GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

Richard Bonham

Bruce, 1970

Recognised for trailblazing community-driven conservation and a lifelong dedication to protecting East Africa's wildlife.

Richard Bonham is an African conservationist renowned for pioneering community-based wildlife protection.

Born in Kenya, in 1954, Richard grew up immersed in the bush. His mother's family were coffee farmers and his father was a game warden. He attended Prep School at Kaptagat, Kenya, before moving to Gordonstoun on the strength of its 'outdoorsy' reputation. Here, he enjoyed sport and expeditioning, and playing Rugby with the Colts - the junior team. However, at the age of 15, he moved to Abbotsholme in Staffordshire to complete his exams.

As soon as school was over, Richard returned to Africa, beginning his career as a bush pilot, before setting up his own safari company - taking tourists deep into the wilderness to walk and camp. In the mid 1980s he founded Ol Donyo Lodge in the Chyulu Hills, working closely with the Maasai landowners to pioneer community-based conservation. By harnessing local engagement to wage war against poachers, Richard began a lifelong commitment to wildlife protection.

In 1992, he established the Maasailand Preservation Trust which, in 2010, merged into the Big Life Foundation which now operates across the Amboseli - Tsavo - Kilimanjaro ecosystem, covering over 2 million acres of community owned land and employing 400 anti-poaching rangers plus 200 more driving community-based programmes. The success of this project has seen thousands of arrests and illegal weapons being seized, resulting in a huge reduction in poaching of elephants, rhinos, lions and antelopes.

Richard's leadership in this area has led to global recognition, including the Prince William Award for Conservation in Africa in 2014. Today, he remains Big Life's Director of Operations in Kenya, where he lives with his wife and three children. He continues to champion community-driven conservation, combining law enforcement, education, and sustainable tourism to protect wildlife across millions of acres of East African wilderness.

My family had instilled in me the importance of integrity but I think it was at Gordonstoun that I truly understood the value.

It's been interesting reflecting on my school days and the one thing I come back to again and again when thinking of that time is the emphasis in Gordonstoun' education on truth, honour and integrity. These values were so entrenched in me that by the time my career at Gordonstoun ended (rather abruptly when I was asked to leave over a misdemeanor) I immediately knew that I had crossed a line and should face the consequences. But I'll never forget, having accepted my punishment, the Headmaster telling me he felt I was a good guy and so he would recommend me to a good school. He made me promise to turn over a new leaf there - and sure enough, I kept that promise. It was a valuable life lesson which proved to me that integrity mattered; that when you behave honourably, often others do too.

The biggest challenge the Foundation had to overcome was gaining the trust and approval of the Maasai people.

This was essential for success. Local people rely on their herds of livestock for their livelihoods yet the very wildlife we are looking to conserve are a threat and carry a cost to people living among them. Predators prey on livestock, elephants crop raid farms and other wildlife compete for limited grazing and water. I realised if the Masai didn't see tangible benefits from the ecosystems thriving on their land, then land use would change and poaching would rise to unsustainable levels. We needed to help them understand how they could make a living from their land. We provided a compensation scheme for predators that killed livestock, alongside electric fences for a barrier between wildlife areas and farm lands. In addition we employed hundreds of rangers from the community and have, to date, provided education scholarships to over 3000 students whilst developing schools and school infrastructure. We also have a health care program which supports dispensaries in the more remote locations in the eco system. All these programs have led to a buy-in to conservation from grass root levels.

My vision is to safeguard a million acres and I hope success is my legacy.

We're definitely not seeing the decline in wildlife which certainly would have happened without our work - we've not lost an elephant or rhino to poaching in seven years. So we're seeing people actively supporting wildlife, but we're now in an age with a new challenge: urban development taking over the wilderness. Kenya's population has risen from around 5 million people in the 1960s to over 50 million now. That puts pressure on the land and if you don't create conservancies to protect it, the whole ecosystem falls apart - displacing wildlife which has a right to share that land.
I remember, as a child, going on safari with my dad when he was a warden and hearing lions roar every night - that area today is now devoid of any wildlife due to loss of habitat. I see my legacy as not allowing that degradation to happen in this ecosystem. Our mission is to create a model of paying landowners for providing ecosystem services in order to enable wildlife to use the land as they always have. If my name ends up being associated with keeping an ecosystem alive here, I'll have achieved my goal.