

ON THE ROAD WITH A GORILLA HUNTER
TURNING POACHERS TO PROTECTORS

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A personal account of the travails of the gorilla hunter from the perspective of a wildlife conservationist who believes that people and nature can be redeemed, if given opportunities to pursue their mutually synergistic ideals. This original field research was financed by the author's family and friends in Los Angeles, and by a gift from The Bellerive Foundation, Geneva, Switzerland. Subsequent work by the author converting poachers to protectors has been supported by the Wildlife Protectors Fund/Gorilla Foundation, Newman's Own, Save the Species Foundation, and conservationists at Seattle, Oakland and San Jose Zoos.

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Dr. Anthony L. Rose / Wildlife Protectors Fund - USA

A Human Affair. I had no idea when I left Los Angeles that I would spend nearly two weeks traveling from one end of Cameroon to the other, riding in bush taxis and logging lorries, sleeping in flop houses and fancy hotels, living in hunting camps and timber towns, all in the company of a gorilla hunter. I went to Africa in May, 1997, to learn about the bushmeat trade first hand. A year earlier I spoke at a conference on the "bushmeat crisis" with officials from the Cameroon Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF). My role as an applied social psychologist and developer was to analyze the situation and to conceive new solutions (Rose, 1998). Subsequent meetings and talks with scores of experts had affirmed the assertions of local officials that conservation biology projects had failed to stop the poaching of wildlife for meat. To me it seemed obvious that to alter a convoluted matrix of human values and to control a multi-million dollar commercial enterprise was the job of social change agents and business people. From the elite gentry in national and provincial capitals paying top dollar for elephant steak to itinerant hunters snaring blue duiker and shooting apes for logging camp workers, the bushmeat business is a human affair.

The humans I knew least were the ones who went into the rain forest to hunt for a living. They were also the people who held the crucial decision in their hands -- where to aim the gun and whether to pull the trigger. While at the MINEF Bushmeat Conference, I spent 4 hours talking with Joseph Melloh, a 33 year old man who had moved from his native home in the Southwestern Province to become a commercial hunter in the eastern forests. Joseph specialized in hunting gorillas, and had been identified as a person who could be useful to the wildlife conservation effort. During our discussions Joseph invited me to come to his camp, live with him and his family, and discover for myself whether his skills and attitudes were redeemable. I said I would return, and after 12 months I was able to fulfill the promise.

On Thursday May 8th I landed in Douala, Cameroon's largest city and a major sea port in western Africa. That evening my friend Karl Ammann flew in from Brazzaville, Congo. Karl is the Kenya based wildlife advocate and photojournalist who had exposed the African bushmeat trade to the world (Ammann, 1997). We discussed the turmoil Karl had seen in Kinshasa with political revolution at hand, and worried about the people and the forests of equatorial Africa. The next morning Karl and I took a bus to the national capital of Yaounde. Enroute we talked about our missions -- Ammann would race across the country collecting photos and stories for a Stern Magazine article on the bushmeat trade, while I trekked into the rain forest to live in a hunting camp and assess the potential for converting poachers to protectors. After leaving Ammann at the Hilton, I checked into my room at Hotel Deputee. Awaiting me there was Kerry Bowman, a bioethicist from University of Toronto whom I had recruited to work on the project. Kerry had been in Yaounde nearly a week, interviewing bushmeat traders and consumers. He only had a few days left and was anxious to get to the forest. Within an hour Joseph the hunter appeared. We agreed to buy provisions and leave for the Eastern Province right away.

Saturday morning we bid Karl adieu, hired a taxi and drove east from Yaounde five hours on bumpy red clay logging roads. We stopped in Abong Mbang, a crossroads town through which most of the timber and bushmeat from the Eastern Province passes. After check-in at the Ngong Hotel, we walked to town center. I stopped at a roadside stand to sniff the monkey stew, which smelled like a sour mutton my grandmother used to make. We settled for beer and eggs at a busy bistro where Samedi soir was in full swing.

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We Take Care of Such Men. A scruffy and quite schizophrenic young man danced to some inner cacophony at the entry to the store, while customers carefully picked their way around him.

"Isn't that fellow in danger, hanging out here with all this drinking going on?" I asked.

"Why should he be in danger?" replied Joseph. "If anyone hurt him they would be beaten on the spot and put in jail. The worst crime is to do harm to someone like that. We take care of such men."

"What if he were a white man?" asked Kerry.

"We must look after all white men. They are guests. We are not supposed to let any harm come to you."

My Canadian friend and I exchanged glances. "That's much better than in North America. Strangers and crazy people are given a hard time where we live," said Kerry.

"If I came to your country, would it be hard for me?" Joseph asked?

"Not if you stayed with Kerry or me. But alone you could have a very rough time," I replied.

"One day I would like to come stay with you in America," mused Joseph.

The rest of the evening passed with little event till we returned to our six dollar rooms in the town's most popular disco and brothel. Loud music and raucous party goers crashed through the halls till the wee hours. I was exhausted when we took off early Sunday in another bush taxi down another red clay highway lined with tall trees. In three more hours we reached Kagnol, the western style logging camp in the heart of the SEBC concession. After leaving a card for the MINEF officer, we continued a half hour on an abandoned logging road through increasingly dense forest to the hunting camp called Tokasa.

It was midday and the overhead sun intensified the colors of clay, vine, and leaf. We pulled our gear from the trunk, paid the driver, and watched the faded beige Toyota turn and disappear. It was then I saw the butterflies -- small streams and clouds of yellow, blue, red, and green floating crystals that spun round us. On a hill above the grass covered berm were four small huts woven of poles and thatch. Behind them, huge towering trees, hanging vines, moss, a dark forest wall of wood and shadows, tinted emerald and brushed with fluttering white wings, a red flower, streaks of gilded light. And all around -- silence. Utter silence. I sighed. And then the forest sang again. A bird. Crickets. Bees, and the rustle of wind high in the canopy. Joseph helped me put my gear in the hut. I sat on a bench in the small verandah and stared at the forest. An unexpected and welcome paradise.

I spent seven of the next ten days and nights at Tokasa camp. Windfalls had blocked the road a few kilometers beyond us with immovable logs. No other cars came. Further on were five small hunting camps; ours was closest to the main road. To get from our site to the auberge in Kagnol was a 2 hour walk through forest. This meant that everyone passing by in either direction stopped at Tokasa to drop their packs, rest, and visit. On the third day Kerry had to hike out and hitch to Yaounde, to catch a plane to Cape Town. I recalled gratefully what Joseph had said about caring for guests and strangers, now that I was the only outsider in the forest. Joseph's wife and child arrived, along with other men and families. The camp began to fill up. Hunters, trappers, bushmeat traders, gatherers of fruit, honey, medicinal plants -- more than 40 people altogether came to stop in Tokasa camp while I was there.

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Most were Bantu men from towns and villages in the Eastern Province who were moving back into the forest at the start of the rainy season. They came with rented guns, a handful of cartridges, and material for snares and traps -- enough to get them sufficient meat to sell at market for a living and small profit to save or to spend on their families back home. From sunup to sundown these hard-working men would trudge up to my hut to shake hands with the odd gray haired American who had come to live in their midst.

My Friend is Here. Joseph's introduction set the stage -- "my friend Dr. Anthony is here to find out how we live and see if we can make a better life." Some were shy and said little. Most were glad to see me, and many were visibly elated to find that a white man could take them as they are, without judgment. Many were forthcoming.

Etienne had come to hunt for the first time a few weeks earlier. After his mother died he and his younger brothers could not make ends meet. He had joined agemates from his village in hopes of earning some money. While we talked his compatriots showed me their catch. One red duiker and two blue ones, two monkeys -- all fresh shot that morning. They also had two porcupine and two duiker smoked from the day before. Etienne did not have a gun, but his friends would teach him to use theirs. At the end of the season he hoped to have saved enough to return home and expand the family farm. He was more bold than the others, and asked if I might get him a small camera -- he would like to be a photographer.

I returned from a walk in the forest late one afternoon to find a more experienced hunter seated by the fire in front of my hut. Marcel held a relic of a gun in one hand and pointed to the meat he had laid out to smoke on the rack above my fire. Two monkeys and a red duiker shot with the gun, two porcupines caught in snares. "A poor day's catch" he explained. Marcel had stopped to rest on his way to the logging camp. He heard that an uncle had died in his village and he must return for the funeral. The sale of the meat in Kagnol would bring him enough cash to pay transit there and back on a lorry -- about \$10. I asked if he had ever hunted an ape. He said that 2 weeks earlier he shot a chimpanzee. It was too heavy for him to bring out, so he and some other hunters ate the feet, hands and innards; then sold the larger portions, back, legs and arms, for \$17. "Will you be a hunter all your life?" I asked. "No, of course not." Marcel hopes to save enough capital to open a shop in his village. But it will take another 2 years or more, with luck.

Joseph learned that while he was in Yaounde meeting me, a gorilla was shot and butchered about 15 kilometers down the road beyond our camp. It's carcass had lain right here in front of my hut, before being carted out to the road and shipped to Bertoua, the provincial capital.

"My friend has shot many gorillas, if you want to meet him. But we will need a car," Joseph offered.

A week later we got a ride with Karl Ammann and his cohorts from Stern Magazine. We drove the 50 kilometers on a relatively busy dirt road to an upscale encampment with houses made of mud and wood. In a new half-built five room house a handsome bright-eyed young man named Dieudonne greeted us. We examined three gorilla skulls collected months earlier. He pointed out the nine holes that represent all nine lead balls of the Chevrotine cartridge. "This was a perfect shot."

Dieudonne explained that he had just sold three fresh gorilla carcasses -- a silverback, young male, and female -- to a woman who is a regular customer. She comes each week to pick up meat for clients in Bertoua. Joseph told us Dieudonne had been quite successful finding gorillas in the nearby forest: in three months he had provided twenty of them for the Bertoua meat market. I asked Dieudonne if he likes shooting gorillas.

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"Of course not. It is dangerous and very hard work. But if I find them, I must use the gun that my patron has given me for its purpose," he replied. Dieudonne expects to save money and quit the hunting life one day.

WILDLIFE PROTECTORS FUND / GORILLA FOUNDATION

"He is a good man. Very trustworthy and honest. I would like to take him with me to help protect the gorillas and chimpanzees in the forest," said Joseph.

Earlier I had asked Joseph when he last killed a gorilla. "I have not shot one gorilla in the year since I saw you," he replied. "I know that you and the others do not want me to hunt them anymore. I no longer have a gun, and have begun to grow the crops." But he explained that he has now reached the end of the rope.

"The month of May is time to finish my planting so the corn and casaba will be here in the fall. In July my family will gather fruit and honey to prepare and sell. But for June we do not have enough to live on. That is why I must begin to hunt again."

I asked him how much money he needs. He calculated and replied that \$120 would get him through the next six weeks. After that the fruit should come in and tide him over till autumn harvest. I figure in six weeks Joseph could kill a dozen great apes, as many as his young friend Dieudonne.

"Don't hunt, Joseph. We will make a contract," I said. "If you will keep a journal in which you record one accomplishment you have made each day, and send me copies every 2 or 3 months, then I will give you the money you need to stay away from the hunt and will help you start to protect the endangered animals."

Joseph was visibly pleased. "I will get the paper and the pen and begin today," he declared.

Good as Gold. After making our agreement I felt a strong sense of relief. For days I had been struggling with a difficult conundrum. To help the apes required trusting the ape killers. As a professional from North America I needed reasonable proof that Joseph would not use this money to rent a gun, buy cartridges, and return to the hunt. As a person in the rain forest I had the man's word, as good as gold.

Joseph and I left Tokasa camp by different routes and met up again in Yaounde near the end of my sojourn. He then accompanied me by bus back to Douala and down to the resort town of Limbe. During those three days out of the forest a different man began to emerge. A worldly man, at once confident and cautious, open and honest, and quite insightful about his place and potential in this difficult world. At the Atlantic Hotel in Limbe I video-taped a long interview with Joseph the ex-gorilla hunter.

Joseph the boy had been slated to attend a technical school, but the funds were used instead to send his brother to college. After high school he found himself adrift, and took a variety of jobs, from house boy in Limbe to milliner and restaurant manager in Yaounde. He traveled north to work in Nigeria, then returned to Yaounde to study French, and at age 28 he moved to the Eastern Province where he could start afresh in Cameroon's frontier state. There he married a B'aka pygmy woman, adapting to yet another language and culture. As journalists and TV crews began reporting the exploitation of wildlife in east Cameroon, Joseph with his relevant skills and knowledge became a valuable resource person. Now he was proving himself to have yet another set of talents, working as my private guide and comrade.

We talked for hours and days about life in Cameroon and life in the bush. In the end I was convinced that while Joseph had an exceptional mix of competencies, he was the tip of an iceberg. There were at least a dozen other bushmeat hunters back in the SEBC concession who had sufficient will and ability to serve the conservation effort. Still, I could not be sure that they would develop the attitudes towards wild animals that are needed to sustain an enduring commitment to protect them. It is one thing to care for an ape or an elephant because you are paid and you have the competence to do the job. It is quite another to care for them because they matter to you -- to feel the deep

WILDLIFE PROTECTORS FUND / GORILLA FOUNDATION

connection that renders the gorilla a kindred spirit whom you know, implicitly, deserves to live a secure and fulfilling life.

WILDLIFE PROTECTORS FUND / GORILLA FOUNDATION

A Gorilla Loved, and Mourned. During our last evening together, I decided to test Joseph's metal. Before my trip, the Gorilla Foundation had supplied me with copies of a book about Koko: the first gorilla who had learned to communicate using sign language. Penny Patterson, Koko's friend and trainer, had wondered whether people who hunt and eat gorillas could be influenced by reading the story of Koko's Kitten (Patterson & Cohn, 1985). This tale has evoked tears in thousands of North Americans. Would a man who shot and butchered 100 wild gorillas, be moved by it? In our interview a year earlier, Joseph had argued that God put gorillas here for us to use as we please. With incredulity he had said "They are not humans; how can they feel what we feel?" Now after nearly two weeks traveling together I had grown close to this man: I was afraid he might laugh at the book, declare it foolish romanticism -- a response I had heard from a few people, scientists and lay people.

We were exhausted from travel and retired early. Joseph sat at the foot of his bed in our room at the Akwa Palace Hotel and held the thin paper-back book. His face brightened at the sight of the cover, with the photo of a large gorilla holding a small calico colored kitten gently in her hands. Joseph began to read at once, before I could explain anything. He was so engrossed, I dared not interrupt. After a minute he looked up from the book to exclaim, "Is this really so?" in a manner that represents deep excitement for him. I said "yes." Similar exclamations came again, and again. As if he was compelled to speak his change of mind -- to declare the expansion of his world view. At the end he asked, "Can I take this to my friend, Dieudonne? I want to show this to my friend who is hunting the gorillas. It will impress him very much." As we talked about the story it was clear that the language competence Koko displays was incredible to Joseph. But the most profound impact came from realizing that Koko could grieve. A gorilla loved a kitten, and mourned its death. Is this so different from you or me?

The truth is, I was surprised at the strength of his reaction. I had not expected that a book would impact him so strongly. Joseph and most of the hunters in Cameroon do not read very many books, but the level of presentation and the photos were convincing and moving as well. I gave a dozen books to Joseph, some with French translations included, for him to distribute to his friends and mine in Yaounde, Bertoua, and the forest camps. This assignment he accepted happily. It was a message he was pleased to carry.

Poachers to Protectors. As I watched Joseph's bus rumble out of Limbe town the next day, I was certain that what had been done in other African countries converting poachers to protectors (e.g.: Owens & Owens, 1993) could also be accomplished in Cameroon. Joseph Melloh could be the first of many. Of course he had the skills and the will to work in many aspects of the wildlife conservation movement. For that alone I was confident he would fulfill his agreement not to hunt. But at a deeper level, he had the capacity to be touched by the real intelligence and empathy of the gorillas he had spent so many seasons tracking for their meat. Surely he could now track them to save their lives.

In the months that followed my sojourn in Cameroon, my confidence was confirmed. Joseph has diligently recorded in his daily journal the events that matter to him most. As I read those notes I begin to recognize what brings a sense of achievement to his life; what motivates his striving in the face of odds to get through this hunting season and the next without killing apes or any other living being. I received a package in the mail from Joseph in August, three months after my departure. He had survived without hunting so far. He also built an addition on his house in preparation for the birth of his second child, and continued the planting in the village of Bordeaux where his family lives. His most intriguing achievement from my viewpoint is illustrated in these four journal entries:

1 June: "I have left Bordeaux to visit Dieudonne in his camp."

2 June: "Dieudonne and I have gone to the forest where he used to hunt and we have met two groups of gorillas which I have asked him not to shoot. He accepted not to kill them. I have spent the night there with him in the forest. He only got some monkey for his market."

WILDLIFE PROTECTORS FUND / GORILLA FOUNDATION

3 June: "Dieudonne and I have passed another night in the forest."

4 June: "I have left Dieudonne's camp and I am with my family in Bordeaux."

If Joseph did convince Dieudonne not to shoot gorillas in the forest, it is a promising sign. The two men could have made \$60 to \$80 by butchering and selling a silverback from each group. The \$20 per week that I advanced Joseph does not match such an economic incentive. Of course there are many factors that influenced Joseph to ask his friend to lower his gun and not shoot the gorillas they came across in the forest. Both men would like to use their forest knowledge and tracking skills in legal and respected ways in the conservation business. Economic and social incentives are at work in all such cases. I believe that the two men envisioned something better in their future; some benefit that can come from saving gorillas rather than killing them. And then there is the question of caring, intrinsically, for the apes. Joseph did show the book "Koko's Kitten" to Dieudonne. They discussed it, and Dieudonne was surprised, affected. Perhaps there are more hunters in the forest who have heard that gorillas can talk, and grieve.

Fruit is Scarce, Nothing Accomplished. Despite his small success in wildlife protection, Joseph reported that his family had failed in their farming program. The fruit and honey were scarce: not enough money had been made to last 'till the harvest. To help Joseph get through the end of 1997 without hunting, we sent him another US\$400, and the I made a contract that defined our aims. In a page we made our mutual commitments: Aim 1) To encourage Joseph and his family to maintain their health and well-being during the period of his transition into a new life-career. Aim 2) To guide Joseph in obtaining the training and employment that will transform his skill and understanding of Cameroon wildlife into assets for wildlife protection, education, and touring. Aim 3) To provide Dr. Rose with reliable information so that he and his donors can effectively audit and support the needs and accomplishments of Joseph and his family in this transition. Aim 4) To assure that Joseph and his family refrain from the hunting, trapping, purchase, and eating of any and all animals whose populations are vulnerable to extinction, and that they focus their energy and resources on the new activities and accomplishments they must make in order to serve the wildlife conservation effort.

Joseph continued the year without hunting, and sent his Journal as promised. But conservation work was harder to find than we had hoped. Then in February, 1998, Joseph made a big change: he moved with his wife and two young sons to Yaounde. There he became affiliated with Dr. Samuel Nguiffo, Director of the Center for Environment and Development (CED). Nguiffo and CED (a Cameroon NGO) agreed to help Joseph become a conservationist. I gave CED another \$1,000 to provide a small monthly stipend for Joseph till the end of 1998, while they sought a location to develop a wildlife protectors' project.

Joseph's wife Delphin and their boys, Karl and Anthony, had never been outside the Eastern Province. It was hard for them to survive in the city, and we had to send additional funds for basic expenses -- medicine, utensils, and electricity not required in the forest. Joseph continued to write in his journal with dogged reliability, though many nights in his little dark apartment he could say no more than "nothing accomplished today."

Outsiders Who Conserve. Just last month staff of CED took Joseph to a rich forest area in the Eastern Province where he was invited by the leaders of a small isolated village to come and start his project. In August, 1998, he is moving there to become friends with the people, build a small thatch and mud house, start a garden, and begin to develop a working relationship with local residents. His first goal is to organize a gorilla protection team and establish a safe protected area. This team will help him habituate two groups of apes, so that scientists and select visitors can begin to study them. The village chief is excited to have such a project in which outsiders who conserve, rather than exploit, will come for the first time to this beautiful natural location.

WILDLIFE PROTECTORS FUND / GORILLA FOUNDATION

The program is more easily conceived than accomplished. Resourceful as he is, Joseph needs professional and financial support for his project. An endowment for him and his family for another three years is fundamental. This alone would keep Joseph out of the bushmeat business, and by his presence, reduce the threat to gorillas and other endangered animals in the new area. But to find money and hire the professionals with relevant expertise to train Joseph and other hunters and to develop and establish conservation related work for them in Cameroon is the critical path.

In the beginning we had many leads but no closure. Traditional donors praised our pursuits, but spent their money on their familiar old projects. Professional talent goes where the money is -- the most devoted among us must make a living. Government and private agencies in places like Cameroon are so poorly funded they cannot perform their assigned duties, let alone start new programs, without support from outsiders. Ironically, this whole effort could be launched for the price of one of the luxury automobiles on sale in a car lot a few blocks from my house. The cost of two or three BMWs could put ex-hunters and professionals to work in wildlife conservation projects that would help the local economy in a half dozen villages and save many thousands of endangered animals in the rain forests of Cameroon. In 1998 Ammann and I, with conservationist Mark vanderWal and the Dutch Development Organization (SNV), wrote a proposal to support Joseph's project with the villagers who had invited him to help them conserve the gorillas in their forests. International Fund for Animal Welfare agreed to fund the proposal. A new beginning is upon us, and Joseph seems destined never to hunt gorillas again.

To Save Them Both. I went to Cameroon's Eastern Province to experience life in the bush with commercial hunters. I came back convinced that these men and the socio-economic systems in which they are caught can be changed in ways that will restore and enrich the people and the natural heritage. My commitment to facilitate this change remains strong -- hopefully the will can produce the way.

In Tokasa Camp one balmy afternoon I handed Joseph the video camera and asked him to interview me. He was delighted, and quickly got right to the point.

"Mr. Anthony, are you interested in Joseph because I am a hunter, or because you want to improve my life," he asked.

I thought hard before answering. "When I first came here to Tokasa Camp it was so I could learn about the hunters, and see if I could help them to make a better life for themselves, and for the wild animals that live here. But now, after living with you for all these days, it has become a personal thing for me. Now I want to help you Joseph, and your family, to make a better life."

I went to Cameroon to save gorillas, and I became friend to the gorilla hunter. Now I must return to save them both.

* * *

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WILDLIFE PROTECTORS FUND / GORILLA FOUNDATION