the exclusive safari operators Tamimi Kenya. A Kenyan, you could say that Amos was born into conservation as his parents worked at the Mundui Private Sanctuary on the shores of Lake Naivasha in the Rift Valley area of Kenya.

Amos's father was a tracker who used to find elephants for hunting safari clients. "My father used to tell me stories about the wildlife and their behaviour which aroused my interest and my dream was to be involved in conservation" says Amos.

However, when Amos was twelve years old, his father retired and moved the family of five sisters and three brothers to a two-acre shamba (smallholding). He also insisted that, after leaving high school, Amos went to polytechnic to train in carpentry and joinery so he had a trade.

As luck would have it, Amos went back to Mundui on a three-month attachment doing repair jobs during which time Lord Enniskillen, the owner, promised him a job once he had obtained his certificate. In 1998, Amos joined Mundui as a maintenance man and gardener but which also involved helping with the annual wildlife census.



Additional responsibility for keeping the wildlife in the reserve supplied with water was added two years later.

Lord Enniskillen noted Amos's interest in conservation and sent him on a week long workshop at the Elsamere Field Study Centre in Naivasha after which Amos used to visit local schools to give talks about the environment. Lord Enniskillen enabled Amos to learn

to drive and obtain his licence and, when he was away, Amos was tasked with keeping an eye on the animals.

Having assisted in the capture of a hippo in Naivasha, Amos was offered a two-week work experience with the rangers at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy where he first came across and learned about rhinos. A course in bird identification and guiding with the

South Lake Conservation Group opened up further opportunities and Amos also volunteered with the National Museums of Kenya to carry out bird censuses.

Having gathered all this experience, in 2007 Amos was appointed as a driver at the Hippo Point Private Estate and Wildlife Sanctuary on Lake Naivasha where hippos were the star species among a host of other wild and bird life. Under his own auspices, he took and achieved the bronze level of the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association and immediately started to study for the silver award which he achieved in 2013.

Amos says “I believe if you want to progress and do the very best in your job you have to be prepared to educate yourself and get the appropriate qualifications even if you need to pay for it yourself”. He took up a chance to spend another week at Lewa, this time with the research team on an intensive course especially devoted to tracking lions and data analysis. A year later he was offered a job at Lewa as a driver/guide based at Kifaru House, where he learned a lot about rhinos and took a four wheel driving course including anti car-jacking and defensive driving.

The opportunity arose to join Tamimi in august 2010 as the principle driver/guide at the newly opened Solio Lodge which was too good to resist. “Where so many other wild areas have been destroyed by tourism with lots of vehicle



Top: learning to identify bird species.
Middle: Taking a guest on a nature walk.
Bottom: Talking rhino conservation with guests.

tracks degrading the environment, at Solio I saw a much more natural habitat and was told that that was how Tamimi intended to keep it”.

Amos sees his role of a driver/guide as more than safely showing his guests the wildlife but also in gently teaching them about what they cannot see in terms of the wider ecosystem and how the different species contribute to its creation. “The guests I come across are



really interested in conservation and to learn more about it and not just get told about the animals in a way they could read from a book” says Amos. “It’s a challenge for me and I am always keen to learn from visiting experts and by trawling the internet”. True to his ideals of continuing his education, Amos achieved the Certificate of Ornithology – Fundamentals of Ornithology in April 2013.

The driver/guide is an ambassador not just for the company but for the local community and the country. The range of subjects that guests ask about is huge from geography to politics, from wildlife to home life. Sometimes guests want to visit the local schools and offer to finance improvements to the facilities. The more amiable and knowledgeable the guide is, the more

Conservation characters



Top left: planning is an important part of the job
Top right and middle: cooking and serving up a bush breakfast
Bottom: keeping his vehicle in good order

satisfied the guest and the more empathetic they are towards Kenya, its people and its wildlife.

As the head of the driver/guides and spotters, Amos has to coordinate all their activities. Guests mostly arrive by aircraft and have to be picked up and dropped off at the appropriate times. Each party has to be allocated a driver/guide and game drive times and routes planned in a way that vehicles do not mass around a sighting.

Of course there are some menial tasks to be carried out. Amos has a vehicle allocated to him – a long wheel base Toyota landcruiser, which has to be kept clean and in perfect running order. Washing inside and out, daily oil, water and tyre condition checks, on site repairs and minor servicing are essential. The most embarrassing thing for the driver is to breakdown carrying guests due to a drivers neglect so the routine must be strictly adhered to.

People skills are an essential requirement of a driver/guide especially as some clients can be very demanding. The objective is to give the guest an interesting and enjoyable experience and what that means for one person can be very different for another. Keeping guests safe can also be a challenge as tourists do some crazy things. "One lady nearly gave me a heart attack





Top: teaching conservation and giving gifts to local school children.
Bottom: receiving the prestigious Silver Award of the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association.

when she intentionally slipped from her roof top seat onto the bonnet of the vehicle to get some better photos of a lioness” says Amos.

In addition to game drives, the Lodge offers nature walks and bicycle rides which requires Amos to act as the guide but he has his limits - “I once tried the

horse riding safari but nearly came off, so never again” he exclaims.

During the off-season times, Amos visits local schools on the days they have their Wildlife Clubs of Kenya period to teach about conservation taking along videos especially prepared for schools and leading Question and Answer

sessions. Amos is adamant that “we especially need to teach the children about the importance of trees which help keep the environment clean”. Books are taken to the schools bought from income earned from the tourists which helps show how important it is to protect the wildlife on Solio.

Having decided early in his life that he wanted a career in conservation, Amos has done everything in his power to fulfil his passion. He is a prime example of someone who has, through the force of his personality and willingness to work at (and fund) his own education, achieved his ambition.

The job of the driver/guide based on a reserve is very different to that of the driver/guide who takes tourists on a tour of several reserves. By being based in one area has enabled Amos to get to know individual animals, to learn more about animal behaviour, to see rhino calves growing into adults, to see lion prides develop and so much more about how a reserve can change over time. As Amos puts it “and I get paid as well!” ●

