

OBITUARIES

Robert F Dodson (Bwana Rob) – Pioneering conservationist passes away unexpectedly of natural causes

Tribute by Mike Korchinsky

Born December 23 1969, in United Kingdom
Died March 3 2017 in Kilifi, Kenya

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It is with great sadness that we report the passing of Rob Dodson on 3 March 2017. Rob was a great man, inspirational leader, loving husband and father, passionate conservationist, story-teller

extraordinaire, adventurer without equal, and my dear friend for 20 years. Officially, Rob was the Head of African Operations for Wildlife Works based in the Tsavo Conservation Area in SE Kenya since 2004, where he was responsible for protecting an important migration corridor for elephant in 500,000 acres linking Tsavo East and West National Parks. But Rob was so much more, both to the Kenyan community in which he worked for two decades and to the broader conservation community. He was provider, protector, mentor, cheerleader and friend. His enormous enthusiasm for every living thing inspired many young conservationists both in Kenya and abroad to follow their hearts into conservation.

Rob was born in the UK on December 23 1969, and first came to Africa as a “gap year” student, taking what he thought would be a short break from schooling before going to university. To our great fortune, Rob never went back, devoting his adult life to conserving Africa’s wild things and wild places, while helping rural communities to develop and prosper. Rob’s first base in Africa was in Swaziland, and southern Africa. His experience there opened his eyes to the splendor of Africa’s wilder areas, the pressure of unchecked-utilization on these areas and the daily struggle that the continent’s indigenous people face in the complex process of development. Further travels took Rob to Zimbabwe where he spent a year and obtained a Professional Guides License.

Kenya stole Rob’s heart during a grand adventure on the Afrika Odyssey Expedition from Cape to Cairo and he returned to Kenya in 1994 and worked in Kenyan conservation until his untimely death.

His first three years in Kenya were spent in the Maasai Mara where he developed and managed “The Olonana Maasai Cultural Centre”. This cultural centre allowed visitors to the famous Maasai Mara National Reserve to learn about and experience the life of the Maasai people in the most authentic way. Olonana was handed over to the Maasai community in 1997. Rob then moved down to the Chyulu Hills for a brief period where he guided walking and riding safaris at Richard Bonhams’ “Ol Donyo Wuas” lodge. He

moved to Tsavo in 1998 where he built and ran the Taita Discovery Centre (TDC), a field study centre designed for students and researchers of all ages, from Kenya and overseas. In August 2001 he handed TDC over to another manager and joined Wildlife Works, where he would spend the rest of his life.

Rob was the living embodiment of the Wildlife Works vision to find a new model for conservation in which the local community is a willing participant in protecting their wildlife and environment in return for support in meeting their very real community development needs. A model not based on paternalistic charity, but on rolling up sleeves, and working side by side with communities day in day out to find a way for them to prosper while conserving the wildlife and wilderness as a living asset.

At a time when the measure of a conservation career is too often papers published and research done, Rob measured his success in animals saved, children educated and jobs created. His incredible knowledge of the ecosystem he lived in came from an intense passion to value every living creature for its intrinsic worth, and to protect it at all costs no matter the personal risks involved. Where conservation groups can be competitive, Rob was inclusive, always encouraging, always willing to collaborate.

But Rob's legacy stretches far beyond the Tsavo ecosystem, as the model he built in Kenya is now influencing similar projects all over the world, from the Congo to Cambodia. Inspired by his example, we are working to ensure a future for all the world's rural communities, by protecting forests to protect our climate for future generations, financed by those who recognize the very real value of intact forests to our global society. Rob was truly a global ambassador for wildlife, in particular elephants, forests and communities.

Rob was also a fortunate man, who met Lore the love of his life while living in the bush with the elephants and buffalo. Rob cherished every moment he could spend with her and with their two beautiful children.

I would like to close by remembering that Rob was also a very dear personal friend with whom I shared so many memorable adventures over the years. Rob taught me about Africa, he

shared with me his incredible knowledge of all living things from ectognatha to elephants. Together we were charged by gorillas in Cameroon, crossed log bridges in the pouring rain over rivers in the Congo, chased lemurs through the forests of Madagascar, were chased by elephants in the Kenyan bush and sat under the stars in so many beautiful places, with the sound of lions roaring near by. Through all of these adventures, majestic or frightening, Rob always found the funny side, and laughed in the face of danger.

And that is how we should remember Rob Dodson, with an enormous grin on his face because of all the beauty in his heart. His spirit infused everything he did and everyone he met, it poured out from his beaming smile and his booming voice, and left everyone the better for having met him.

Rob is survived by his wife Lore and two young daughters.