

Keeping 'The African Experience' African

By WADE GREENE AUG. 15, 1971

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John S. Owen, the game warden turned conservationist, is determined to keep the parks in Tanzania "African" by avoiding overdevelopment and maintaining the natural environment.

...the parks are not just a source of income for the government, but also a source of pride and identity for the people of Tanzania. Owen is determined to keep the parks in their natural state, without the intrusion of modern amenities and infrastructure. He believes that the parks should be managed in a way that allows the wildlife to thrive and the people to benefit from the natural resources. This approach is in stark contrast to the way that many other national parks are managed, where the focus is on maximizing revenue through tourism and the development of facilities for visitors. Owen's vision is to create a sustainable model of conservation that respects the integrity of the parks and the needs of the local communities. He is currently working on a plan to improve the management of the parks, focusing on the protection of the wildlife and the environment, as well as the development of alternative sources of income for the people living in the park areas. This plan is expected to be implemented in the coming years, and it is hoped that it will help to ensure that the parks remain "African" for generations to come.

AMONG the millions of visitors to America's national parks four years ago were 15 citizens of Tanzania, trustees of that East African country's national park system. They had flown halfway around the world to see how United States parks worked. They visited two world-famous areas, Yellowstone and Yosemite, during the peak tourist season, in midsummer, and they came home inspired—to protect their own parks from similar onslaughts. The African visitors were appalled by the crush of people and cars and the spread of litter they had encountered. Besides, they wondered, where were the animals?

“Since that trip one has never had to argue about the dangers of overutilization,” says John S. Owen, who was director of the Tanzanian national park system at the time and who told me about the trustees’ visit. “They're absolutely determined not to let their parks get spoiled in the way that you've spoiled your parks.”

Protecting the Wildlife

Owen had helped arrange the trustees' trip as part of his strategy for protecting Tanzania's vast domains of wild animals. One of his goals has been to convince the 10-year-old African country of the value, and vulnerability, of its wildlife as a national resource. At the same time, he has been busy traveling around the world persuading a wide assortment of people and organizations to contribute to the cost of protecting this wildlife as a rare and threatened world resource.

Owen's efforts have gained him international acclaim as a conservationist, (Recently he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Oxford, his alma mater.) But while he was working to defend endangered animal species, John Owen became a very nearly extinct species himself—one of the few white officials left in major government positions in black Africa. "I stuck out like Kilimanjaro," he says, referring to Africa's tallest and most celebrated mountain and Tanzania's most famous landmark. So now, with his major goals for Tanzania's parklands well on the way to fulfillment, he is moving on. He officially stepped aside last year to let a Tanzanian take his job as director of national park system, which he had held since 1960, but he is staying on as consultant until the end of this year to ease the transition. Then he's off, either back to England, his homeland, or to other parts of Africa, the continent where he was born of missionary parents and has spent most of his life.

Owen was in the United States a few weeks ago on the last of many international fund-raising expeditions on behalf of Tanzanian wildlife. During stop in New York he talked of the fragile harmony of man and animal in the land he is leaving, about how growing numbers of tourists are likely to weigh in the balance, and about himself.

Owen is an affable, solidly built, tanned and blue-eyed outdoorsman of 59 whose world has been full of strange and wonderful animals, but he was not always their protector, for, ironically enough, he was at one time an enthusiastic big-game hunter. He described Tanzania's treeless grasslands as one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited regions, in which the inhabitants have been and still are hundreds of thousands of zebra, wildebeests, gazelles and lesser numbers of elephants, lions, buffaloes, leopards, giraffes, wild dogs, cheetahs, vultures and so on. And, of course, man.

Owen's principal purpose since he became director of Tanzania's national parks has been to see that modern man does not infringe on the animals or their terrain any more than economics and demography, perhaps, make inevitable. Owen didn't mention it, but a New York Zoological Society official, to whom talked later, did, that Owen was "almost singlehandedly responsible for the development of the Tanzanian park system." This is an area now of some 12,000 square miles, in which approximately 1.5 million animals roam.

"Of course," Owen said, "you can't lock up an area as large as Belgium, even in Tanzania. You can't wrap it up in cellophane and make no use of it. It's got to earn its keep." Which is where tourism comes in, and the lesson he and Tanzania's park trustees see in the overcrowded United States national parks. The number of visitors to Tanzania's parks has been rising by about 15 per cent annually in recent years and with it the Government's appreciation of tourism as a valuable source of foreign currency. In fact, in neighboring Kenya, tourism is already the second largest such source.

Retaining the Wildness

One question Owen found himself grappling with was how best to capitalize on the parks as a tourist attraction without overwhelming the very wilderness, the wildness, that is attracting the growing numbers of visitors. Owen talked of the fragility of "the African experience," a term he frequently

used. "The African experience," he said, "can be ruined by too many people in too many cars—you know, 30 Land-Rovers or minibuses around pride of lions."

Another aspect of "the African experience" was impressed upon him soon after he took charge of the parks. He was traveling just outside Serengeti National Park, Tanzania's (and many feel the world's) most splendid wildlife area, when he spotted a Land-Rover bouncing down a crude path. The vehicle had a strong tailwind and the lava dust its wheels kicked up blew back over it and cascaded down the windshield. The driver, an elderly German doctor, stopped and chatted with Owen, who apologized for the condition of the road and said he would be building better ones as part of making the Serengeti more accessible to visitors. "Don't make the roads too good," the doctor admonished him, "because this is part of the African experience."

Owen has since overseen the grading and upgrading of some 750 miles of roads and tracks in the Serengeti, none, he assured me, too good. And while such roads have definitely opened up Tanzania's wilderness to ordinary tourists, accommodations, which are very limited and heavily booked these days, keep the traffic to a bare trickle, and deliberately so. In the Serengeti's 5,700 square miles there are only two 150-bed lodges, and while others are being built or are in the planning stage, the Government has set the limit at seven, with a total of 1,050 beds, for the foreseeable future. Owen did some quick arithmetic, figuring about 75 per cent occupancy, four people to a car, and decided there could be 200 automobiles in the park—comfortably—at one time, plus a few campers. "Sure," he said with a bit of English understatement, "it won't be as marvelous as when I knew it, but you should still be able to get away from it all."

Lodging Limitation

Two hundred or so cars in an area the size of Connecticut may seem like nothing to American nature-seekers, but it is clear that Owen finds even this an intrusion. He obviously feels, however, that compromises are necessary. Ideally, for instance, he would like to see the lodges limited to 40 beds or so. But after what one imagines have been long hassles with architects, hotel management people and Government officials, Owen concedes that at least 150 beds are required to make an isolated lodge economically feasible.

"One hotel that we have going up at the moment," he said, "I wanted to keep to 100 beds, but the commercial pressures were such that I couldn't. It's being built on a little kopje [a South African term for a small hill with granite boulders] and at the 100-bed level the kopje would have dominated the lodge. At the 150-bed level, it's draw." Still, Owen feels that within the economic imperatives the lodge designs have been skilfully drawn to enhance the lodgers' African experience.

Owen imparted an almost mystical sense to the term "African experience" when he used it, and it was clear that those words had a strong, personal meaning for him. It was also clear, when he talked about the complex, shifting ecology of Tanzania's grasslands, that the African experience was not always a pleasant one for visitors. The struggle for survival, raw and visible, is part of it, and a part that tourists often find upsetting.

Owen talked of seeing lion cubs dying of starvation, a common sight in the dry season, and, he explained, an ecologically purposeful phenomenon. "A lion has three or four cubs every two years. If they all survived, you'd very soon have an unequal balance of lions and wildebeests, which have only one calf every year. So, nature has designed things in such a way that a lot of cubs die, and they're meant to. Of course, it is very distressing to visitors when they see these poor little lions emaciated and starving." Feeding the cubs would only transfer the problem, Owen said. "It means going and killing a beautiful gazelle or similar animal which also has its right to live. A gazelle will only keep two

or three lion cubs going for three or four days. Whereas a gazelle left alone will have seven years of life. What do you go on?"

Shooting the lion cubs is no solution either, he said. "There, you're stepping in with the arrogance of man, because the mother has only to kill a buffalo that night and they're set again." So the park service lets nature take its course and passes out a pamphlet to visitors explaining such matters, which, Owen suggested, doesn't make visitors much happier.

Owen has been more concerned in general with animals' unnatural deaths at the hands of poachers. According to one estimate, as many as 40,000 animals a year are poached in Tanzania's parks, for their meat and for their skins. A good zebra skin, Owen said, can bring a poor Tanzanian farmer \$30 to \$40, a leopard skin up to \$200. But the Government is beginning to crack down on poachers, he said, and the situation is better now than it was a few years ago. "During the last year, the word has gone down very strongly from the top that poaching is old-fashioned. You must not destroy the nation's heritage." And strong word has been followed by strong example. The Government has recently prosecuted two prominent Tanzanians for poaching, going so far as to dismiss one leading civil servant and fining him heavily for "fiddling"—illegally dealing in—four elephant tusks.

Owen's role as a super game warden, enforcing the parks' strict no-hunting regulations, must be a source of ironic amusement to old friends. In earlier years, he was an ardent hunter himself. Indeed, it was evident from talking with him that he still looks upon hunting with mixed feelings. While he expresses a philosophical disdain for shooting big game, at least as the sport is practiced these days, he also nourishes some nostalgic memories of hunts of days gone by.

"A Virile Thing"

Owen did the biggest of his big-game hunting during the 18 years following graduation from Oxford when he served as an official, eventually a district commissioner, in the British-Egyptian Government of the Sudan. "I was hunting before the war," he explained, "when the general climate of opinion was that hunting was a virile thing." He hunted lions on horseback with tribal hunting parties, hiked in 120-degree temperatures for as long as 100 miles to get to game areas and felt there was some real adventure in such exercises. "It would be stupid to think there was anything particularly brave about it," he said, "because the number of hunters killed even in those days was very much less than the number of animals slain. The odds were very comfortably on your side." Owen spoke wistfully of "the moment of truth"—the firing of the first shot. "Until then, you normally had control over the situation, but once you fired, you might have a wounded animal to deal with."

Owen went back to England in 1954 to work for private industry for five years, in the research and development end of a packaging company. Then the lure of Africa and an advertisement in *The Times* of London brought him to Tanzania for the park director's job. He hasn't shot anything since. "I think there is a grave realization among people who arrived at it much earlier than I did that it's wrong ethically to do anything for your own personal pleasure that necessarily entails suffering or death to another sentient being." Besides he doesn't see much sport or adventure left in big-game hunting as it's practiced nowadays. "Very few hunters walk anymore. Most of them are driven up to within a stroll of an animal. A number of them, I'm sorry to say, actually shoot the animal from the car. There is practically no danger involved, far less danger than walking about the streets of New York anyway."

Real danger, in fact, remains to be one of the elements that have been pretty much institutionalized out of the African experience. "We've lost only one visitor in my 11 years," said Owen. This was a

camper who had not taken the routine precaution of having his tent flap shut and his mosquito netting down while he slept and was mauled by a wounded lion.

Owen himself almost suffered a similar fate, it came out. He was showing an architect a lodge site on top of a kopje, and as the two men walked around a boulder, they almost stumbled over four lionesses and their broods of cubs. The two fled toward their Land Rover, which was a good way off, and the lionesses padded after them. Owen soon found himself losing ground to the lionesses and in desperation halted, turned around, shouted and flapped his arms at the charging cats. Evidently assured that their cubs were not under attack; they stopped before this noisy, flapping figure and growled harmlessly enough until the architect retrieved the Land-Rover and, driving it between Owen and the lionesses, picked up a very nervous but wholly intact parks director.

Exuberant Pilot

To protect visitors from similar encounters, park regulations prohibit people from leaving their vehicles while in the parks, except in carefully cleared picnic and camping areas. This leaves very little danger for visitors, except perhaps—an acquaintance of Owen's suggests—an airplane ride with John Owen. Soon after he came to Tanzania, Owen learned to fly. He got his license in three weeks during a period, he acknowledges, when license requirements were somewhat more relaxed than they are now. His exuberance in the air since then has become something of a local legend and word is that a number of his passengers have been scared stiff by some of his manoeuvres.

For less privileged visitors, those who remain on the ground, the semblance of danger appears to have replaced the real thing. But this, Owen suggested, may be good enough for most people. He was thinking, he said, of an elephant in one Tanzanian park that used to charge after cars with a great deal of trumpeting and other wild-elephant-like carryings on. "She never did anything, but there must be hundreds of people dining out on the time they were chased by her," said Owen. "It was a very African experience."

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