

Game ranching in Kenya Part five

My eighteen-month-stay on David's game ranch in Kenya profoundly marked my life. Not only did I learn a great deal about animal behaviour, ostrich farming, ranch management, wildlife conservation and desertification, but I also learnt that it is not always easy to find your way in life. The important thing is to put your heart into your work. As a teenager, I was not fully aware of what it really meant for my own career, but I never grew tired of listening to David's first-hand account of what difference it had made for his.



zebras and cows grazing side by side

I still cherish the memory of our casual chats as we were leisurely sipping our afternoon tea on the veranda.

« David, if raising wildlife in its natural habitat is so simple, why hasn't it been done on a major scale before ? »

« Mainly because nobody's done it yet. It's much easier to follow what's been done in the past ».

When pressed to enlarge on his answer, David reluctantly admitted that he had to face a fair amount of opposition from some international organizations which had poured money into livestock development and whose reputations were at stake with the fate of the cattle industry. Despite the common sense inherent in his project of utilizing local resources, his experimental game ranch was seen as a threat to traditional cattle ranching and the visionary rancher could not underestimate the risks he was actually taking to publicize it.

Today, some thirty years later, I still follow this basic principle learnt in the field : *stick to what you believe in, no matter what. In other words, stand up for your beliefs.*

At a conference on desertification held in Nairobi, David H. boldly defended the idea that the main cause of desertification was MAN. He fiercely argued that « *weather hasn't been the main transgressor, but rather our own mismanagement of the land : improper ploughing of the soil, cutting of trees for charcoal, and especially the overstocking and overgrazing of livestock.* »

In the 1970's, he was openly criticized for giving point to his arguments : « *SHOCKING!* », « *How DARE you!* », « *NONSENSE!* », « *Falsified data!* » were some of the caustic remarks that punctuated his lectures. In fact, he exploded the credo that the domestication of animals must be a keystone to civilization. Today, not a single scientist would dare prove his revolutionary ideas wrong. Over the years, he has won numerous prestigious international awards for his experimental game ranching project in Kenya. A token of appreciation for his boldness.



Severe drought in Kenya threatening herders' livelihoods

Living on the ranch in rudimentary conditions, I got to appreciate the luxury of having running water in periods of severe drought.

For wild animals, lack of water is not fatal. Adapted to semi-arid conditions, they can survive long droughts without water by getting moisture from the grasses and leaves they eat.

On the contrary, domestic cattle cannot survive without their daily intake of water. Day after day, they trample and kill much of the natural grass and bush while trekking to and from their water holes. Tracking and increasing devastation round water holes reduces not only the amount of grazing available, but also the amount of moisture which is normally passed from the soil to the atmosphere by the transpiration of plants. The air thus becomes drier. The bare earth, exposed to the sun, heats up. The dry and heated air rises, reducing further the probability of rainfall. When it finally rains, it does more harm than good because the water runs and erodes the lifeless soil. The end result of this natural process is desertification and it is irrevocable.



a Kenyan boy standing in a dry river bed

One day, our water pump broke down. One farm worker dismantled the whole engine and finally singled out the faulty part. We were convinced that it was a matter of days before we could get it fixed, but the part had to be imported and the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months. Believe it or not, the water pump was finally running again ... on Christmas Day ! I will never forget the sheer joy of soaking in a hot bath, water up to my chin, on that very special day. I thought to myself : « This is THE most precious Christmas present I've ever received ! » Years after this memorable experience, I caught myself contemplating the running water pouring out of a tap, thinking how quickly I had lost the sense of gratitude I had once felt in the same ordinary situation.



Amboseli National Park at sunrise

Another important lesson I learnt from living in the savanna is that the natural world we inherited is a single indivisible unit. Every living thing is inter-related to everything else. If we undertake to amputate too severely any part of that unit, the whole structure collapses. It is like a gigantic jigsaw that becomes meaningless and worthless once one of its precious pieces goes missing.

If we do not protect indigenous animals, which form part of the whole, our dwindling and degrading food resources will no longer support our own life. In fact, wild animals live in perfect harmony in their natural habitat as long as we do not interfere in this fragile ecological balance. When we live in opposition to nature, subjugating and altering it to suit our whims and desires, the consequences are FAMINE and DEATH. What was just a mere warning or a distant threat thirty years ago has now become a blatant reality in many parts of Africa: rich fertile grasslands have turned into parched wasteland and desert.

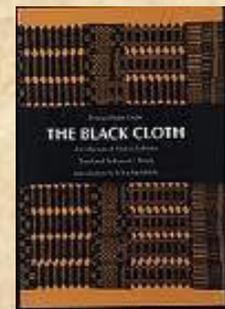
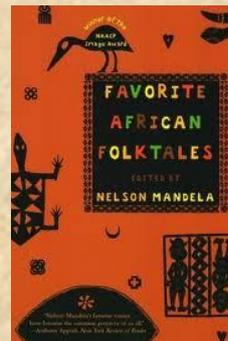
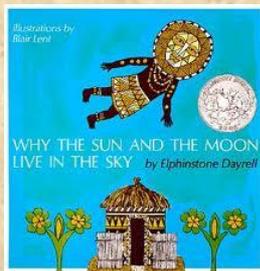


The Chalbi desert in Northern Kenya

On David's game ranch in Kenya, I learnt how to observe nature and wild animals with the belief that they held the solutions to many of the environmental issues we have to tackle to stay alive. After all, they have existed much before us and survived tremendous climatic changes thanks to their incredibly high degree of adaptability. We should see them as a living testimony of what we, humans, have to do to preserve our own species.

If we want to save our lands and our sources of food, we have to take time to observe and study wildlife. But are we humble enough to learn from our past mistakes ?

If you want to share some African folktales with your students, here are some of my suggestions :



- Why the Sun and the Moon live in the Sky by E. Dayrell and B. Lent - A1/A2 level
- Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales (an audiobook benefiting children in South Africa orphaned and impacted by HIV/AIDS) - A2/B1 level
- Favorite African Folktales edited by Nelson Mandela - A2/B1 level
- The Black Cloth - a collection of African Folktales by B. Binlin Dadié - B1/B2 level