

The Kinge-Wirth Family



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It is not often that you can find eight members of a family all involved in wildlife conservation but this is the claim of the Kinge-Wirths. Father, mother, daughter, two sisters, two brothers and a cousin are all playing their part principally in the Kenyan conservation project Rhino Watch.

Kendy Kinge Wirth is the focal point of the Wirth family. Kenyan-born and brought up in Meru, Kendy spent many weekends at Nairobi National Park and the Animal Orphanage so grew up knowing and loving wildlife. After finishing school, Kendy moved to Nairobi to study for a Diploma in Tourism and Travel after which she worked as a tour guide but, with an independent spirit, she always wanted to be her own boss so established a curio shop in Mombasa. It was here, in 2001, she met Frank Wirth, a German filmmaker, who, on their first meeting, offered Kendy a chance to work in conservation that was to change her life.

Frank was making a film for German television and needed a Swahili-speaking assistant. Seeing something special in Kendy, he employed her on a

‘pay per day’ basis. Kendy says “it sounded like a real adventure with no strings attached and too good to miss so I said yes!” The new team worked well together and Kendy went on to work with Frank in Germany and on Frank’s filmmaking and tourism projects in Portugal and Argentina where whales, not rhinos, were the key feature.

Frank Wirth has a love for sea mammals and their conservation. Having undertaken a scuba diving course in Diana, Kenya while in the German army, Frank decided to satisfy his love of travel and adventure by becoming a scuba diving instructor, working in Belize and the Galapagos Islands. This was his first experience of marine mammals and led him to develop an interest in under and above water photography.

During a tourist visit to the sperm whales of the Portuguese Azores in 1993, Frank decided to start a diving school there and it was here that he had his first taste of conservation. Fishermen were killing sea mammals, the very resource needed for tourism. As Frank puts it “I wanted to see animals alive in the water and not dead in fishing



PHOTO BY: FELIX PATTON

TOP: Wirth family.

BELOW: Frank filming penguins.



PHOTO BY: F. WIRTH

CHARACTERS IN CONSERVATION

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nets”. At the time, the Azoreans were still eating (illegally) dolphin meat and their mindset needed to be changed. Frank employed local watchers to help guide boats to the whales and local skippers for the boats so the community earned income from the tourism trade. Today, the Azores marine mammal tourist industry is booming with whales, dolphins, sharks and Mobula rays the main attraction. “It has taken some 20 years to turn killing into saving and the whole economy has benefitted” says Frank.

Frank researched more marine mammal watching locations. For the southern right whales, Patagonia (Argentina) was ideal and also offered the opportunity to encounter penguins, seals, sea lions and dolphins and a variety of sea birds. At Patagonia and the Azores, conservation education has played as important a role as tourism.

As Frank’s guiding businesses and contacts increased, so did his local knowledge and this led to film companies contacting him for information on the best locations and logistics and led him to organising film shoots. He has since acted as Line Producer for over 15 films including a 3D movie with Jean-Michel Cousteau the French explorer, environmentalist, educator, and film producer and first son of ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau.

As Frank and Kendy worked together on the businesses so their relationship changed and, in 2003, they married and, soon after, came their daughter Maisha. With Kendy being responsible for the management of the clients and their self-contained accommodation in the Azores, Maisha got her first taste of travel before she was a year old! By the time she was eleven years old, Maisha was

an experienced diver and, by diving among the sharks, she was able to show the local people that sharks were not so dangerous and should be protected and not killed. “I find animals are interesting and fun” says Maisha’s “and I really like being involved with people like the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust and their Orphans Project where elephants are being taught how to cope with being put back into the wild”.

Not to be outdone by her parents’ involvement in conservation, Maisha became a Climate Justice Ambassador in Kenya for the organisation “Plant-for-the-Planet”, a global movement with the goal of fighting the climate crisis by planting trees around the world. By organising “academies” children find out about the problems of climate change with more experienced children spreading their knowledge to other children. Training is given to enable children to give lectures to, and inspire, other children as well as adults. At its heart is a tree planting ceremony with the goal of planting a billion trees worldwide.

The Wirth family sponsored the first Kenyan academy in 2011 and over 20,000 trees have now been planted around Rhino Watch Lodge, the Kinge-Wirth family’s principle conservation initiative in Kenya.

With a Kenyan wife and Kenyan daughter, it was clear to Frank that they needed a Kenyan base. It was also clear to Frank and Kendy that many of their marine mammal guests were interested in land mammal safaris if these could be offered. The climate in central Kenya is particularly suitable for Europeans and so they set about searching the Laikipia plateau for a good site for a Lodge coupled with an appropriate conservation theme. This they found with the rhinos at Solio Game Reserve and a wonderful hillside location some five kilometres from its main gate. So it was, in 2007, the construction

TOP LEFT: receiving David Shepherd Wildlife Trust elephant certificate.

TOP RIGHT: promoting Kenya tourism at ITB Berlin.

BELOW: The three sisters Grace, Kendy and Miriam.

PHOTO BY: FELIX PATTON



PHOTOS BY: F WIRTH



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work began and the doors to Rhino Watch Safari Lodge were first opened to guests in 2010.

Kendy is the General Manager and handles reservations and marketing, with her extended family also closely involved in the running of the Lodge. Miriam Kinge is one of Kendy's two sisters. Miriam manages operations and guest relations having joined the business with a background in sales and marketing. She is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Lodge and values the job as, as she says, "we have a cause behind what we do, a purpose which is more than just working".

Grace Kinge, Kendy's other sister, is a certified accountant who works for the government. On days off and weekends she can be found at the Lodge looking through the books to give advice on stock and financial management.

With an International Diploma in Food Production, Kendy's brother David carries responsibility for all the Lodge's food and beverages while also producing some of the specialities as lead Chef.

Second brother Moses Kinge is head driver/guide. His passion for wildlife conservation is clear as he expresses the reason for his love for nature as "I do what I do in order that my children and their children will see animals in the wild and not just in pictures if they become extinct. I want them to enjoy and experience what I do". Moses has attended several courses in wildlife and was an assistant tour guide with a leading Kenyan tour operator before joining Rhino Watch.

Working alongside Moses as a driver/guide is his cousin Aaron Koome who joined Rhinowatch after completing a Diploma in Tour Guiding and Administration at the Kenya Utalii College in Nairobi. Aaron claims a love of animals, travelling and spirit of adventure.

In 2014, following significant poaching of rhinos in Kenya and Africa wide, Rhino Watch launched a "Rhino Awareness and Protection" conservation programme. At the heart of the programme is the

TOP LEFT: David checking the daily menu.

TOP MIDDLE: Moses in his vehicle.

TOP RIGHT: Frank Wirth teaching daughter Maisha.

need for education particularly of children about the wildlife and the problems of poaching. Maisha, as a Rhino Awareness Ambassador, will be involved in those programmes designed for children and families. In addition, using funds raised by tourists attending 'rhino camps', teachers are to be employed to deliver lessons on rhino and other wildlife conservation at schools in the local area. Classes would also be offered the opportunity to sponsor an individual rhino and would be taken to visit it and, if new born, give a name to it so as to form an emotional connection.

The 'Rhino Camps' are tourist safaris with a strong educational basis. While guests visit a number of wildlife facilities around Rhino Watch Lodge, they also gain an in-depth understanding of the issues and problems associated with managing a rhino sanctuary and in conserving rhinos.

The conservation story does not end here. A first whale safari in the Norwegian fjords has been completed and Frank has already surveyed a site in the Simien Mountains of Ethiopia for what would be the highest Lodge in Africa with the rare Walya Ibex, Ethiopian wolf and Gelada baboon set in stunning landscape. Such a venture would provide a livelihood for the local community who could then abandon farming which is currently pushing out the wildlife.

The foundation of all the Kinge-Wirth family's work in conservation is summed up by Frank "It is important to contribute to the sustainable development of tourism and to create a platform for research and nature and wildlife conservation. We must engage and educate our children because they have the chance to transform the future of our planet". ●