

Introduction by Rolf D. Baldus

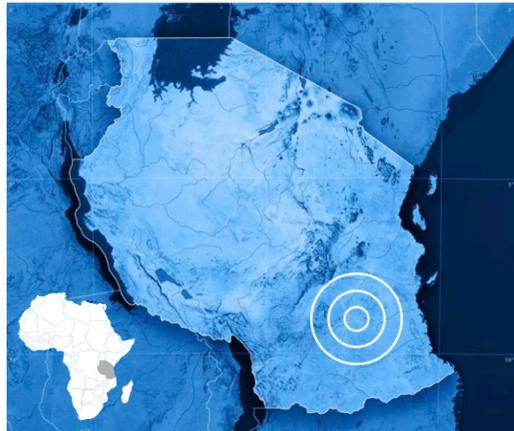
THE POACHING CRISIS in Africa is presently an important topic worldwide, and all too quickly the guilty parties are identified: the corrupt politicians, game wardens, and customs officers in Africa. Often enough this has indeed proven to be true. Without corruption it wouldn't have been possible for tens of thousands of elephants and many thousands of rhinos to have been slaughtered. We in Europe however shouldn't be so fast to point our fingers, especially when it comes to condemning corruption in Africa. For years we haven't managed even to untangle the obvious worldwide net of corruption cast by FIFA, and to place the guilty parties before a court.

What is ignored during the animal welfare solidarity marches, the anti-poaching conferences of politicians, and during public demonstrations involving the destruction of ivory, are the successes of the game scouts who are poorly paid and equipped, but who nonetheless carry out the war on poaching in the African bush. They risk their lives, and hardly anyone thinks about them. Every year dozens of them pay the ultimate sacrifice while trying to save the game parks and the freely living wild animals of Africa for coming generations. In the thirteen years that I worked in African wildlife conservation, several of my

friends were killed in the line of duty, either from airplane crashes or they were murdered.

In the following article we give voice to Benson Kibonde, a man who coordinated anti-poaching efforts in the Selous Game Reserve, the largest protected area in Africa, for nearly eighteen years. This made him the longest-serving warden of any game reserve in Tanzania. It probably wasn't a coincidence that he was transferred from the Selous to Mwanza, at the other end of Tanzania, just before the recent poaching catastrophe on the reserve began. In 2012 he was transferred back to the Selous and continued his activities there as chief warden for two years after his official retirement. In that time poaching was again seriously fought and radically reduced. For the first time in years the elephant population has again stabilized. In September 2015, he finally retired as a civil servant.

I met Benson in 1987, and worked together with him for many years. I consider him a good friend and one of the best and most successful game wardens on the African continent. Now for his own words.



Selous Game Reserve: Is There Any Hope for the Future?

Text: Benson Kibonde
Photos: Rolf Baldus and Ludwig Siege

THE SELOUS GAME RESERVE had for many years enjoyed its status as the largest stronghold of African elephants in the world. The first formal census was conducted in 1976, and it recorded 110,000 elephants. This was believed to be the carrying capacity of this 50,000-square-kilometer wildlife area. This population of elephants faced an onslaught beginning in the early 1980s.

I only joined the Selous Game Reserve in 1985 after my studies at the Mweka College of Wildlife Management. In 1986 I was appointed a sector warden for the southern sector – Liwale, one of the then four sectors of the Selous. Another census was

conducted in 1986 and it recorded 55,000 elephants, indicating that in only ten years 55,000 had been massacred. I participated in the census. The situation was grim, chilling and frustrating. This was a very sad story. While the poaching level was very high over the entire reserve, compared to the other sectors, the southern part was better off in terms of numbers of elephants.

In reaction to the appalling situation, the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) in 1987 sponsored and funded a report on the rehabilitation of the Selous Game Reserve, on behalf of the Wildlife Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources and

Tourism. FZS contracted J. Stephenson, a retired warden of the Mikumi National Park, to prepare the report. It advanced strategies to remedy the problems and detailed the required resources necessary to turn the situation around. The German Government quickly intervened by funding an emergency program to address the situation that same year. Two years later, in 1989, a full-fledged program, The Selous Conservation Program, was commissioned by the German Government. As a condition of the funding, the German Government requested that the Tanzanian Government approve a 50% retention scheme, whereby the Selous Game Reserve



From right: Benson Kibonde, Rolf D. Baldus, (Sector Warden Selous), Gerald Bigurube (National Parks Director ret. and predecessor of Kibonde as Selous Warden) At Shuguli Falls, Selous, February 2014.

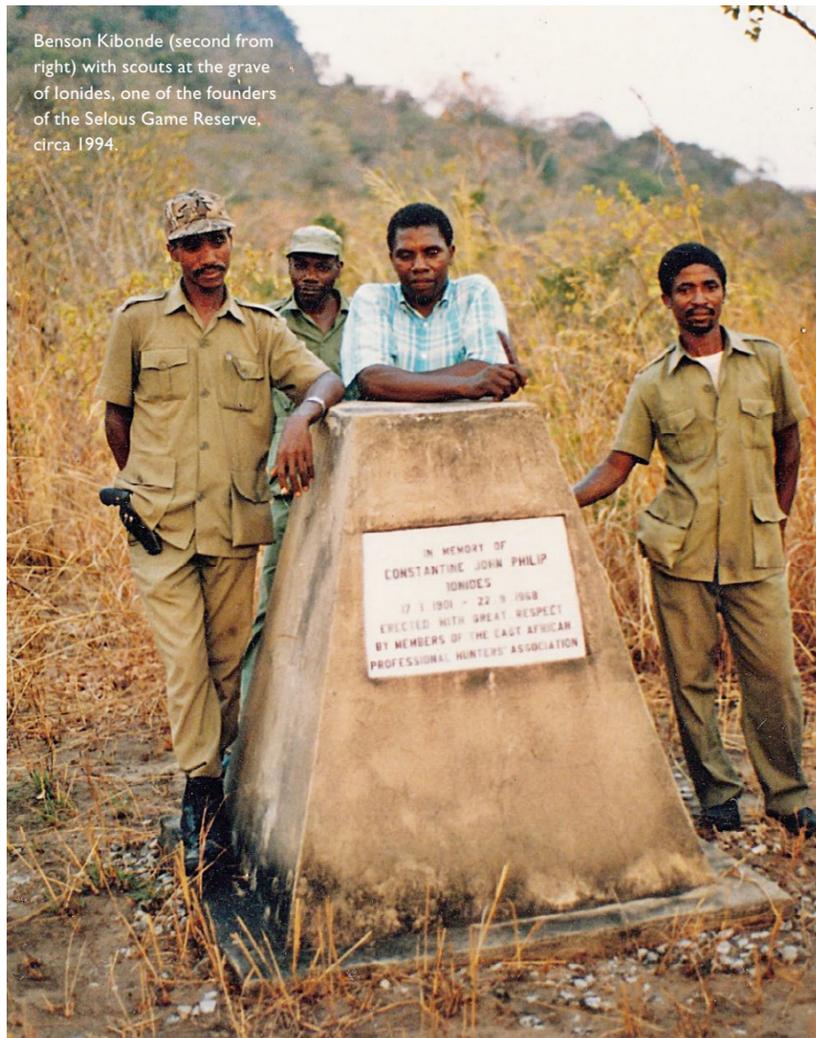
would retain half of the revenue accrued from tourist hunting and the little photographic tourism that took place. The German Government also attached a provision that required the involvement of communities in the conservation of wildlife resources in the areas surrounding the reserve. This was the dawn of community-based conservation in Tanzania.

Another dry-season census was undertaken in 1989, this time only three years after the previous one. This census was done in order to establish the baseline population of elephants at the outset of the program. The situation was even worse and very alarming. The census registered slightly less than 30,000 elephants in the ecosystem. This was shocking, but was also a good rallying point for commitment on the part of the Government of Tanzania and the Selous staff.

The funding from the German Government and the retention scheme improved the management capacity of the Selous. At the same time, the Tanzania Government launched a crackdown on poaching through an operation christened Operation Uhai. I took part in Operation Uhai, and as a sector warden, I worked hard to make sure that the elephant carnage was controlled in my area. The poaching trend was stopped and the elephant population started growing. The retention scheme was fully operational in 1993, and was the biggest factor behind the capacity building of the Selous staff. When I was appointed chief warden for the entire Selous in 1994, I made sure that we bought heavy construction equipment including graders, bucket loaders, and lorries, in addition to the equipment that was acquired from the German funding. This enabled us to open bush-

roads to allow for access to all the areas of the reserve. At the same time we undertook in situ combat training and inspired discipline among the staff and a sense of responsibility and commitment to anti-poaching.

Our anti-poaching motto was "the only way to prevent poachers from operating in the Selous was for the rangers to make known their presence in all the areas of the reserve". We did this and poaching was totally contained. A census conducted in 1994 registered 52,000 elephants, in 1998, there were over 55,000 elephants, in 2002, 63,000 elephants and in 2006, over 70,000 elephants. This was an increase of approximately 40,000 from the lowest dry-season count of 1989. At a conservative estimated population increase of 6% (7% for the Addo National Park in South Africa) for Selous elephants, the record figure of almost 110,000 in 1976



Benson Kibonde (second from right) with scouts at the grave of Ionides, one of the founders of the Selous Game Reserve, circa 1994.

experience, I knew it was possible to fight the poaching and stop it. I knew that I had done it in the past and definitely could do it once more. I mobilized and sensitized the staff, called in 'volunteers', namely graduates from the Pasanisi Training College, where I had been working, rehabilitated vehicles, opened roads to ease patrols, established a high level performance evaluation among the staff and ensured that all staff were paid what was due to him/her. The idea was to spend every dollar of the newly reintroduced retention scheme as effectively and efficiently as possible. I knew that we had to offer sweat and blood as our labor to save elephants from their siege. A number of scouts were injured while carrying out their duties, but we taught the poachers a lesson that we would no longer tolerate their self-imposed immunity to the conservation laws. Poachers flouted the Wildlife Conservation Act No. 5 of 2009 with impunity, and even went on record bragging that nothing would stop them from exercising their self-imposed right. Today, the situation is different in the Selous. The last census has shown that compared to the 2013 count, the number of elephants has slightly risen again. We have not yet stopped poaching completely, but we have turned around the trend. When we said we were going to free elephants we meant it. We have done it.

How have we accomplished it? First, we increased the number of patrol scouts by employing 207 new staff, and recruiting 250 volunteers from the Pasanisi training school. We now have 680 patrol scouts. Each scout spends a minimum of 20 days on patrol per month for the 12 months of the year. This adds up to a total of 163,200 patrol days, up from the previous 30,000 patrol days, and bringing the average to 3.2 days per square kilometer per year. These scouts have patrol bases in the bush, which are permanently occupied. In hotspot areas where concentrations of elephants are evident, patrol groups are spaced at short interval distances, so any activities by poachers will be discovered and investigated immediately. We have managed to increase the number of patrol vehicles from 20 to 40 and expect to increase this to 60 by the end of next year. We have rehabilitated six graders, nine lorries and other

could once again have been reached in the year 2014.

I left the Selous Game Reserve in 2008 after being transferred to a training institute in the northern part of Tanzania. I left while the population of elephants was still increasing. I was called back to the Selous by the Ministry in July, 2012. I found the poaching situation beyond imagination. It was once again out of control. The infrastructure had degenerated, the equipment was completely broken, staff moral was very poor, and the patrol vehicles were virtually all unusable.

There were also problems with the retention scheme, which had been put on hold by the Director of Wildlife in 2005, after the German project had come to an end. When I returned, funding for the Selous was very low. There were only 250 scouts, who each

only spent 10 patrol days per month, for a total of only 30,000 patrol days per year, which was the equivalent of 3/5 of a day per square kilometer per year. This was too low an average, and whether they really worked was another question. Scouts hadn't had their allowances paid on time, or were not paid for all the days they patrolled, which made the reserve porous to poachers. It was sad news. My heart was bathed in my tears. I cried for my beloved Selous. I felt it shattering in pieces. I prayed to God that this would not continue to happen under my watch.

After assessing the situation, I raised an alarm with the conservation partners, particularly the hunting companies. I requested them to come to our assistance, by waging an all-out war against poaching. Based on my

machinery, which are urgently required for anti-poaching. Starting in 2016 the German Government, through the German Development Bank (KfW), will once again come to our rescue. To bridge the gap until this project starts, the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC), the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the FZS have meanwhile come to our support. Together we have devised a 'Selous Elephant Emergency Project' (SEEP), which equips rangers and provides urgently required practical assistance. We invited others to join.

The hunting companies have contributed to our efforts against poaching and are still contributing a lot. Some have provided vehicles, others funds for paying monthly allowances for 100 volunteers, while some have supported us by making their vehicles available for transporting scouts to patrol areas. I thank all those who have participated in this painstaking struggle.

The elephant census that was conducted at the end of 2014 showed that we are on the right track. Elephant numbers had increased to 15,000, from the 13,000 of the previous count in 2013. This stabilization was quite contrary to the general trend in the country.

We are doing more and more at a fast rate. It is imperative that tourist hunting continues in the Selous for two main reasons. The first reason is that hunting companies and hunters have helped to control the poaching situation in the reserve through direct involvement. Secondly, 85% of the Selous retention scheme funds come from hunting. If any amount of the hunting revenue is compromised, the registered success in anti-poaching efforts could be seriously jeopardized. In 2014 the US Fish & Wildlife Service stopped the importation of hunting-trophy ivory into the USA. This move is a disaster for the Selous, as most of its income is directly or indirectly dependent on elephant hunting. If our remaining 15,000 elephants are wiped out in the very near future, this ban would be a major reason.

I hope that the hunting of elephants will continue. Tourist hunting has a very insignificant impact on the decline in numbers of elephants. It can in no way be linked to the decline. It is poaching alone that has the highest and most unsustainable off-take. There could be stricter requirements for hunting elephants, but hunting should continue. If we stop the hunting of elephants in the Selous, we should be prepared for another pandemic from poachers, another distressful

time, and face a possible loss of an entire population of elephants in Selous, an elephants' doomsday. We may not be able to recover the African elephant population in Selous ever. This could be another scenario like the rhino one.

If the current anti-poaching efforts in the Selous are sustained and stepped up, we should be capable of doubling the elephant population there in the next twelve years.

I have never believed that poaching cannot be contained. I will never believe that it is impossible to stop. The last person who pulls a trigger to shoot an elephant is an African in an African environment. I am an African, trained, committed and confident, and armed and dedicated to protect wildlife in the African environment. I will do all that it takes to stop poaching. I have the will, vision, passion and courage to do it. So do my fellow Selous staff. The international community should understand this. I will not do it for financial gain. God bless the Selous, God bless the elephants, and God bless conservation in Tanzania and the world over. ■



Benson Kibonde before retirement in 2015.

Benson Kibonde: Curriculum Vitae

- Born on November 23, 1952 in Tanzania
- 1983–1985: College of African Wildlife Management – Moshi (Tanzania);
- Diploma in Wildlife Management
- 2004–2006: Tshwane University of Technology- Pretoria (South Africa);
- Bachelor in Nature Conservation
- Starting in 1977 as an assistant warden at Rungwa Game Reserve,
- Benson Kibonde was in charge of an anti-poaching unit in the Serengeti area, led anti-poaching operations at the Wildlife Division's headquarters and was director of the game scout training college in Mwanza.
- In the Selous Game Reserve he worked as sector warden for the southern sector from 1985 to 1990. Between 1994 and 2008 he was chief warden of the reserve. He held this position once again between 2012 and September 2015, despite his official retirement in 2013. During his final years of service he was also chairman of the task force to establish a Tanzanian Wildlife Authority.
- See Benson Kibonde in a short GIZ film: <https://www.youtube.com/user/GIZonlineTV>