

Colin Church—Rhino Ark CEO, awarded an OBE for services to Kenya’s conservation vision

Born: 28 January 1940
Died: 16 March 2021

Tribute by Julie Church

Address: Seas4Life, PO Box 15565—00503,
Nairobi, Kenya
Email: juleschurch@gmail.com



Colin Church was born in Kenya in 1940, the second son of Rev. Howard and Elisabeth Church, who came to Kenya in 1932 with the Church Missionary Society. Church attended Kenton College preparatory school and the

Prince of Wales (now Nairobi School) and spent the school holidays with his elder brother Tony exploring the rivers of Mt Kenya and the Athi and Kapiti plains. Here his passion for fly-fishing developed in tandem with his passion for Kenya, its wild places and its people.

Church completed his education at King Edward’s school in UK and began his career in journalism honing his skills with the Surrey Advertiser and latterly Reuters, reporting on the proceedings of the House of Commons in the 1960s. His first job on his return to Kenya was as an editor with the Nation Media Group. In the early 1970s, he set up Kenya’s first Public Relations firm, Church Raitt and Associates. Following Ian Raitt’s departure in 1975, Church founded Church Orr and Associates together with Patrick Orr. He also established the Public Relations Society of Kenya, and in 1996 was elected the President of the International Public Relations Association, the only Kenyan to hold this global position to date.

After 25 years in Public Relations, Church devoted the rest of his life to conservation. In 2005 he was appointed by President Kibaki to Chair the Board of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). There he introduced new, innovative programmes developing inter-agency partnerships, and focusing on communication and marketing strategies, importantly propelling wildlife conservation into the national focus.

From 2002 to 2012, Church chaired the Management Committee of Rhino Ark and focused on bringing Kenya’s unique fundraising mechanism—the Rhino Charge, a grueling orienteering rally—into the international limelight. Rhino Ark was initially established to raise funds for a 250 km perimeter fence around the Aberdare National Park (NP) to protect Kenya’s black rhinos therein. Church changed the Mission of the institution, to “Humans in Harmony with Wildlife”, protecting not just wildlife species including elephants, rhinos and bongos, but also and essentially, its mountain forest ecosystems and the welfare of farmers living in close proximity. The idea of the Rhino Charge as a fundraising event, has now been adopted by other countries in southern Africa.

In 2004 while inspecting illegal logging in the Aberdare National Park the helicopter in which he was travelling crashed as it approached the landing site. He later wrote: “I felt the chopper begin to gyrate anticlockwise as the controls to the tail steering appeared not to respond ... It all happened in seconds. One skid hit the ground over a road indent. Lurching,

the hull tilted violently, and the rotor blades whacked into earth. “The blades shattered and were flung 100 metres away ... The helicopter hit the ground with an ear-splitting crash, followed by silence except for a hissing from the engine.” Fortunately, Church and the other members of his group had only minor injuries, and they continued their inspection by road.

After retiring from Rhino Ark in 2014 Church continued working in conservation, In 2018 he was elected the Chairman of the Mara Elephant Project working closely with its co-founding members and in 2019 he chaired Seas4Life Trust, a marine conservation organization established by his daughter Julie. He also co-founded Eburu Rafiki, became a key adviser to the Big Life Foundation, and the Bongo Surveillance Project. Church was a member of the Board of the Muthaiga Country Club for 17 years, chairing that institution for three years, where he was instrumental in leading the way for a younger generation of members. Church was awarded an OBE by the Queen in 2017 for his “outstanding contribution to conservation in Kenya”.

In 2020 Church published *Mel-el-Leks’ Mountain*, a fascinating book which portrays life as seen through the eyes of Mel-el-Lek—a member of the Wandorobo people. In the Maa tongue Mel-el-lek means: “It is not easy.” Church must have relished researching and writing the book with his intimate knowledge of the Aberdare National Park and its people.

Church had the gift to listen, learn and gently find ways that supported conservation and sustainable development in Kenya. He has now handed the younger generation a torch, to create a pathway that involves living in harmony with wildlife and to make his contribution looking after the country he loved so dearly—Kenya. Known for his dry humour, and easy charm, Church will be remembered as an unassuming person, who quietly and most capably, got on with the tasks at hand.

While conservation became Church’s professional career, he was a devoted family man, and most weekends and holidays were spent surrounded by his family and latterly seven grand-children. Church was married twice, in 1966 to Sally Hopcraft and then in 1984 to Nicole Heinmann. He is survived by three daughters

Tanya, Julie, Antonia and a son, Marcus.

Church passed away in March 2021, after he developed septicemia during his last safari to Kora National Park, Tana River County, just after his 81st birthday. Kora has been home to the conservationists George Adamson and Tony Fitzjohn. It is a wild, rugged and remote landscape, a poignant location for Church’s last big safari.