

Rudi Van Aarde—beyond the loss, celebrating the Professor’s indelible footprints

Born: 21 September 1951

Died: 21 July 2023

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It is with great sadness that I share the tragic news that Professor Rudi van Aarde passed away suddenly on Friday 21 July 2023.

Rudi grew up in Pretoria and went to Mayville Laerskool en Hoerskool Wonderboom. Following high school, he studied at Pretoria University, and continued on to do his graduate studies at the Mammal Research Institute.

The short answer to who Rudi was is that he was the Director of the Conservation Ecology

Research Unit (CERU) at the University of Pretoria, with whom IFAW had partnered for over 20 years.

But Rudi is a lot more than a job title and he and I go back a long way.

Rudi taught me while I was at the Mammal Research Institute at Pretoria, (Department of Zoology and Entomology) and our paths crossed over common goals for elephant protection in my early days at IFAW. The fact that IFAW is pioneering one of the most ambitious global conservation initiatives of our time, Room to Roam, is due to Rudi and CERU’s work over the past 20 years.

He has led one of the most comprehensive elephant population-level research programmes ever conducted, the conversations in turn led to implementing the NGO’s Room to Roam in recent years. As with IFAW’s past contributions to whale and seal science, Rudi’s work was geared towards the use of science to inform conservation decision-making.

This is how it all started 20 years ago. His mantra was to put science on the table first and foremost, and then decide whether science or politics would lead the way in policy and conservation management decisions.

For IFAW, our paths first crossed in the controversy around renewed calls for elephant culling in the Kruger National Park (NP) in the late 1990s. We quickly rallied around Rudi to present the data, i.e. to understand the drivers of the dynamics of Kruger NPs elephants before making archaic, ill-informed decisions with serious animal welfare consequences.

Fortunately, South African National Parks (SAN Parks) adopted Rudi and IFAW’s recommendations and developed a new management plan for Kruger NP’s elephants based on spatial management of water in the Park and the removal of the fence between South Africa and the Mozambique border. The elephant population stabilized in a few years, and culling was no longer a consideration.

Rudi knew that politics would drive poor management decisions in southern Africa, with calls for culling coming from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe. At the helm of CERU and IFAW, the focus shifted to a regional one, and thus started the work of Room to Roam.

The goal in 2007 was simple—to understand the drivers of elephant population dynamics across southern Africa, where 80% of Africa’s elephants lived. His vision was about what Africa should look like for elephants and people 10, 30, 50, and 100 years

from now, something I often repeat regarding how we comprehend the importance of Room to Roam.

While this is saddening news, the legacy that Rudi has left behind is immeasurable.

I will say that if it were not for Rudi and his passion for elephants, science and nature, we would still be deep in the throes of the politics around elephant management in southern Africa.

He was a seeker of the truth, and if you have ever seen any of his amazing photographs, you could attest to his deep spiritual connection to elephants and nature. I always told him this, and he would always groan about it.

I have spent a lot of time with Rudi over the years, mainly in the bush, memories that I will forever cherish. I have learned an incredible amount from a friend and mentor, a larger-than-life character. IFAW will continue to honor Rudi's legacy through our ongoing commitment to the science behind Room to Roam, an initiative that will live on as a celebration of his life.

Rudi married Camilla Norgaard in 2012, and sadly leaves Camilla and his wonderful dogs behind.