

CONSERVATION

LOOKING BACK AT FORTY-FIVE YEARS OF  
TANZANIAN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

# GERALD BIGURUBE

INTERVIEW: ROLF D. BALDUS

PHOTOS: GERALD BIGURUBE AND ROLF D. BALDUS



Gerald Bigurube has been actively involved in conservation in Tanzania over a period of almost five decades. At the end of 2018 he won the prestigious Africa Prize from the Deutsche Afrika Stiftung. He worked with Rolf Baldus in Tanzania - and met him in Germany for the interview for Hunter's Path.

**Rolf Baldus:** Gerald, first of all let me congratulate you for receiving recognition for your achievements in the fields of democracy, good governance and human rights. And now, the "Deutsche Afrika Stiftung" by awarding you their Africa Prize, has recognized that preserving the rich biodiversity of Africa is a field of comparable importance. After studying wildlife biology in Tanzania and Canada, you started your professional career as a wildlife manager in the Tanzania government services in 1973. At the end of 2018 you retired. What major changes for wildlife and protected areas have you seen during those years in your country?

Gerald Bigurube: Let me start with the positive side of things. The number of protected areas has risen, and so has the income from consumptive and non-consumptive wildlife use, which is good for conservation. We have experienced a number of administrative improvements and provided a more professional service.

The recent creation of the Tanzania Wildlife Authority (TAWA) has put the wildlife areas that are outside the National Parks, under unified management, and they can retain all revenues from wildlife, and use them for management and conservation. It has also centralized wildlife management once again. Decentralization, which left the wildlife outside of the protected areas under

the authority of districts and regions, clearly failed. And finally, community-based wildlife management and community wildlife areas have been introduced in Tanzania, following the example of some other African countries.

**Baldus: The negative list of changes will be longer, I guess?**

Bigurube: Unfortunately, yes. During my professional career Tanzania's human population has increased by more than a factor of four: from fifteen million in 1973 to sixty million today. Consequently, the demand for land and natural resources has greatly increased, and the wildlife range has shrunk accordingly. Wild animals are increasingly confined in protected areas, although Tanzania still has much free-ranging wildlife in unfenced areas, as compared to other countries in Africa. However, agriculture is being practiced now right up to the boundaries of the Serengeti and of other parks, and human-wildlife conflicts have increased dramatically.

We have also seen an explosion in nomadic pastoralism. Cattle and goats are now in areas which are protected in one form or the other, that never before had livestock. Livestock and its keepers push the wildlife out. It is a simple formula: If the habitat is lost, the wildlife is lost. Losing a couple of thousand head of game due to poaching is bad, but game will recover, proper management provided, if the land remains available. In my time I have witnessed and fought two major poaching disasters, in particular regarding elephants: one in the mid-eighties, and another during the last decade.

As a consequence of lost habitat and poaching, and despite all our efforts, we have experienced major declines in many wildlife species during the last forty-five years.

**Baldus: Have you given up on free-range wildlife in Tanzania?**

Bigurube: Well, I remain moderately optimistic. Wildlife has a future in Tanzania, if we practice proper management with a force of committed and qualified professionals, if wildlife enjoys political support, if the wildlife areas generate revenues, and if these funds go to the people living there and also flow back into conservation.

**Baldus: This sounds a bit like an agenda for your successors?**

Bigurube: (Laughs) Yes, it does. They certainly face challenges and will have to work hard. Providing them with the right training is imperative.

**Baldus: For you, the future of wildlife centers on the issue of land use?**

Bigurube: Yes, as I said before, the wildlife will be lost if the available land is taken over for other uses, and this brings us to the question of incentives. The relevant groups on which the future of wildlife depends: politicians, local farmers, and administrators must see benefits arising from wildlife. Wild animals that bring in no revenue and that cost the government to maintain, will not survive in the long run. Contrary to what many well-wishing animal lovers in the industrialized countries believe, intrinsic values are not enough, economics come into play. Without substantial revenue from photographic tourism and sustainable hunting, our wildlife's future will be bleak.

**Baldus: So hunting has a role to play?**

Bigurube: Yes, indeed, a very important one. In wildlife areas outside the national parks sustainable hunting tourism, if well-managed and controlled, is the income earner with the highest potential. And, its ecological impact is small. Hunting revenues are, in particular, crucial for communities in their wildlife management areas. These areas' attractiveness for photographic tourism is in most cases limited.

The national park, with minimal management intervention, if possible, is often used as the gold

standard of conservation. However, all the game reserves and wildlife areas with less protected status would vanish without hunting.

**Baldus: Hunting tourism has, however, decreased in Tanzania in recent years.**

*Bigurube: Yes, this worries us. Half of the hunting blocks have been returned by the companies, and no hunting currently takes place there. Experience shows that such unused blocks, without the presence of the hunters, will quickly be poached out. Additionally, herdsmen with their cattle, squatters, and artisanal miners will soon occupy them. It is a troubling situation.*

*TAWA is self-funding and therefore dependent on the income from the land under their authority. They have lost considerable hunting revenues. As a former member of the TAWA Board, I am fully confident that it is prepared and able to reform and improve the hunting sector, and revive it.*

**Baldus: What do you see as the reasons for the companies surrendering their blocks?**

*Bigurube: The United States is our main market, and the import bans on lion and elephant trophies have*

*led to a major decline in hunters. It will also take time before elephant hunting returns to normal after the poaching crisis. Trophy import bans in some European countries, airlines not transporting trophies, and anti-hunting campaigns in the USA and Europe have certainly also played a role in the reduction in demand. When you lose a market, it is difficult to regain it.*

**Baldus: Obviously you do not regard the manifold anti-hunting campaigns conducted by many animal welfare NGOs as helpful for conservation.**

*Bigurube: This is correct. They are greatly counterproductive for wildlife and for the people who live with the game. As an African it annoys me when people in developed and rich countries hijack conservation in Africa, and try to impose their own agenda on us. Why don't they occasionally listen to us? I thought neo-colonialism was behind us. Obviously I am wrong.*

**Baldus: Thirty years ago we both were working in the Selous Game Reserve and managing it. Now the Tanzanian Government has started building a mega-hydroelectric dam in the heart of the reserve.**

**The impact upon wildlife and the environment has not been investigated, but it will be big. Any comment?**

*Bigurube: It's a tricky situation. I understand that the German government will terminate its eighteen-million-euro support project for the Selous, if UNESCO removes its World Heritage status, as it will most likely do. The Frankfurt Zoological Society will continue to provide management, and anti-poaching support, and will try to mitigate potential damage from the dam.*

**Baldus: Gerald, what are your plans now after your retirement?**

*Bigurube: It might take some time to get used to the new situation. In recent years I spent too much time in offices and not enough out in the wildlife areas, as I did in my younger years, when I still was a game warden. So I might take my battered 4x4, visit the national parks and stay in the bush and observe the wildlife. As a former TANAPA-CEO I have the privilege of having a free pass to visit all national parks of Tanzania.*

**Baldus: Thank you for the interview, and have a good trip back home to Africa.**



Gerald Bigurube and Rolf D. Baldus together at an entrance to the Selous.



## GERALD BIGURUBE RECEIVES AFRICA PRIZE

Tanzanian biologist and conservationist Gerald Bigurube received the Africa Prize on November 27, 2018, for his life's work in the field of wildlife conservation. German Bundestag President Wolfgang Schäuble presented the award in Berlin. The Africa Prize is awarded annually by the German Africa Foundation.

After his studies, Bigurube initially worked as an airplane pilot for the game protection authority. From 1986 to 1994 he was a warden in the Selous Game Reserve. This is the largest protected area in Africa at 50,000 square kilometers. The Selous, a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site since 1982, is considered one of the most pristine game reserves in the world. Under the direction of Bigurube, the Selous was able to secure funding from sustainable hunting tourism, and it became financially independent. With the support of a German governmental project, which was then headed by Rolf D. Baldus, he and his staff managed to reduce elephant poaching from about 5,000 killed annually to almost zero.

After his time in the Selous, Bigurube was head of the Tanzanian National Park Authority, TANAPA, for fifteen years. In 2009 he took over as the regional director of the Frankfurt Zoological Society (ZGF) in Tanzania. At the end of 2018 he retired.

After Germany ended its commitment to wildlife conservation in Tanzania in 2006, there was another dramatic collapse of elephant populations due to poaching. A 2014 wildlife census by the Tanzanian Ministry of Environment and Tourism showed a decline from over 70,000 at the end of the German project, to only 14,000.

The International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) and the German Hunting Association (DJV) honored Bigurube for his tireless efforts to protect wildlife and to combat poaching in Tanzania. Hartwig Fischer, President of the DJV and former President of the German Africa Foundation, paid tribute to the work of the award winner: "The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) concludes that legal, well-regulated hunting programs play an important role in wildlife conservation and in the livelihoods of indigenous and local populations. Gerald Bigurube is very deserving of this award for his support and implementation of a successful biodiversity policy that has always included sustainable hunting."

Bigurube shared the 2018 award with Clovis Razafimalala, who works to protect forests in his native Madagascar.