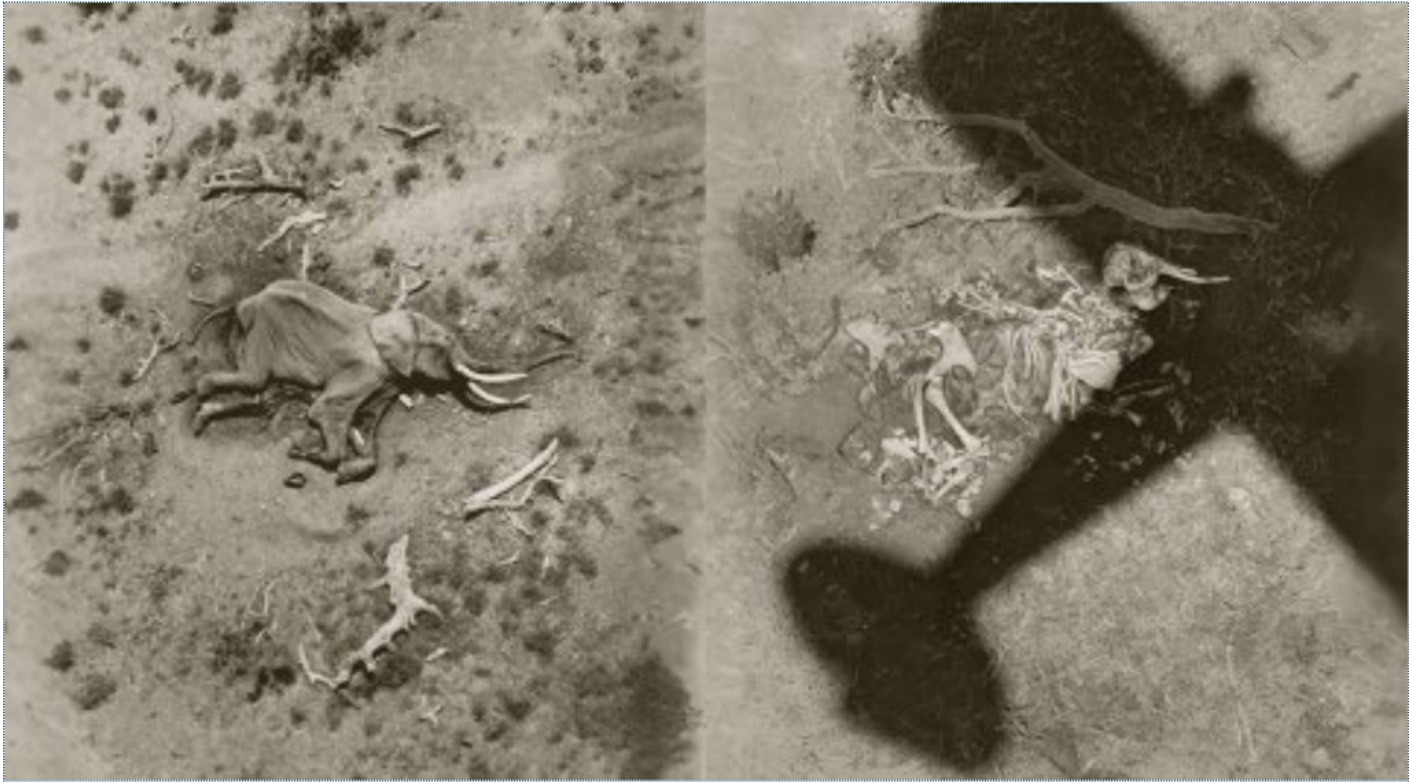


by Gerhard R. Damm

“They make a desert, and call it peace.” The Legacy of Peter Beard



The death of Peter Hill Beard challenges us to take a closer look at why thousands of elephants died of hunger and stress-induced diseases in Kenya’s Tsavo catastrophe, in 1971, and to think of what may happen now with Southern Africa’s exploding elephant populations.

Photographer, writer, artist and naturalist Peter Beard, who lived in Montauk, on the eastern end of Long Island, New York, disappeared on March 31 and was found dead in Camp Hero State Park, not far from his home, after a 19-day search. He was 82. His family wrote on his website, “He died where he lived: in nature.”

Obituaries around the world celebrated Peter Beard’s life. Harrison Smith wrote, in *The Washington Post* and the *Independent*: “in photographs, collages and diaries that Beard turned into works of art, he chronicled the destruction of savannas, forests and wetlands, and the deaths of thousands of elephants . . .”

Vanity Fair called Beard “an avatar of the romantic, adventurous, and elemental life—half Tarzan, half Byron with shades of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Tony Armstrong-Jones as well as Indiana Jones.” *The Art Newspaper* said Beard was an “arresting and sometimes prophetic artist, especially with his photographs of the early 1960s that revealed the devastating effect of overcrowding and starvation on

by Gerhard R. Damm

the elephants [of] East Africa.” And from *The New York Times*: “Even by dashing standards of wildlife photography, Beard’s résumé was the stuff of high drama, full of daring, danger, romance and tall tales, many of them actually true.”

An impressive picture of Peter Beard emerges from Roger Pinckney’s “The Exotic Eye: The unlikely life, art and death of legendary artist and adventurer Peter Beard” (in *Sporting Classics Daily*, April 21): “A photographer of wildlife and beautiful women, a writer, an ethnologist, explorer, hunter, naturalist, conservationist, ladies’ man, married man, wise man . . . But if you’ve ever seen the video of him being trampled by an elephant, you might want to add ‘fool’ to that considerable list. But however you cut it, you’ll run dry of adjectives long before you ever nailed Peter Beard down.”

The following extract from Owen Edwards—“Peter Beard, Photographer: The Toast of Society Photographs the Death of a World” (first published in *The Village Voice* on December 12, 1975) contains prophetic perceptions:

“Shooting an elephant is not the sort of thing you can drum up much enthusiasm for among modern civilized folk. It can only seem an act of purposeless destruction in a world of ever scarce wildlife, but Beard sees it as the only realistic solution. The problem is that man is interfering in a much more profound way than hunting; he is expanding the geographic limits of his civilization, and elephants, with their voracious appetites and inclination to travel great distances, have less and less place in modern westernized Africa except as tourist trade decor. So, they are crowded together on preserves to await nature’s way, in the form of the Malthusian sickle. But as Beard vehemently points out, there is nothing natural about overcrowding, whether in Kenya or Manhattan, and while thousands of elephants sank into starvation, the doomed and distended herds deserted the ancient forests that had been their habitat, and that of hundreds of other species. As Beard and I looked at the wall of pictures, a famous person remarked in plangent Italianate tones, ‘How wonderful that they die with all that beautiful space around them—not like the way people die here in New York.’ Beard pointed out, with his imperturbable Wasp politesse, that the photogenic empty space was simply the result of the elephants eating every living thing in the region. Beard’s elephants, vultured and rotting, are not just unprecedented views of the end of an epoch, they are intimations of the end of the world.”

All obituaries focus rightly on Peter Beard’s best-known work, *The End of the Game*, first published in 1965. In text and stunningly artful photography, the book—especially the later editions of 1977, 1988, 2008 and 2015—documents a vanished period of African history as well as circumstantial events that devastated East Africa’s wildlife. Deeply disturbing and politically incorrect, *The End of the Game* is a riveting mix of Beard’s photographic arrangements, vintage photos of Karen Blixen, Teddy Roosevelt and many others, and quotes from seemingly everybody who has written about Africa. When new, the book was called “unforgettable” and “prophetic”—“an unambiguous warning” that is “perceptively current.” It still is.

The afterword to the 1988 edition, which Beard wrote with Dr. Norman Borlaug, whose work as an agronomist led to the Green Revolution and a Nobel Prize, and the haunting photographs of countless elephant carcasses in the chapter “Nor Dread nor Hope Attend” project a catastrophic look into the future of elephants in Southern Africa.

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Then, in Kenya's Tsavo National Park, elephants were eating themselves out of existence by annihilating ancient *Commiphora* woodlands. Today, burgeoning elephant populations are destroying their habitats in Botswana and other southern African countries. Half a century has gone by, but what have we learned? In Europe, the Americas and Africa, scientists, wildlife managers, hunters, protectionists and nature lovers are still bitterly debating deeply divisive alternatives on the future of Africa's elephants. As a consequence, the Southern African sub-populations are marching lockstep into a mega-Tsavo scenario.

Those who cherish Africa and its pachyderms should remember the words of ancient Rome's eminent historian Tacitus: "*Aufferre, trucidare, rapere, falsis nominibus imperium, atque, ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*" "To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire, and where they make a desert, they call it peace." Beard expanded on this in his afterword to the 1988 edition of *The End of the Game*:

In the 1977 edition of *The End of the Game*, it seemed to be politically unwise to include details of the conservation efforts that had paradoxically led to the die-off of tens of thousands of elephants and black rhinos in a single national park. In the book's last chapter, "Nor Dread nor Hope Attend," a sequence of disintegrating carcasses sought to show that photographs are worth a thousand explanations.

The rich woodland cover that had sheltered Tsavo for centuries was eaten away by an expanding population of elephants confined within artificial boundaries drawn by a rapidly expanding human population busy denying any such population problem. All this combined—or rather conspired—to cause the desertification of eight thousand square miles of *Commiphora* canopy woodland in a matchless preserve, the largest in East Africa. A director of the Tsavo Research Team estimates that thirty thousand elephants died there from starvation, constipation and heart disease—all attributable to density and mismanagement.

In Tsavo, as in Ethiopia, drought was blamed.

"Water for Wild Animals" and "Buy An Elephant A Drink" programs raised millions of emergency dollars. At the same time, traditional hunters, who had coexisted for centuries in harmony with the fauna, were arrested and imprisoned at great cost. Fund-raising was all that mattered. CBS's "Sixty Minutes" produced a program confirming that "poachers" were to blame for the famine, a program that ironically succeeded in raising large sums for antipoaching forces. A team of Ford Foundation scientists, who counted 40,000 elephants using the park, were forced to resign for suggesting overpopulation as a problem. (When I worked for the park in the early sixties, conservation authorities estimated a total of three thousand elephants using the park). In 1971 and 1972, countless "orphans of Tsavo" waited to die next to the remains of their mothers who had starved to death, tusks pointing heavenward, on a battlefield of twisted driftwood.

They make a desert.

And call it peace. —Tacitus

The remains of the trees eaten by elephants in their agony were systematically arranged on the forest floor to prevent wind erosion. Massive dust storms 2,500 feet high were nevertheless to blow away Tsavo's senile and laterite topsoil—washed away down the Athi and Galana rivers into the Indian Ocean.

Some argued that it was an act of courage on the part of administrators to allow nature to take its course—that the elephants, like the Gadarene swine in Matt. 8:28 had “. . . found their own level”—at the bottom of a cliff.

Now, a decade or two later, we have Ethiopia. Like Tsavo, Ethiopia was covered with trees that were destroyed by a [human] population that expanded beyond the carrying capacity of the land.

The comparisons are as embarrassing and obvious as they are haunting. We are left to reflect on the extravagant appetites that create these wastelands within which we must now try to live our diminished lives.

The entire ecology of the elephant is now seen to be more similar to that of man than to any other animal, especially the elephant's ability to destroy its habitat while adapting with great cunning to that destruction. It will adjust to the desertlike conditions, surviving on bits of dry wood, long enough to get to the last bit of green.

Again and again, we adapt to the damage we cause. That is our genius. We do to our forests what we have forced all the Babars and Dumbos to do to theirs. At the highest level of leadership (and guilt), we cover our tracks and invent perfect excuses.

Observes Dr. Ronald Laing in *The Politics of Experience*: “Human beings seem to have an almost unlimited capacity to deceive themselves into taking their own lies for truth. The double action of destroying ourselves with the one hand and calling this love with the other, is a sleight of hand we can marvel at . . . By such mystification, we achieve and sustain our adjustment, our adaptation.”

“[Peter Beard's] pages of photographs [are] evidence that we must begin at once to reverse the complex origins of our apathy,” wrote Dr. Borlaug for the book's back cover. “Here, we find the elephants' graveyard and a mandate to try to arrange our own fate this side of the politics of sentimentality and anthropomorphism . . . this book should come to the attention of the dedicated preservation groups, as it brings into the open a Wildlife Watergate for which they to a certain extent are responsible.”

And in a 2009 interview in the *Financial Times*, Beard affirmed that “Borlaug knew the end result [of the Green Revolution] would be over-population and nature's destruction, but nobody listened to him. Leonardo da Vinci talked about this [already] in the 1490s. [Humans] are monsters with these enormous

by Gerhard R. Damm

teeth eating up the world and, when they've eaten everything, they'll want to go up to heaven but the weight of their stomachs will keep them down and their bodies make a tomb . . ."

In Derek Peck's short film Peter Beard — A Wild Life you can listen to Beard telling us that "The entire ecology of the elephant is more similar to us than any other animal. What have they done to their habitat? They ate it! They trampled it. They died. You'd think we would take a hint from their demise."

The horrific Tsavo die-off was nature's response to an overburdened, overpressured, rapidly deteriorating finite wasteland of ruined woodlands. Southern African landscapes are now being ravaged by climate change-caused droughts and many other human-caused threats. When will we learn that there are simply too many of us, too many ingeniously adaptive, rapaciously destructive, hungry, fornicating, fundraising, excuse-making *Homo sapiens*?

Peter Beard, the Earth will miss you and your pinpoint observations.

Gerhard Damm is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Conservation Frontlines. For more on Peter Beard and his work visit the Peter Beard Studio.

Banner image: Dead elephants in Tsavo, 1971. Peter Beard photo

Breaking News: *The mystery surrounding a mass die-off of elephants in Botswana is deepening as the carcass count surpasses 110. The Dept. of Wildlife is investigating, but the work is complicated by COVID-19. This was reported in late May and early June on various national and international news sites.*