

## TRIBUTES

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### **Diane Skinner**

Former Programme Officer of IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, and conservationist who bound hearts and minds

Born: 8 December 1980

Died: 10 August 2022

*Tribute with reflections by Holly Dublin, Tom Milliken, Nicholas Dyer*

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*“Diane will be remembered by many, as during her years on Earth she touched many lives and made this a better world for people, animals, and the environment”.*

*Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE; Founder of the Jane Goodall Institute/UN Messenger of Peace*

Africa’s conservation community lost one of its leading figures, Diane Skinner, the Executive Director of the Painted Wolf Foundation, who succumbed to cancer on 10 August 2022. Although only 41, Diane leaves behind a stellar legacy of global efforts to conserve not only African elephants and rhinos, but also wild dogs, chimpanzees, pangolins and other charismatic fauna in Africa.

Through a long body of work addressing international policy, community conservation, and NGO interventions, Diane continually navigated the delicate, ever-fraught balance of human-wildlife conflict; always striving for win-win solutions to safeguard endangered species and also benefit local communities.

A proud Zimbabwean, Diane graduated summa cum laude from Denison University in Granville, Ohio, USA, and commenced her career in conservation starting with the Jane Goodall Institute in Washington, DC in the early 2000s. Diane worked for the JGI for six years. Following this, Diane undertook her Masters in Society and Development at the University of Sussex, in England, achieving a distinction. After completing her MSc, she joined the IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group as a Programme Officer in Nairobi from 2008 to 2014, which included her role on the editorial board of *Pachyderm* (Issues 46–55).

Dr Holly Dublin, the Chairperson of the AfESG for over two decades, warmly recalls their friendship and time working together:

*“From 2008 to 2014, Diane’s constant companionship was a central feature of my professional life and for the years after, my personal*

life as well. We recognized from the start that we shared several key characteristics. We were non-conformist, unconventional, and often constructively mischievous, filled with our own ideas on novel ways to tackle the problems we encountered in our work together. Whether it was purely operational matters or the 'wicked problems' inherent in conserving elephants in Africa, we always stepped up to the challenge together.

Although Diane secured the much-flaunted job of being the Programme Officer for one of the most prestigious and high-profile IUCN SSC Specialist Groups, it was not what she expected. While most people assumed that Diane spent endless time in the field getting to know the world of elephant conservation from the bottom up, that was not her role. Her job was to support the members of the AfESG to do their work, not to be a practicing technical player herself.

By the time she left the post, she had become one of the most ele-savvy people around. She carried out her position with aplomb, rigour and without a hint of the ego and arrogance so often seen in elephant conservation circles. Diane was highly knowledgeable, always pragmatic, and hugely effective. Above all, she was a diplomat, and with a disarming smile, sharp intellect, and ironic wit, she won over anyone and everyone that came her way. A West African minister warmly referred to her as 'la dame au grand sourire'. Diane always left an indelible mark!

Diane and I travelled extensively together to places near and far, gaining vast experience of the cultures and sensitivities of people in China, Europe, and Africa. Diane's innate ability to absorb everything around her and synthesize it into deep understanding to inform subsequent actions was unparalleled. What she learned in one place, she applied in another; learning profound lessons from the issues that divided our membership and those that united them.

But there was another far less serious side to Diane, and I loved (and miss) that even more. How could I forget the time we were preparing for a CITES Standing Committee meeting, we booked our own Airbnb for the

duration of a conference, and on many nights, we hosted pizza parties or had potlatches with friends and colleagues, creating some of my most lasting memories... and some of the best relationships anyone could ever have with delegation members of the Parties to CITES.

In fact, I have endless memories of our time together in the AfESG, always wanting to have an even broader and deeper reach using all of our knowledge of elephants and the wider implications to ensure a greater impact for African conservation. One of our most deeply shared passions was our belief that for conservation to be successful in Africa, it had to be led by African people, [done] with African people and for African people.

After leaving AfESG, Diane became central to the group that developed a new methodology called 'Local Communities: First Line of Defence', commonly known as FLoD. This cutting-edge approach worked with local communities to document how they lived with wildlife, what it meant to them, and what they felt were critical actions toward delivering a larger vision for conservation and development.

For me, Diane's ability to work with all people, regardless of their differences and perspectives, was the greatest contribution she made not only to elephant conservation but also to successful conservation efforts across Africa... and always with a smile.'

In 2014, Diane left IUCN to return to her beloved Zimbabwe to become an independent consultant working for species such as elephants, rhinos, and pangolins and developing strategies to improve coexistence with local communities.

In her work, Diane advocated collaborative approaches to conservation working in a multidisciplinary way. As a passionate advocate for increasing African conservation capacity, especially for women, she volunteered her time to mentor and train young Africans and became a conservationist in residence at the African Leadership University (ALU) School of Wildlife Conservation. She volunteered to serve on several boards, including the Zimbabwean Chapter of the Society for Conservation Biology.

In 2018, Diane became the founder of the Painted Wolf Foundation (PWF), an organization that she evolved to bring best practice conservation interventions to wild dogs across Africa. In 2020/21,

as Executive Director of the PWF, she analyzed the status of wild dog conservation across Africa and produced the seminal report ‘Securing the Future of the Painted Wolf’. The report provides an intelligent and workable strategy to remove wild dogs from the edge of extinction and is a lasting and impactful legacy for the species.

The Painted Wolf Foundation and the ALU School of Wildlife Conservation have established the Diane Skinner Award for the ‘Unsung Hero in Conservation’. This award celebrates people like Diane, who work selflessly for conservation and focus on wildlife and not themselves. The inaugural winner in 2023 was Norah Njiraini of the Amboseli Trust for Elephants for her dedicated work to the savannah elephant.

This year, PWF and ALU created the Diane

Skinner Conservation MBA Scholarship for African Women to help build a future generation of African conservation leaders. The winner of the Award for 2024 will be announced in early 2025.

Those who knew Diane remember her as a warm and resilient person with contagious enthusiasm for the natural world. Her loss is deeply felt by the conservation community; however, her legacy will continue to inspire future conservationists. Colleagues describe her as someone who did not waste energy on self-promotion or seeking recognition but who used her keen intellect to find solutions and her gentle charm to push them through.

Sadly, Diane leaves behind countless friends, a loving family, her husband, Nicholas Dyer and her much loved dog, Snowy.

