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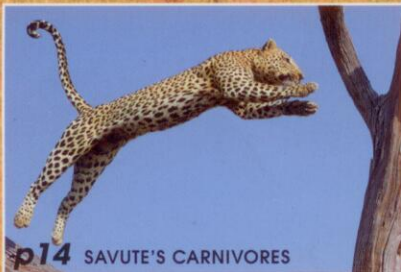
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p14 SAVUTE'S CARNIVORES

**EDWARD
NORTON**
ON AFRICA,
ECOTOURISM &
GREENWASHING



p26



p22 RHINO UPDATE

star power

Twelve years ago, Edward Norton – known to many of us as the star of *The Illusionist*, *25th Hour*, *Fight Club* and *American History X* – travelled to Kenya, where he stayed at a lodge called Campi ya Kanzi in the Chyulu Hills. The son of an attorney for, among other clients, The Nature Conservancy, Norton was no stranger to conservation initiatives, but there was something about the way owner Luca Belpietro ran his business with the local Maasai community that drew the actor back, and over time he became a patron of Belpietro's non-profit trust. **Sarah Borchert** spoke to him about the aims of the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust and what makes Campi ya Kanzi so special.



Sarah Borchert: Let's start at the beginning. Can you take us through how you came to be involved in the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust (MWCT)?

Edward Norton: My sister used to work in Kenya for a company that organised Kilimanjaro climbs for people. My brother and I were tagging along on one of her trips and, prior to climbing the mountain, we stayed at Campi ya Kanzi in the Chyulu Hills. Because of my father, my family has always been very involved in conservation work. When we visit places, we all have a tendency to nose around local conservation efforts, looking at the interplay between tourism and the surrounding communities. When we compared notes from that trip, we found that we had all been incredibly impressed by what the founder of Campi ya Kanzi [Luca Belpietro] and the local Maasai community were doing in terms of their approach to community-based conservation, tourism and economic development. They were working in a way that we thought was a cut above other initiatives that we had seen.

The next time I visited my aunt and uncle, who live in Kenya, I went back to see Luca and offered some support. I felt that he had a very significant template for how you could conserve critical ecosystems by working with local communities to create economic models that didn't require permanent philanthropy. So I got more and more involved. It sounds like a big decision made on the spur of the moment but, really, it is a relationship that has grown over 12 years.

SB: You must have seen or been approached to be involved in a fair number of conservation initiatives. Can you elaborate on what makes Campi ya Kanzi and MWCT different from other tourism-based conservation projects?

EN: Well, don't forget that Campi ya Kanzi shouldn't be equated with MWCT. Campi ya Kanzi is a full-profit safari operation

owned by the local community and managed by Luca's safari company; MWCT is the non-profit trust that was set up to help that community manage the revenues and programmes that it was developing for its own benefit. So they are interrelated – and Luca happens to wear two hats because he founded the trust and he also runs Campi ya Kanzi.

What distinguished MWCT for me was that Luca talked about environmental conservation as a function of economic development or, I should say, looked at wilderness and wildlife as natural resources that have an authentic economic value. Ten years ago that was actually a very pioneering thing to say. Today I think environmental economics and the underlying economic value of

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natural resources, like healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, have become leading themes in global environmental policy.

But 10 years ago, Luca was talking about that

at a *community* level, which very few people were doing.

I had never met anyone who talked with his level of sophistication about getting communities invested in figuring out ways to sustainably exploit the resources that they had.

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The other thing that I thought was very different was the depth and sincerity of Luca's partnership with the community. In the safari world, there are many places

where operators talk about their community partnerships, but if you look at the fine print – which I've done quite a lot – you'll find that 'community partnership' really

means that, although the community is paid some sort of management concession, the safari company owns the infrastructure. For the community to ever make a change they would have to buy the operator out of that infrastructure, which would cost them millions of dollars and would be impossible.

In Luca's case, he really did build that lodge with the Maasai Kuku community, which owns the whole camp. Luca has no title, no deeds, nothing. He just pays a concession – a management fee – to the community.

SB: And how are those concession fees administered and disbursed? In so many cases, that revenue tends to be paid to a relatively small number of people within a particular community.

EN: How community benefit is received is a huge issue within the matrix of tourism and community benefit. You've actually hit on one of the thorniest problems. ▶



BOUQUET IMMAGINE

OPPOSITE Actor and director Edward Norton has served as the United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for Biodiversity since 2010.

RIGHT For Norton, the sourcing of staff is a key concern. Ninety per cent of the people who work at Campi ya Kanzi come from the immediate community.



It's usually very hard to track how that money moves into the community, and you're right, when it is tracked it's usually found in the hands of very few people. One of the things that Luca and MWCT have done that has worked extraordinarily well is to institute community standards and practices to make sure that the benefits from the tourism business and the conservation programme at large go into the community in a very broad-based and traceable way. They've achieved something that I have never seen anywhere else – the community officials have agreed to let MWCT receive the dividends, which are then reinvested, with advice from the trust, in employment, education, health, community rangers and so on. So Luca has achieved a remarkable standard in terms of being able to demonstrate that this benefit really is for everybody and not just a few people.

SB: I was chatting to someone the other day about communities benefiting from tourism, and he said that if you're working in this kind of environment, the benefits have to be at a household and not at a community level.

EN: That's absolutely right and this

principle is one of the mainstays of MWCT's strategy. If we can reach the point where the revenue being generated exceeds the funding needed for certain community programmes, our idea is to create a shareholder roster so that, like stockholders in a corporation, the adult members of the community are paid a household-to-household dividend.

We're not quite there yet. Currently the principal way that we achieve broad community benefit is by reinvesting the proceeds in employment, which obviously is a way of creating quite a lot of household-to-household benefits. The trust is now the single largest income-generating entity within the entire community.

SB: And how big is that community?

EN: It's about 7 000 people, of which the trust employs 200. Because the families are pretty large, we're starting to impact on a fairly sizeable percentage of the community. Apart from employment, MWCT takes a lot of the revenue generated through philanthropic fundraising and some of the conservation programmes, and invests it in education and health care because the community has identified those services as their top priorities. So, within that community, MWCT employs more teachers

than the government does. We also employ the only doctor.

SB: The key here is that these are priorities identified by the local people themselves, rather than a top-down approach.

EN: I think one of the great testaments to Luca is that from the beginning he said that MWCT had to be a community enterprise. It couldn't be seen as the safari operator's little side project. So in the early years he actively recruited and developed local talent in the young Maasai guys he was working with. And one of them, Samson Parashina, emerged as a phenomenally confident and committed young man. He got his silver guiding licence, which very few Kenyans from tribal communities have attained, and Luca moved him into a leadership role in the trust. He has been president now for five years and I think that if you look at why the community has embraced this partnership and why MWCT is so trusted, a lot of it has to do with Samson's leadership, and the fact that most of its senior management – community rangers, the doctor, the community educators, the finance and administrative director – are either Maasai or native Kenyan. When I look around at other projects, I don't see much cultivation of authentic leadership from within the communities that are supposed to be benefiting from tourism.

SB: You're starting to touch on something else I wanted to ask you. I've so often received stories for the magazine where 'community development' is discussed and you hear from the lodge owner, the lodge manager and the guy appointed by the lodge to be the community liaison, but you never actually hear from the people who are supposed to be benefiting from it.

EN: Look, it's important to be honest about where we are. We're not all the way there. On one hand, it's a great mix – there's Samson and 200 people from within the nearby community employed by the trust; on the other there's a robust board of really terrific people in Kenya and the US who are supporting this too. I think they have recognised that this is a very sophisticated attempt to build a community-based programme that actually adheres to a lot of the cutting-edge ideas about how you create economic value out of wildlife, forests and watersheds. Where the community is not just a philanthropic beneficiary, but where its economic model is actually based

on its stewardship of important ecosystems and animals.

A large chunk of the tourism economy of Kenya moves through this area, and a critical watershed that serves seven million people, the Chyulu forest, which feeds Mizima Springs, lies within Maasai land holdings. So to me this is a textbook case in which a fairly poor community has an outsized role in the fate of an ecosystem that is critical for the Kenyan national economy. So then the trick becomes how you make sure that the community is compensated appropriately for making livelihood decisions that sustain that ecosystem.

SB: Can you elaborate a little more on how you see the trust developing in the future? You mentioned that you wanted it to become self-sustaining in time.

EN: That would be the ultimate goal. We're not there yet by any stretch, but I think we are moving out of what I would call our 'bootstrap' stage into a venture capital, start-up company phase. We're getting some funders now to support models that, hopefully, over time will replace the need for philanthropic funding. To some degree that's already begun – about 10–15 per cent of the MWCT budget is being funded by recurring revenues from the Campi ya Kanzi partnership. And that's where we're trying to go, whether it's through brokering carbon credit deals or figuring out watershed evaluation or land conservancy management agreements.

SB: Let's change tack for a moment and talk about Campi ya Kanzi and ecotourism in general. Greenwashing is an area of increasing concern, both because it is happening and because it's so difficult to expose. What are your thoughts on that?

EN: I think the issue of greenwashing and tourism is particularly important in the safari business because at this point most operators call themselves an ecotourism experience.

Unfortunately the travel media play a significant role in recirculating superficial claims without really examining them, and discerning travellers who want to make informed choices have no way of knowing whether what's being marketed is of substance. So I do believe that tourism journalists need to be a little more stringent in the types of questions that they ask of a place that is claiming green credentials.

SB: What, in your opinion, are the key criteria that need to be addressed if you're to be credibly 'green'?

EN: There are four key standards that I think don't get drilled into enough. One, and we've already talked about this, is community benefits. When safari companies talk about community partnership or community benefits, people should wonder what that really means.

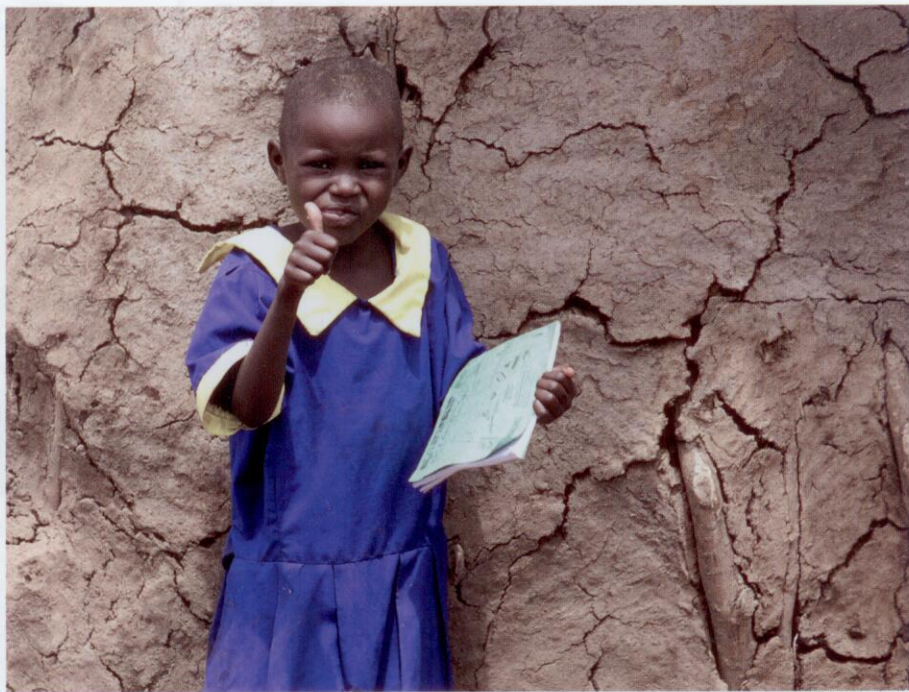
The second one is how these places source their water. I think in South Africa, Kenya and Botswana in particular, water is a very important resource for local communities and most of the sourcing of water in the safari business is a scandal. One high-end safari lodge in another group ranch not far from Campi ya Kanzi offers plunge pools off each room, yet it is operating in a semi-arid grassland environment where community water is already seriously stretched. Where do they get their water? Turns out that they truck it in twice a day from a community spring. That is in no way, shape or form ecologically sustainable and yet this camp talks about itself as an ecotourism operation.

Operators need to have the courage to explain to their guests what forms of ▶

in South Africa, Kenya and Botswana in particular, water is a very important resource for local communities and most of the sourcing of water in the safari business is a scandal

OPPOSITE The Maasai Kuku group ranch offers the same environment as in nearby Amboseli and Chyulu Hills national parks, but it is five times the size of the former and, says Norton, 'you won't see another vehicle.'

BELOW The Maasai Kuku identified education as an area where they felt particularly underserved and, consequently, it is one of MWCT's top priorities.



BOUTIQUE IMAGINE

luxury are appropriate to the environment they are in. Plunge pools in areas that get hammered by drought are 'inappropriate luxury' in my opinion and don't deserve to be marketed as an 'ecotourism' experience.

Power is another area of concern. Very few operators have invested in even rudimentary solar panels, either to supply their power or heat their water. Almost everybody is still running diesel generators.

The other thing that is rarely talked about is staff. It's one of the hidden truths that a lot of camps bring their staff from the big city, they don't bother to train up and hire the local people. So I think one of the first questions to ask is, 'What percentage of your staff comes from the immediate community?'

SB: How well does Campi ya Kanzi fulfil those criteria?

EN: I think there are three areas where Campi ya Kanzi can totally claim its ecotourism credentials. The first is community benefits – the management concessions Luca pays, the conservation surcharge imposed per person per night (it's the highest of any camp in Kenya) and employment. Ninety per cent of the camp's 60–70 staff members are from the immediate Maasai Kuku community, and you get a strong, authentic feeling of ownership – it's their home, it's their business.

I've always thought that the feeling of return you get when you go into that East African environment is very real

The second is that Luca sources his water in a sustainable, ingeniously low-cost way. He's built a large, gravity-fed rainwater-cropping system using plastic

sheets that cover 8 000 square metres of hillside. These feed rainwater into PVC tubes that run down the hill into large flexible bladders, which I think he

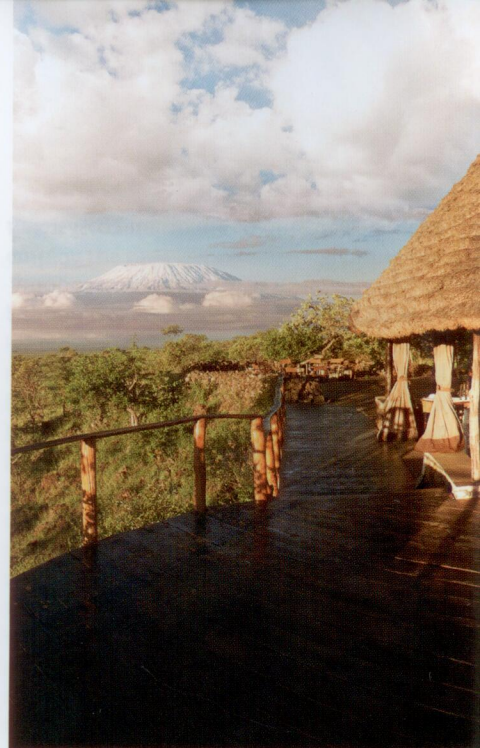
sourced from a company that uses them for firefighting. These above-ground bladders have a storage capacity of 1.2 million litres and during the rains they collect enough water to see the camp almost entirely through the dry season.

The camp also operates largely on solar power. All electric lighting is powered by photovoltaic cells, and water in the suites is heated through solar boilers. It's what Luca calls 'appropriate luxury' and I agree. He says to people, 'Look, if we've had clouds for three days, your water is not going to be super hot, but that's the reality of where we are. We don't want to run a diesel generator in this pristine environment so that you can have a slightly hotter shower.' That willingness to be assertive with his clientele about the level of luxury that he provides is inspiring. If people are going to call themselves an ecotourism enterprise and not just a hotel, they should be willing to communicate that value system to their guests.

SB: Finally, because I can't resist... What is your favourite destination? You clearly

know Kenya well, so is it somewhere there, or is there somewhere else that's at the very top of your 'must-do' list?

EN: Well, I'd need to live to be 140 to visit all the places I want to go in Africa! But saying that the Chyulu Hills is my favourite spot is not just a function of knowing the people and having worked there a long time. It really is, I think, one of the most iconic landscapes in East Africa. You're situated in Hemingway's *Green Hills of*



CHRIS SORENSEN

ABOVE Campi ya Kanzi is owned outright by the Kuku Maasai community of the Chyulu Hills. Luca Belpietro, founder of both the lodge and the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust, simply pays a concession fee to operate it.

BELOW Luca Belpietro (MWCT executive director); Edward Norton (board president); Samson Parashina (MWCT president) and Nerissa Chao (co-director of conservation programmes for MWCT).

Africa, staring at Kilimanjaro; you've got the montane forests, the savannas, the lava flows, the geological history, the grassland migrations. And then, of course, there are the people who live there and the particularly fantastic traditions of that culture. It's a combination I've never really gotten over.

SB: There is a book called *Ecological Intelligence* written by a South African psychiatrist called Ian McCallum that addresses this modern malaise of homesickness, a sort of restless depression. He says that we need to return to wild places to restore something in ourselves. That wild place is different for everybody, but it's that sense of coming home, of something being put back by returning to the environment that you evolved to be in.

EN: I don't think any of that is overstated. I've always thought that the feeling of return you get when you go into that East African environment is very real. It sounds New Age when you say it and I'm not a New Age person, but I think a very palpable sensation of familiarity is triggered when you re-encounter that environment. There aren't many things in the contemporary world that feel almost mystical, but that does to me.

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