

# Rhinos, dogs and a mad Englishman in the sun

After years of African adventure, Tony Fitzjohn finds his calling: Saving 2 species

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## MKOMAZI GAME RESERVE, Tanzania

Nestled in an arid and endless carpet of acacia trees and commiphora brush is one of the world's most endangered creatures.

Its name is Tony Fitzjohn.

Part missionary, part madman, Fitzjohn, 54, belongs to a select species of human that has sought both refuge and meaning in a life dedicated to the preservation and restoration of the animal kingdom.

"I wasn't born here," says the British expatriate, who has called Africa home for 33 years. "But I plan to die here."

Dedication is a must. Much like the USA's spotted owl debate, African conservation is rife with political pitfalls and antagonistic factions.

Population explosions, ethnic strife and poaching threaten the planet's richest animal resource more than ever before. And as last week's massacre of tourists visiting Ugandan mountain gorillas shows, these issues could decimate safari operations and destabilize national economies.

Africa has a tradition of drawing into this man-made fray disenchanting foreigners who blossom in its epic wilderness. Dian Fossey lived and died for her mountain gorillas. Fitzjohn's mentor, George Adamson, shared a tragic love of Kenyan lions with his wife, Joy, author of *Born Free*.

Fitzjohn, after two decades with big cats, has found his calling. Since 1989, he has labored with Tanzanian government assent to restore to ecological health the 2,200-square-mile Mkomazi (mukoma-hi) Game Reserve. Specifically, he is aiming for a resuscitation of two endangered species: the black rhino and African hunting dog.

Considered a pest by Masai shepherds, the odd-looking hunting dog could slip into history books. Fitzjohn has 42 dogs in a captive breeding program and aims to restock unpopulated expanses such as the Serengeti and Masai Mara.

The black rhino, however, presents a far more shocking picture of human predation. In the past four decades, an estimated 95% of black rhinos have fallen to poachers who hack off the rhino's snout to get its horn, a solid mass of hair that, when ground into a powder, sells in Asia for twice its weight in gold. The lure: Its alleged medicinal properties.

Fewer than 50 black rhinos roam east Africa; Fitzjohn has four and hopes to increase their population at Mkomazi through captive breeding.

### Movie in the making

The price of rescuing nature is high. Fitzjohn, who draws no salary and has a staff of 30 Wapare tribesmen, has an annual operating budget of about \$200,000. He is funded by the George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trusts, based in

### THE FITZJOHN FILE

Name: Tony Fitzjohn  
 Born: July 7, 1945; grew up a foster child in north London.  
 Personal: Married to Lucy, 31; two children, Alexander 3, and Jemima, 1.  
 Title: Field director, George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trusts, with offices in London; New York; Los Angeles; Rotterdam, Netherlands; and Munich, Germany  
 First job: Delivering milk in the London area at age 21  
 Longest Job: For 18 years he helped George Adamson of Born Free fame return more than 30 lions and leopards to the wild in central Kenya  
 Current Job: Since 1989 he has overseen the 2,200-square-mile Mkomazi Game Reserve in northern Tanzania, where he is working to increase the numbers of African hunting dogs and black rhinos.  
 Brush with death: In 1975, he was attacked by a lion  
 Brush with fame: This year should see the release of a Canadian film. Titled *To Walk With Lions*, starring Richard Harris as George Adamson and British stage actor John Michie as Fitzjohn

Fitzjohn and conservation: This generation of Americans and Europeans are all talking about the environment. My generation never did. We want to have education be a big part of what we're doing at Mkomazi so that we can get them to take up the fight.

London. Nearly half the Mkomazi budget is covered by U.S. donors, many of them celebrities drawn to Los Angeles fundraisers led by regional trust president and Fitzjohn pal Ali McGraw.

Fitzjohn is no stranger to the USA, jetting in often with cap in hand. He has testified on Capitol Hill for various wildlife departments and guested on Dennis Miller's HBO talk show.

Soon more might know Fitzjohn's storybook tale, which includes liaisons with adventurous women, bouts with the bottle and near-fatal tussles with lions. A Canadian production company is seeking distribution for *To Walk With Lions*, a feature film about George Adamson and Fitzjohn. Conservationists often wrinkle their noses at such high-profile crusades, but some acknowledge that, in their field, magnetism often is an invaluable asset. "People like Fitzjohn inspire future generations after they leave," says Kate Newman, who monitors eastern and southern Africa for the Washington-based World Wildlife Fund. "A charismatic leader is key to getting any project off the ground."

In the case of Mkomazi, politics and conservation intermingle. Tanzanian officials support Fitzjohn's efforts (but don't contribute financially) because they envision a sanctuary that could generate critical tourism revenue.

On the opposing side are some of the area's Masai Villagers, who view these ancestral acres as prime cattle-grazing territory. Then there are the machine-gun-toting poachers

### DESTINED FOR THE WILDS OF AFRICA

There was something different about the young Tony Fitzjohn, something impossibly restless. Born to a British serviceman and his brief paramour, Fitzjohn was put into a foster home as a toddler and raised by solid but unadventurous parents.

At the Mill Hill school north of London, he burned up his energy on the rugby team. A photo of that motley crew hangs at Mkomazi.

Fitzjohn "was never destined for a metropolitan life," says Andrew Mortimer, a Mill Hill rugby friend who is the treasurer of the Adamson trusts, which in lean times were kept alive by contributions from a dozen other teammates. "He didn't like suits or cities."

At 21, Fitzjohn shipped off to Cape Town, South Africa. He worked odd jobs that included transporting uncut diamonds and working as a bouncer at a brothel. Five years later, in 1971, he wrote to Joy Adamson in Kenya. She mentioned that her husband, George, from whom she recently had separated, could use assistance with his lion project at the Kora Game Reserve in central Kenya.

What followed were 18 years lived with no brakes. The "old man," as Adamson was known, and his rakish protégé formed bonds with Earth's most fearsome predator that couldn't be shaken even by a 1975 attack that left Fitzjohn near death for two days.

His love for lions endures today. Jipe, a 7-month-old cub, is Fitzjohn's charge at Mkomazi; he hopes to return her to the wild in a year. Talking to Fitzjohn is like visiting a war veteran; many of the people he talks about have been killed while working in Africa.

Fitzjohn and Adamson were operating in a part of Kenya that was constantly invaded by Somali bandits and poachers. When Kenya's political stability slipped in the early 1980s, the government could no longer guarantee the duo's safety. Fitzjohn implored Adamson to come with him to Mkomazi and start over, but Adamson would not leave his beloved Kora.

In 1989, Adamson was killed by three bandits wielding machine guns; Joy had been killed in 1980 by one of her local workers. The guilt that Fitzjohn carried with him ("I should have taken the heat for him," he says softly) has been transformed into determination.

"I still talk to the old man," Fitzjohn says. "I do it all for him, of course. If I didn't do this, I wouldn't be George's boy, now would I?"

Today, George's boy has grown up. Although always shirtless, looking like some landlocked California surfing pioneer, Fitzjohn has a new-found maturity that is crucial to running a complex operation such as Mkomazi.

He has been sober for seven years, though he is the owner of a vicious chain-smoking habit. A few years ago he retired his bachelorhood, marrying his longtime love, Lucy, 31, who has borne the couple two children and serves as the project administrator.

who stalk elephants and rhinos for their Ivory and horn.

Fitzjohn, by his own admission a man who once preferred to settle scores with his fists, has learned to walk a political tightrope for a beloved cause.

"If the Amazon is the world's lungs, then Africa is its heartbeat. It needs help, and it needs supporting," he says. "I'm enormously grateful for the life I've led and lead. But I hope it's all working toward my helping on a bigger level, rather than me just being a cowboy."

When Fitzjohn arrived at Mkomazi in 1989, he found a parched landscape blighted by overgrazing and poaching. His first mission was to set up an infrastructure in the wild. He recruited a staff and set about using a donated earthmover to plow airplane runways (he patrols the area by Cessna) and erect stone buildings, including his three-room home, a radio-communications center and a repair shop for the team's half-dozen Land Rovers.

### Seeds of survival

A few decades ago Fitzjohn and Adamson lived off the latter's \$500 pension; now Fitzjohn must keep track of a massive array of bills and expenses.

But his efforts at turning a deserted plain into a living

swath of land are beginning to see results. In 1995, Fitzjohn welcomed his first batch of African hunting dog pups from a nearby Masai village to four netted compounds sitting just below his house. Most of the dogs are thriving.

And two years ago, after Fitzjohn and company painstakingly set up 30 miles of electrified fence to form a secure compound, four rhinos were flown in from a sanctuary in South Africa on a Russian cargo plane. Fitzjohn suspects both females are pregnant.

"Part of me thinks, 'In a few years I'll be 60, and yet I feel like I'm 28. This is crazy,'" Fitzjohn says. "But I love this part of the world. I love the people. Those who work with me here do so because they believe in what we're doing."

Fitzjohn is about to complete a \$100,000 school for the village nearest his remote home base. He says locals deserve to feel that the Mkomazi project benefits them as well as the wildlife.

But there is no questioning where his allegiance lies. No wondering just which species — human or animal — he feels are in need of the most help.

"We have to get away from the attitude of 'If it pays, it stays,' because wildlife really will never pay for itself," he says. "We need to help because we're in a position to do so. I'd love for my son to grow up and do this, but in the end, I'll be happy just so long as he pays his dues to the planet."

Then Fitzjohn adds a final thought: "We all have to constantly keep watch over the environment, because when it goes, it's gone."