

by Rolf D. Baldus

In Memoriam of Dr. Graham Child (1936-2016)

Dr. Graham Child passed away on December 2nd in South Africa. In his young days, Graham held a good number of positions in conservation in his home country, Zimbabwe, and in Botswana. Later in life he served two terms as IUCN regional councilor and worked as a consultant advising governments and conservation agencies around the world. He was a member of the South African CIC delegation.

However, his name will always be most connected with his 15 years of duty as Director of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management of Rhodesia and later Zimbabwe. Together with colleagues and staff he developed this department into one of the finest conservation agencies not only in Africa, but in the world. Graham combined the leadership with management skills, and being a man of vision, forethought and of impeccable integrity, and guided it through politically turbulent years.

I first met Graham, when working in Zimbabwe in 1981 as FAO-consultant on self-help organizations. I was most impressed to see how Graham and the wildlife policy makers around him had developed a thriving wildlife industry, based on the principle of sustainable use, and aiming to conserve wildlife whilst promote rural economies. Multiple land use with ownership rights for wildlife created an alternative to less environmentally friendly agriculture and livestock husbandry.

Graham oversaw the promulgation of the innovative 1975 Wildlife Act, which sparked the expansion of wildlife use on large commercial farms. This Act also laid the foundations for communal wildlife management which later developed into CAMPFIRE, a program that influenced wildlife management not only in Africa, but around the world. Graham's name will always be closely connected with these successes.

In 1982, I bought one of the Department's auction hunts and hunted in the Zambezi Valley. The Department's scouts, who were seconded to accompany me, were professional and behaved with integrity. I saw how wildlife areas in Africa could thrive, when they are run by an efficient and non-corrupt agency under the strong and impartial leadership Graham provided.

But with the winds of change blowing through Zimbabwe, the Mugabe government eased people such as Graham, and other fine professional conservationists, out of their offices. It must have been heart breaking for him to see the downfall of "his" department and consequently wildlife under the Mugabe regime.

Ten years ago, it seemed for a short time that the era of the Zimbabwe dictator Mugabe was coming to an end. It seemed that the time had come to consider how the wildlife sector in a new Zimbabwe could be rebuilt. On behalf of some committed German conservationists, I asked Graham to prepare a concept note for an action program to rebuild the wildlife sector, and to propose supporting activities for donors and the private sector. These proposals were never implemented for known reasons. They are, however, just as valid today as they were then. Perhaps one day they will guide future policy makers and conservationists trying to rebuild Zimbabwe's wildlife sector. I wish to end this obituary therefore with a few paragraphs from this study:

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„Zimbabwe was one of the leading countries in wildlife conservation and management. The sector earned over US\$ 300 million per year through conservation generated by protected areas belonging to the state, rural community-run wildlife management areas and private game ranches and reserves. Sadly most of this has been destroyed or severely damaged within a few years of political lawlessness and corruption ...

Wildlife [has] a great ability to recover within a relatively short period of time, provided the natural habitats remain intact, and sound protection and wise management can be reintroduced. The formerly thriving wildlife sector can be restored, but to achieve this, [Zimbabwe] will need the assistance of bilateral and international donors and “hands-on” conservation NGOs.

The future political decision-makers of Zimbabwe as well as donor institutions must not overlook the conservation and sustainable use of wildlife once a new start is possible. [Wildlife] conservation is not a luxury that may be taken up at a later stage after the most urgent tasks of rehabilitation have been achieved. Zimbabwe’s wildlife heritage is the draw card of the country’s tourist industry, which is a sector that can quickly be turned [around]. For the recovery of the wildlife sector, it must be incorporated in economic development and poverty reduction strategies from the [start].

Many tracts of land formerly devoted to wildlife are now occupied or resettled. Appropriate action is needed fast or the remaining wildlife in these areas will be lost forever. Past experience shows that these areas are unsuited to conventional agriculture, and that wildlife production is the most appropriate form of land use.“

Many of the principles outlined above are captured in the conclusions of the current EU-funded review of the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Authority.

Such was the vision of Graham Child, one of Africa’s premier wildlife conservationists.