

From a prospective pastoralist to a convinced conservationist

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.

Patrick Agaba is Project Manager for the Ugandan Conservation Foundation. A Ugandan hailing from the Ntungamo District in the south west of the country and bordering Rwanda, Patrick was born into a family of pastoralists with no interest in conservation. A large swamp in the area ensured wildlife was abundant with sitatunga, wild pigs and herds of buffaloes whose aggressive nature sometimes meant it was too dangerous to get to school. Far from being a conservationist, Patrick says he “grew up with the idea that wildlife were a problem and just good for the hunters”!

Having done well at primary school, Patrick was offered a place at a nearby secondary school but he stubbornly wanted to go to another school, further away, that he had applied to. His father refused so he ended up working as a pastoralist with the family’s cattle. After a year, the headmaster of the local school persuaded him to try furthering his education and he never looked back. However, there was still no idea of working in conservation and a career in banking seemed most likely.

With a glowing report, Patrick was sent to High School in Kampala where he chose to study Mathematics, Economics and Geography. The school had a wildlife club which met every week and went on field trips such as to Entebbe Zoo (now the Uganda Wildlife

Education Centre) and Murchison Falls National Park. Patrick says “however interesting and enjoyable, this exposure still did not point me towards a career in conservation”.

In 1991, Patrick became the first member of his family of five brothers and four sisters to be offered a place at a university and, with the help of a government scholarship, attended Makerere University in Kampala from where he graduated with a BA in Geography and Political Science in 1994. Typically there were no jobs and the next year was spent without employment. Then a friend offered him a job in Rwanda, the home country of his mother. After six months, Patrick started working for the Rwanda Ministry of Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Resettlement registering Rwandan returnees and helping get assistance from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) for them to settle. A year on, fate



University graduation



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF PATRICK AGABA



Top Left: The water hyacinth problem
Below Left: Patrick the safari operator
Top Right: Working with Uganda Wildlife Authority
Below Right: Waterways Project patrol boat

work more closely in conservation and the opportunity came in 2006 when he was appointed Projects Officer at the NGO Uganda Conservation Foundation (UCF). At the time, UCF was a small but developing UK based charity committed to conserving the wildlife of Uganda following years of civil war, political upheaval and heavy poaching of wildlife. Its sister not-for-profit company based in Kampala was responsible for organising and administering the projects. In essence, UCF works closely with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to provide resources to assist in solving wildlife issues so, as Projects Officer, Patrick could “at last exercise my passion for wildlife and conservation”.

One of the first projects that Patrick was, and still is, instrumental in developing is termed ‘the Waterways Project’ in the Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area (QECA) in the south of Uganda. UWA needed support for their anti-poaching measures – hippo

intervened and Patrick was summoned back by his family to sort out the affairs of a dead cousin and so he was again effectively unemployed.

In May 1996, the chance came to join a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supported project for the control and management of water hyacinth where the weed was threatening the ecological health of Lake Victoria and thereby the livelihoods of lakeshore communities that depended on income from particularly fishing.

The work was undertaken by the US company Clean Lakes Inc., a specialist in aquatic ecosystem restoration and maintenance. As the local co-ordinator, Patrick was responsible for the office management in Kampala controlling finances, bank reconciliations,

stakeholders coordination and operational support to the government of Uganda.

After some 7 years, the company closed the unit and Patrick joined the Concord International Travel Bureau Limited, based in Kampala, as a tour guide for safaris within Uganda and Rwanda. As Patrick says “this was my first exposure to wildlife and I soon grew to appreciate nature and how wonderful the natural resources of Uganda are”. With his administration experience, Patrick was promoted to assistant operations manager responsible for the logistics of the safaris, strategy for improved marketing and drawing up the annual plan.

With an ever-increasing love for wildlife, Patrick became anxious to



Working with the communities and below working with the Uganda Conservation Foundation team.

poaching, bush meat trade, ivory trafficking and illegal fishing – and for community and tourism water safety and rescue capability.

UCF have provided much needed patrol boats, boat stations and training for UWA rangers in the QECA. Patrick was involved in determining with UWA where the problem areas were, sourcing materials for the marine stations and contracting and facilitating the International Rescue Organisation and latterly Poole Harbour Sea Survival to carry out the training programme.

Due to this, the legitimate fishing communities are beginning to see a small recovery in their catches and fishing village economies are gradually improving. Control of fishing in restricted areas has also resulted in fewer crocodiles, otters and birds being caught and drowned in the nets. In addition, Patrick has helped with the counting of hippos and so learned a lot about their behaviour. The Waterways Project has been extended into the Murchison Falls Conservation Area.

Queen Elizabeth National Park is one of the worst areas for problems

with crop raiding elephants for which, under current Uganda legislation, there is no compensation leading to the communities taking retaliatory measures against the culprits. Patrick has led the project to build a 2 metre by 2 metre trench and fencing in the valleys around communities which has kept the non-jumping wildlife (elephants and buffaloes in particular) away from human habitation. With the finance channelled through UWA, Patrick held meetings with the community to ensure the funding was truly beneficial. He further helped in creating a community/park committee in the Park's Ishasha sector to coordinate communications, agreements and partnerships.

Dealing with people at all levels is a key part of the job. One day Patrick might be briefing UCF directors on the progress of a project, the next in a meeting with UWA and the Park Managers discussing the challenges they are facing and how best to spend available funds and then the next day making a presentation to a local community in how to avoid human-wildlife conflict. Fortunately Patrick



is a natural 'people person' who has developed great empathy for those he works with and for. As he says "working as I do at ground level with UWA rangers and local communities has given me an understanding of the hardships that people have to go through and engendered a desire to help as best I can".

Patrick was promoted to Project Manager with a wide range of responsibilities including identifying, developing and delivering projects and engaging appropriate stakeholders. Project budgets have to be drawn up



Working on elephant research.

and when approved monitored and reported on to the board of directors. Finance for the projects requires assisting with fund raising applications and initiatives. UCF spending on projects in 2013 amounted to over US\$120,000 so requires careful management and accounting by Patrick. "I really love my job because I love nature. When I am out in the wild I am transformed by the behaviour of the animals. They have such a calming effect on me after the hustle and bustle of the city".

Since 2012, UCF has been working with UWA in Murchison Falls NP. Patrick has been instrumental in

supporting elephant anti-poaching operations in the delta area between Buligi and Pakwach where poachers pose among the fishermen and then set snares to catch the elephants. Says Patrick "UWA resources in Murchison have been stretched with rangers needed to guard the oil exploration activities. The three new UCF funded ranger posts offer much needed facilities for rangers to help protect the elephants but we also need the government to put pressure on consuming countries if we are to win the war on poaching."

Patrick assists with research work. Alongside UWA, he has been investigating the cause of a serious

skin disease that affects the Rothschilds giraffe in Murchison Falls NP while as a personal member of Nature Uganda he assists with bird censuses.

As to the future for wildlife in Uganda, Patrick is very optimistic if peace and stability remain. He says "whilst wildlife populations are growing, we must always be vigilant as any insurgency can do a lot of damage in a very short time."

From no interest in, to a passion for, wildlife, Patrick Agaba is a fine example of how it is never too late to make a career in the world of conservation.

For further details of the projects supported by UCF see the website ugandacf.org. ●