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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sources on the visual history of African wildlife, 1940s to 1980s: images that changed the animal world

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Abstract

We have recently completed the draft of a book on the changing representation of East African wildlife from the 1940s to the 1980s. We have used many published texts as well as visual representations such as photographs, films, and television. The output of material in these years was huge. We suggest that these media representations were a significant, and neglected, element in the emergence of a global animal-centric conservationist ethos. This article discusses some of the people involved and the papers, many of them in private hands, that we used. We believe that this is valuable material and should, where possible, be acquired by archives. The material is scattered, especially in Kenya, the UK, and USA. In the UK, the University of Bristol library now houses the Wildscreen film archives and also some private papers that could form the foundation for a larger collection.

Résumé

Les auteurs ont récemment achevé l'ébauche d'un ouvrage sur l'évolution de la représentation de la faune sauvage d'Afrique de l'Est des années 1940 aux années 1980. Ils ont utilisé de nombreux textes publiés, ainsi que des représentations visuelles telles que photographiques, cinématographiques et télévisuelles. Le volume de matériel produit au cours de cette période est considérable. Les auteurs suggèrent que ces représentations médiatiques ont été un élément important et négligé de l'émergence d'une culture conservationniste mondiale centrée sur les animaux. Cet article présente certaines des personnes impliquées et les documents utilisés, qui appartiennent pour la plupart à des particuliers. Les auteurs pensent qu'il s'agit d'un matériel précieux qui devrait, dans la mesure du possible, être racheté par des archives. Ce matériel est dispersé, notamment au Kenya, au Royaume-Uni et aux États-Unis. Au Royaume-Uni, la bibliothèque de l'Université de Bristol abrite désormais les archives cinématographiques Wildscreen ainsi que certains documents privés qui pourraient constituer la base d'une collection plus vaste.

African wildlife in print and visual media[1]

Human impact on the environment is one of the central concerns of our time. There is multi-disciplinary engagement with the many issues involved, more diverse and complex in scope than any of us, especially those in the humanities, can easily grasp. But we should, as historians, librarians, and archivists, try to expand our understanding. The challenge of analyzing environmental change, for which much of the conceptual base and empirical material is rooted in scientific work, is huge. Science is not, of course, separate from human ideologies, institutions, or motives. These two realms, as has long been argued, need to be conceived together. The humanities have their limits in that they are so anthropocentric. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that *Homo sapiens*, like other species, are most intently focused on themselves. But predators need to understand their animate prey and inanimate environment – in the broadest sense; we can't survive without them.

The changing representation of East African wildlife from the 1940s to the 1980s is the subject of a book we have been working on for several years, using many published texts and visual representations such as photographs, films, and television. We suggest that these media representations were a significant, and neglected, element in the emergence of an animal-centric conservationist ethos. North Americans, who have until recently been dominant in the writing of environmental history, have inevitably constructed a historiography around a sequence of influential writers and activists there; Rachel Carson is probably the key figure in our period. But in our braver moments we suggest that, collectively, African-based producers of images, and subjects of film, made an equal impact on the routes of modern environmentalism.

We focus on about twelve main protagonists, some of them couples, with many others as smaller players, who were involved in photographing, filming, narrating, and acting out their experiences with African animals – or facilitating these processes. These were largely a cosmopolitan group of whites who lived for extended periods in Kenya, but many African people were involved. The scale of production was huge. Joy and George Adamson, who lived and worked in Kenya, probably became the best known. They recorded their experience rearing Elsa, a young lion cub, and returning her to the wild, in thousands of photographs. More than 100 were published in each of the hardback editions of *Born Free* (Adamson 1960), *Living Free* (Adamson 1961) and *Forever Free* (Adamson 1962), Joy's books about this experience. A feature film followed in 1966, by which time publicists claimed that the books had reached fifty million people. The Adamsons' ideas, practices, and images were generated on the peripheries of fading empire, rather than in the heart of Western society and institutions.

Their context was specifically African, and the images were generally celebratory of African animals and landscape – and sometimes of its people. This was a new aesthetic arising from a Western vision but powerfully influenced by locations, animals, and people in Africa (Beinart and McKeown 2009). They contributed to a significant phase in the development of a strand of initially anglophone, animal-centric conservationism that became global in its scope, impacting also on African countries. They were innovators in the use of visual media to expand the public reach

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the SCOLMA (UK Libraries & Archives Group on Africa) conference held on 23 June 2023 at SOAS University of London.

Figure 1. From killing to loving wildlife: Hemingway in Africa in the 1930s.

of conservationist ideas. They broadcast their ideas and experiences at a time when East Africa became independent and African political landscapes were changing rapidly. They advocated, and to an extent practised, though not without contradictions, new relationships with wild animals.

The destabilization of old imperial cultures of hunting and capture was in certain respects a profound reimagining of a postcolonial modernity (see Figures 1 and 2). The Adamsons recognized (as Darwin had done) emotions in animals and advocated emotional relationships with animals. This sense of affection and even love – a word quite frequently used by our protagonists – was important in helping them connect with mass audiences and reshape attitudes to wildlife. Some scientists of their era, and natural history presenters in the BBC, were sceptical and anxious about anthropomorphism but seldom consistent in their approach.

These animal lovers have not been written into academic environmental history and social sciences, except to some degree in the critique of the myth of wild Africa (Adams and McShane 1992). They have been seen as one of the vehicles for that myth in that they focused on wildlife in Africa. Yet they did not, on the whole, present the landscape solely in those terms: in the books and films, there is often coverage of human involvement, including African people, in the enterprise. Environmental conservation is not generally factored into an analysis of decolonization, and on the contrary is often seen by Africanists as a vehicle for neo-colonialism (Ramutsindela 2004; Garland 2008). Both processes were at work and we are suggesting that in an environmentally-centred history this issue needs rethinking.

Many people, in a range of countries, were fascinated by animals and had experienced what they believed were emotional attachments between people and

Figure 2. Joy Adamson with Elsa, fully grown, in 1959.

domestic animals. Popular culture was also changing rapidly, with the rise of visual images. Cinema audiences peaked in the US and Britain in 1946; television took off soon afterwards. The nature and scale of visual literacy changed human society as photographic and moving images became more widely distributed and more accessible through a range of media. Wildlife and the screen took to each other and became part of mass viewing; BBC TV audience surveys from the 1950s to the 1970s often put wildlife films at the very top of approval ratings. This new visual imagination, later given further momentum by the digital revolution, was one of the most important mental changes of the last century. We are suggesting that East Africa from the 1940s to 1980s was a base for an important strand in the growth of modern environmentalism, with important repercussions for African countries too.

Archives of East African wildlife media production

Even if you don't accept all of this argument, we believe that the archives of these processes are of value. This media output had a large audience and helped to generate a new wildlife-linked economy in some countries. The archives are scattered, and diverse: some records exist in public repositories such as the BBC, British Film

Institute, University of Bristol, and the National Museum in Nairobi. Some films are available on YouTube or elsewhere on the Internet; a number of feature films have been released commercially online. Many relevant materials are stored in private homes.

It is important to mention the scale of illustrated book-publishing by Europeans and North Americans visiting, or living in, East Africa during this period, many of which involve interactions with wildlife. Collins were at the forefront, publishing narratives and photographs by a number of our protagonists, including Armand Denis, Des and Jen Bartlett, Sue Hart, and Hugo van Lawick, as well as Joy Adamson. The relationship between Collins and the Adamsons was deep and intimate: Billy Collins, head of the publishing house, had an affair with Joy Adamson at the time *Born Free* was published; he almost lost his head when Elsa put her jaws around it during his visit to Kenya. Adrian House, senior editor at Collins, contributed to George Adamson's autobiographies (Adamson 1968; 1986) and was the Adamsons' biographer (House 1995). Collins recognized the importance of photographs in selling books and lending authenticity to their authors' adventures. Their published output by interconnected authors is a valuable source.

Armand Denis, Belgian-born (1897) and Oxford-trained, who lived most of his life in the USA and Kenya, was probably the most influential figure in the visual representation of African environments from about 1947 to 1960. He worked as an independent filmmaker, as an advisor for feature films, and as a publicist for wildlife and conservation, and he gave a start to younger men who became some of the most innovative and productive wildlife filmmakers of their generation. He was a restless, freelance filmmaker and entrepreneur of wildlife. Some of his early films projected uncomfortable colonial racial stereotypes, but he and his second wife, Michaela, gradually shifted their approach, celebrating some African lifestyles and knowledge. His film *Dark Rapture* (1938) showed a stunning sequence of Abatwa people in the Ituri forest building a liana (vine) bridge across a river chasm, and his commentary in this case is surprisingly complimentary. Basil Davidson used the footage in the second episode of his eight-part series *Africa: a voyage of discovery* (Channel 4, 1984).

Denis's career displays the tension between an exploitative approach to animals and an educative and conservationist focus that gradually became more marked. But he was responsible for the death of at least thirty-seven gorillas in Congo Brazzaville, when he went on a capture, filming and spying expedition during the Second World War (Denis 1963). Denis's most successful film *Savage Splendor* (1949), for RKO [Radio Pictures Inc.], was probably seen by twelve million people in cinemas. For the final decade of his career, from 1955 to 1964, Armand and Michaela fronted *On Safari*, a long-running British TV series. It was largely made in East Africa where they had settled. Australian Des Bartlett was the main photographer. Figure 3 shows the Denises and Des Bartlett on location.

The Denis archive is very scattered. Some material about the making of *Savage Splendor* is housed at the Cincinnati Museum Center, to which the co-director of the film, Lewis Cotlow, donated his collection. Information on Denis's brief and unsuccessful spying mission is from Susan Williams, *Spies in the Congo* (2018), gleaned from the US archives. Luckily the BBC archives, which are uneven, retain files relevant to Denis's decade of filmmaking for them in East Africa from 1954 to 1965. This archive also reveals the popularity of their BBC programme *On Safari*, at the top of

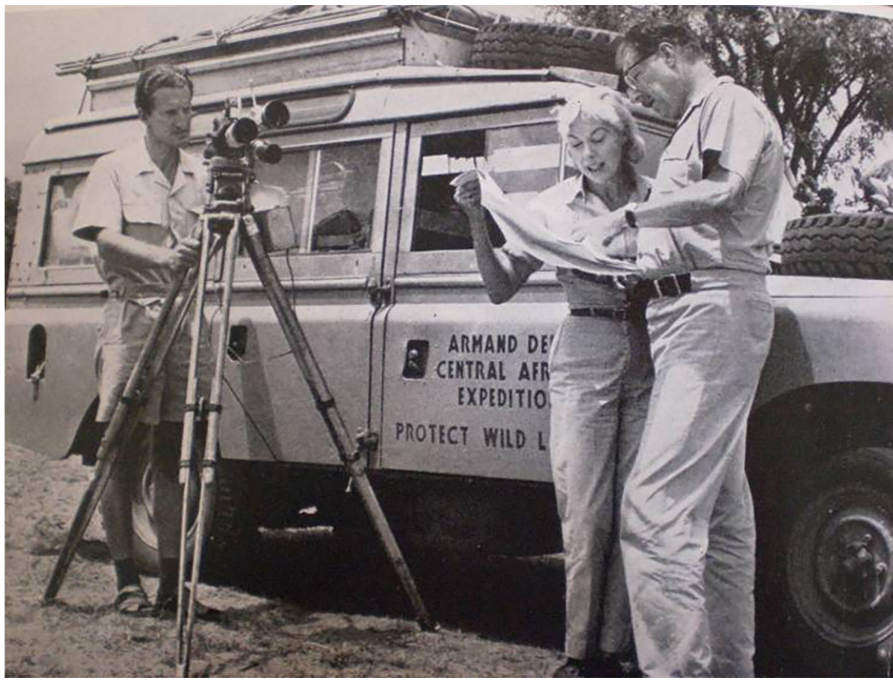

Figure 3. Armand and Michaela Denis with Des Bartlett, Kenya, 1950s.

audience ratings, along with Attenborough's early *Zoo Quests*. There is some correspondence from Attenborough in this archive but less than expected; we mainly used files relating to the first mega-series in which he participated – *Life on Earth*.

The films are difficult to find. The best series seem to be in two private collections, one in Kenya and one kept by the family of Des and Jen Bartlett, whose commitment and skill kept the show on the road. The latter also includes correspondence and photos. Because Jen Bartlett is working on a biography of Des, this latter material has not been available but we learned a great deal from an extended interview.[2] We hope that this archive will be preserved, and it covers also their later filmmaking, the Emmy Award-winning *Flight of the Snow Geese* (1972) and extended work in Namibia.

Intimate relationships with other species played a critical role in the propagation of African wildlife to mass audiences. A number of white Kenyan settlers adopted wild animals. Hunting and the clearance of land for agriculture produced a steady stream of orphans and injured animals. Carr Hartley, born in Kenya in 1910, and his wife owned a farm near Rumuruti in Laikipia (formerly northern Maasai territory). Initially an elephant and buffalo control officer shooting hundreds of animals to supply meat to the British troops in the Second World War, Hartley then turned to the capture business, supplying war-depleted zoos and circuses across the world. The family used a fleet of motor vehicles to chase animals and capture them using lassos

[2] Jen Bartlett, interview with William Beinart. Swakopmund, September 2012.

Figure 4. Jumas Omar with Carr Hartley giraffes in *Odongo* (1956) (still captured from the film).

and ropes. Denis filmed this in 1946, and audience feedback suggested it was the most exciting sequence in *Savage Splendor*.

Captured animals were temporarily housed in cages and large paddocks – everything from cheetahs and chimpanzees to rhinos and hippos. To transport animals, the Hartleys had to modify their diets, which was a form of habituation. Two rhinos were sufficiently docile to allow people to sit on their backs; this resulted in many photos. The animals included a couple of lions, with which Hartley was photographed without barriers. Up to the late 1940s feature filmmakers largely had to splice together shots of actors and wild animals taken separately. The habituation of Hartley's animals enabled actors (or their stand-ins) and wildlife to appear in the same frame (Beinart and Schafer 2013). Biddable wild animals provided new opportunities for directors. Denis took the huge crew and cast of *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) – the second top box office film of that year – to the Rumuruti farm. John Ford's *Mogambo* (1953) started out there, filming scenes of stars with the animals; Clark Gable played an American adventurer with a game capture operation. When Hemingway, sceptically viewing the film depiction of his *Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952), joked that the hyena stole the show, he did not know it was Willie, Hartley's pet hyena.

Odongo (1956) was in many senses a feature film about the farm, distinctive because it probably had the first African teenage star who was given a positive – as well as a title – role. Played by twelve-year-old Jumas Omar (Figure 4), Odongo was depicted as loving animals, which featured in many scenes. One included Omar riding on a small elephant. In the context of feature films made in the 1950s, it presented a very different approach. There were many others that relied on Hartley's animals, including *Tarzan* films, starring Gordon Scott, whom the Hartley family remember as muscled but scared of animals. Together with anthropologist Neil Carrier, we pursued

two of Carr Hartley's sons, one in Nairobi and one near Durban, and were lucky not only to get extended interviews but also access to their modest archives of the farm. We went to Rumuruti, now redistributed as smallholdings, and interviewed former workers. The future of these archives is uncertain.

Monty Ruben, also born in Kenya, completed a zoology degree in London, and returned to join his father's transport business in Nairobi. When film companies started to arrive around 1950, he handled their transport logistics and developed a wide knowledge of the industry and its needs, in effect becoming a local producer of a number of feature and documentary films for over three decades, right up to *Out of Africa* (1985). When we went to interview him at his house in Nairobi, then in his eighties, he took us to a large outdoor study which was stacked high with papers and photos, including images of film stars. Later attempts to get access to the archives were refused by his family due to Ruben's illness and perhaps their uncertainty about our aims. Lacking material, we did not write a chapter about his engagements but his archive may be a valuable resource covering the making of films in Kenya. He had close links with Kenyan politicians such as Attorney General Charles Njonjo. The material may also illustrate the connections that were mobilized in the enterprise.

From the mid-1980s, Jean Hartley was one of those who took over the role that Ruben had played, establishing her own business in Nairobi as a wildlife film fixer. With the help of a friend in the UK and by asking the documentary filmmakers she assisted to send her copies of their films, she developed what may be the largest archive of African wildlife documentary film in the world, comprised of thousands of items. Sadly she died in 2017, in her sixties, but we believe the archive remains in her house in Nairobi, which is used by the business she founded as an office. Hartley produced an interesting short book on the history of wildlife filmmaking called *Africa's Big Five and Other Wildlife Filmmakers* (2010).

Joy and George Adamson's papers are held in the Nairobi National Museum, at Joy Adamson's former home in Naivasha, Kenya, and in Cheltenham, England, by the Elsa Conservation Trust – this is the largest collection. Some of the Kenyan material is on microfilm in the Bodleian at the University of Oxford. Joy Adamson wrote at least eight books (1960, 1961, 1962, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1978, 1980) and George Adamson published two volumes of autobiography (1968, 1986). There are two biographies of Joy (Cass 1992; Niemark 1999), one of George (Gall 1991), and one – the most substantial – of both of them (House 1995). *Born Free* itself (Adamson 1960), the first in the Elsa trilogy published from 1960 to 1962, probably sold over five million copies. The Adamsons are in many respects well covered in books and in films. But the archives, together with this and other published work, provide potential for new research on them and the early visual representation of their story.

Before Joy Adamson became involved with Elsa, she had, between 1947 and 1956, travelled widely to fulfil a commission by Louis Leakey, Director of the Coryndon Museum (now the Nairobi National Museum), to paint the people of Kenya in traditional dress. She produced over 600 paintings; the originals to our knowledge are still largely divided between Kenya's State House and the Museum. She also took about 6,000 photos of her sitters as references for her paintings and made quite extensive notes of the process, recording African names for clothing and objects. While there may be more detailed material on some communities, this archive may be the most detailed overall record of traditional dress in Kenya. For a time, the

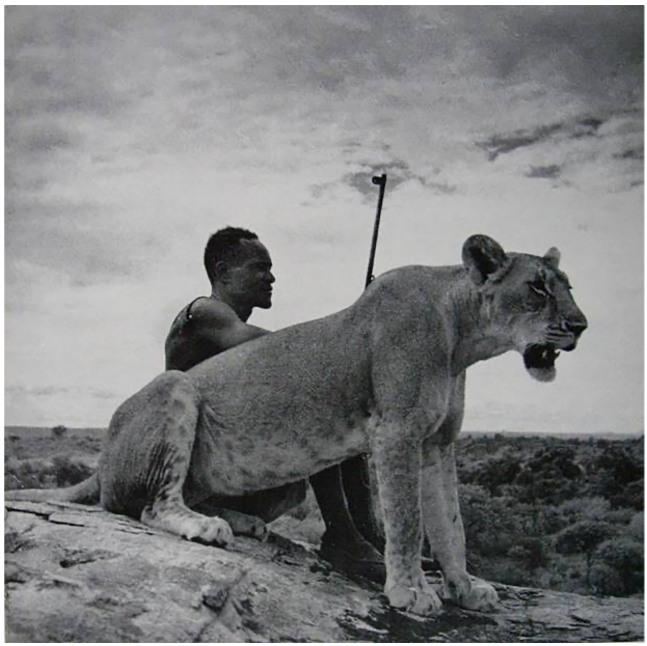

Figure 5. Makedde Lobotio and Elsa (Adamson 1960, between p. 112 and p. 113).

paintings in the Museum were removed from display, seen as a colonial project, but there has recently been an exhibition and renewed Kenyan interest. Joy Adamson (1967) wrote a detailed book about the paintings and there are many contextual and informal photos, some of which, we think, meet her stated intention to give power to the subject.

There are probably over 20,000 film negatives in Cheltenham, mostly depicting the Adamsons' interactions with Elsa and her cubs, Joy's later projects with a cheetah and a leopard, and George's rehabilitation of the lions that participated in the filming of *Born Free*.

There is currently growing interest in the biography of animals, developing quickly with the work of Éric Baratay (2022) and others, involving environmental and cultural history, behavioural understanding, and animal emotions. In fact, an interest in the lives of individual animals has been evident in fiction and film for many years and is now part of the attempt to think beyond a human-centred history, and to accord rights, or at least rights of existence and survival, to other species. The Adamsons' photos and film, as well as George's diary and other records, provide an almost daily record of the lives of specific animals.

Furthermore, there are hundreds of photos of the Adamsons' African assistants such as Makedde Lobotio, who at times took considerable responsibility for Elsa's care (see Figure 5). Joy Adamson was an inventive but troubled person who fell out with many people, but Lobotio worked for her on and off for many years. Through her writing, and their photographs, it would be possible to reconstruct something of the African contribution to the enterprise. Lobotio had died by the time this project began, but we interviewed a few people about him near Isiolo. Correspondence by the

Adamsons allows some insight into one of the key networks around wildlife and conservation in Kenya and also Joy's international fundraising trips, especially in the 1960s, when she raised a great deal of money for the Elsa Conservation Trust, which funded projects in East Africa, such as the foundation of Meru National Park, and elsewhere.

Moreover, there is also quite a detailed photographic record of the making of *Born Free* (Figure 6), an influential film, with Joy's images supplemented by those of John Mark Jay, photographer for Columbia Pictures. Jay published an illustrated book himself (1966) and also took many of the photos for an illustrated book published in the name of producer Carl Foreman (1966). We have not found the original photographs.

The stars of the film, Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers, published a book with over 100 striking illustrations (1966). Travers' and McKenna's lives were transformed by acting in *Born Free*, for which George Adamson habituated a new crop of lions so that they could act as Elsa at different ages, often in the same frame as the actors. Travers and McKenna largely abandoned their successful acting careers in order to make four animal films, the first of which, *The Lions Are Free* (1969) – an extraordinary record of George Adamson's attempt to rehabilitate some of the film lions – showed on TV in the USA to an estimated audience of thirty-five million. It was truly a radical film in respect of human-animal relations. A clip from the fourth film, *Christian: the lion at World's End*, released in 1971, was uploaded to YouTube in 2007, slowly went viral, and is estimated variously to have been viewed over 100 million times. Figure 7 captures Christian's reunion with the men who had raised him in London before his rewilding in Kenya with George Adamson's support.

The Adamsons' British-based archive is safely stored but is inaccessible and not in ideal conditions. The Travers/McKenna archive, which may be huge, also still remains in private hands. This material is particularly important because they were founders of what became, in 1991, the Born Free Foundation, one of the most successful wildlife conservation NGOs. They also deserve a biography.

We have only touched on a few of the individuals involved in the production of wildlife film, photography, and literature during this period. Work by Hugo van Lawick and Bob Campbell, two filmmakers who got their start with the Denises, respectively boosted the careers of Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey. Alan Root, also briefly in the Denis stable, and his wife Joan, made several groundbreaking films in East Africa. Sue Hart and Tony Harthoorn were another couple incorporated into wildlife film production, though largely as veterinarians who supported the care of wild animals and their immobilization for film and conservation initiatives; they also inspired dramatized programmes about vets working in Africa. We found some material at Sue Hart's house near White River. Simon Trevor was a skilled cameraman for Travers and McKenna, including *Christian: the lion at World's End*, and made several films about elephants and ivory poaching. He stayed in Kenya. Perez Olindo, the first African director of Kenya's national parks played a significant role in facilitating this enterprise. We have not pursued the visual and written archives generated by them.

In Britain, the University of Bristol may become an important repository; it now houses the substantial film archives of Wildscreen, a conservation charity that has convened the leading biennial wildlife film festival in Britain. These archives also include the WildFilmHistory collection, an initiative aimed at preserving historical films and collecting oral histories with filmmakers, including many names mentioned

Figure 6. Film poster for *Born Free* (1966).

above, such as Attenborough, Bartlett, and Root. They are accumulating written material from donors and they are probably the logical place to expand historical material collections. Bristol remains the centre of UK wildlife filmmaking.

Many of these people were successful self-publicists and there is sometimes considerable published material by and about them. That is an argument for, rather than against, keeping the records of an adventurous network who played a significant

Figure 7. Christian the lion hugs Ace Bourke, Kora 1971.

role in the making of environmental history and popular culture. Their lives were bound up with the renaturing of African animals, with conservation in Africa, with the twentieth-century visual revolution and its global outcomes.

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