

## Game ranching in Kenya

### Part 3

*Mwako ! Mwako !*

We were leisurely sipping our afternoon tea when Petro's words echoed in the vast farmhouse. We had anticipated the call and carefully planned the emergency procedure... just in case. Each one of us had been assigned a specific task and we rushed out in the hot, stifling air with much apprehension.

« *Mwako* » means « fire » in Swahili. Weeks of hot, dry weather over Kenya's plains had inevitably triggered bush fires across the parched land but this time, David's game ranch was targeted. Our farmhouse was protected by firebreakers : broad dirt roads that were regularly inspected and maintained to prevent the spread of wild fires. If we were safe, our herds of cattle and wild animals were not. The blaze sent them scampering to safety.



nomadic Masai herdsman in search of grazing

The ranch being partly fenced, we feared that all the animals would flee and settle on Masai land on the other side of David's property.

Actually, we suspected the Masai herdsman to have ignited that bush fire to steal our cattle. That was an increasingly common practice during the dry season.

In fact, David's herds were kept in locked paddocks at night and shepherds, armed with spears, kept a close watch on them but Masai herdsman knew how to outwit these security measures.

For the Masai people, healthy cows are very precious as milk suppliers, good bulls as breeders and bullocks as ceremonial meat. Traditionally, the meat of wild animals is never eaten, except in times of famine. Even then, it is restricted to eland and buffalo, animals which resemble cattle.

We loaded the Range-rovers with milk cans filled with water and bundles of potato sacks and drove off in a cloud of dust. Obviously, the farm workers were used to fighting bush fires and I was impressed by their calm and restraint.



a raging bush fire across Swara plains

Braving the smoke and the heat, they all lined up with wet potato sacks in their hands and, at the same pace, they started beating the flames to the ground. I was fascinated by the scene: it looked as if they were performing a tribal dance to the crackling sound of burning thorn trees and dry grass. Amazingly, most of them were barefoot.

I smiled remembering how hard it had been to make them grasp the basics of geometry. Patiently, David had shown them how the poles of the chainlink fence had to be planted in a STRAIGHT line. He soon found out that the indigenous farm workers had no clue what « straight » meant : inevitably, the fence would curve to one side or the other and the poles had to be unearthed one by one and the work redone. But this time, no tedious explanations were needed : they all stood in a perfectly straight line, facing the scorching flames, intent on fighting the intruder.



a herd of zebras in a cloud of smoke

They just knew what nature had taught them : lessons of survival and solidarity. That was my first lesson in the field and I did not know then that I had signed up for an eighteen-month-course on David's game ranch in Kenya.

The fire was finally under control after hours of struggle : we were all drenched in sweat as if we had gone swimming with our clothes on.

A few weeks later, we were called on a major bush fire that was sweeping across our neighbour's land. He desperately needed extra hands to fight it. The raging flames were fanned by strong winds and at one point, we all decided it was a lost battle. We gave up out of fear of putting our own lives at risk. That was my second lesson in the field : a lesson of wisdom.



**the aftermath of a recent bush fire**

We were relieved when the long-awaited raindrops finally fell on the scorched earth after months of severe drought. And I still remember the distinct sigh that rose from the depth of the cracks : the earth was awakening and breathing again ! Soon the ranch would be covered with rolling green grass and the animals would flock around the water holes.



**a high-risk encounter at the water hole**



**an elephant in Tsavo National Park**

Beyond the boundaries of the ranch, wild animals faced the most dangerous and fearless predator : MAN. Hunting wild game had recently been banned in Kenya but poachers went on with their profitable business : killing elephants and rhinoceroses for ivory.

As for the Masai, they killed lions for killing their cattle.



**lions in Masai Mara National Park**

We knew whenever there was another slaughtered animal on the ground : up in the sky, vultures were already circling over their next prey.



**elephant tusks seized from poachers**



**black rhinoceros : one of the most endangered species**

Today, many conservationists believe that the ban on sport hunting should be lifted because they are convinced that the best way to conserve the wild animals is « to put a price tag to them ». This would make them worth protecting for the government and the local communities. As it is now, wild animals have little value and purpose in their eyes.

As for David H., he was fully committed to his game ranching project hoping that « man would wake up and cooperate with nature, in the knowledge that only then would nature continue to support life. »

**To be continued ...**



**lion and cheetah cubs on the watch**