

Interview

GORONGOSA: THE HUMAN SIDE OF CONSERVATION

Sue Watt sits down with Greg Carr, the man who sparked the rebirth of Mozambique's Gorongosa National Park. As she finds out, it has more to do with people than it does with animals.

“The story of Gorongosa is not about Greg Carr, an American, going over to Mozambique to save a national park.”

These emphatic words come from Carr himself as we discuss a unique restoration project taking place in central Mozambique. While he insists that he's not the only actor in the feel-good scenario being played out on one of Africa's most beautiful natural stages, he is undeniably one of its leading characters, and one of its most charismatic.

Carr, 50, developed his love of nature and interest in conservation as a child growing up in Idaho, a vast wilderness state that is still his home today. After making his fortune selling digital voicemail in the 1990s, he left commerce behind to establish a not-for-profit organisation – The Carr Foundation – with the environment, the arts and human rights at its core. Invited to Mozambique by the country's United Nations ambassador in the hope of encouraging investment, Carr certainly made his visit pay dividends. The eventual result was the Gorongosa Restoration Project, which involved a 20-year agreement with the Mozambique government and a multi-million dollar commitment from Carr.

“People told me that there was nothing left in Gorongosa,” Carr recalls, describing his first view of the area while on a recon for philanthropic projects. “We flew over by helicopter and from the air it all looked beautiful: the trees, the different kinds of forest, the running rivers, the gorgeous lake. But, we couldn't see any animals. Yet, as the habitat was mostly there, we thought the animals would make a comeback. And that's what's happening now. We have people on safari as we speak today who are having a

wonderful time – they are having an experience that's just as good as or better than other places they've seen. We're in the thick of it now.”

There have indeed been some pretty lean times during the fifty years since Gorongosa became a national park. In its heyday of the 1960s, the park was bursting with wildlife and visitors alike. American movie stars enjoyed dips in the swimming pools and sips of sunset cocktails in between game drives through prolific herds of animals. The park was renowned (not just in Hollywood) for its 14,000 buffalo and 2000 elephants, not to mention its lion population, which was one of Africa's largest. Gorongosa's demise came in the devastating civil war that followed Mozambique's struggle for independence from Portugal in 1975. Both Frelimo, the new socialist government force, and Renamo, Rhodesian-backed rebels, needed food and funds for arms, and Gorongosa was an easy target. The park was more like a blockbuster war movie set than a popular safari destination, and by the early 1990s nearly everything – buildings, local communities, wildlife – was decimated. In 1992, after the civil war, Mozambique was classed as the world's poorest country, and while things had improved by the time Carr became involved in 2004, people were still living in desperate poverty. Unusually, poverty alleviation became a central theme to the park's restoration project, as Carr explains:

“Our philosophy is a departure from what people think of as a core mission of a national park. We're trying to preserve and protect biodiversity of the park's ecosystem while simultaneously benefiting the human beings who live all around it. Around 250,000 people – some of the poorest people in the world, who face all kinds of challenges – live in ▷

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After falling in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004, **Sue Watt** became a freelance travel writer who's since journeyed across much of the continent. She is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa* and newspapers such as *The Independent*.

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Previous page: Greg Carr getting to know some of Gorongosa's wildlife

Above: A visit to the school in Vinho, one of the communities being helped by The Carr Foundation

Below: One of Gorongosa National Park's many inhabitants

Opposite page: Greg Carr believes the future of Gorongosa lies in the good hands of the local population

▷ the buffer zone, so our mission is to help both them and the ecosystem.”

When I ask if it's sometimes difficult getting the balance right between the two, he's under no illusions. “Yes it is,” he replies. “Both challenges are enormous – the biodiversity's needs and the human development's needs are both critical, so we sometimes walk on tiptoes between the two goals, but that's OK. It's a difficult project but the satisfactions are enormous.”

On the wildlife front, those satisfactions include reintroducing hundreds of Cape buffalo, along with elephants, hippos and wildebeest. With increased security against poachers, animals like impala are coming back and breeding contentedly, which in turn tempts predators to return. But for Carr the successes of the human development projects are just as rewarding. “Ninety-nine per cent of the people who work for Gorongosa are Mozambicans, and that's how it should be. I see local people get training and jobs, and they're very proud, especially the women – it's greatly empowering for them. It's incredibly satisfying to see these women interacting with tourists while working in our park, and then watching them going home at night to their children across the river.”

With six concessions for hotels and lodges being considered by the park, employment prospects look good. But Carr is realistic about their impact: “Under the best of circumstances, the park will create only a few thousand jobs. Even with the thousands of secondary and tertiary level jobs we create outside the park, we are certainly not going to benefit all 250,000 people. So the majority of the people who live near Gorongosa are still going to be relying on agriculture.”

Unsurprisingly, this reliance on agriculture can cause conflict between communities and conservation efforts. Mount Gorongosa is a prime example. Sitting

80km beyond the park boundaries, the mountain and its rainforest provide much of the water that feeds the park's amazing biodiversity. Over the years the forest has been denuded, as trees are cut for firewood and as farmers use slash-and-burn techniques to plant their crops. Hence, the park has begun a restoration project for the mountain too, teaching locals about sustainable farming and providing employment in the replanting of trees on its slopes.

Persuading people to change their practices isn't easy, however. “It's understandable that they would be nervous about the goals of the national park and how they will affect them. But our community relations team, who are all Mozambican, are working with these communities every day so we have Mozambicans talking to Mozambicans, discussing together how the park can benefit the lives of locals. We're helping them with sustainable agriculture – if they get more yield on the land they have, and better nutrition from that yield, that is good for everyone as it reduces pressure on the ecosystem.”

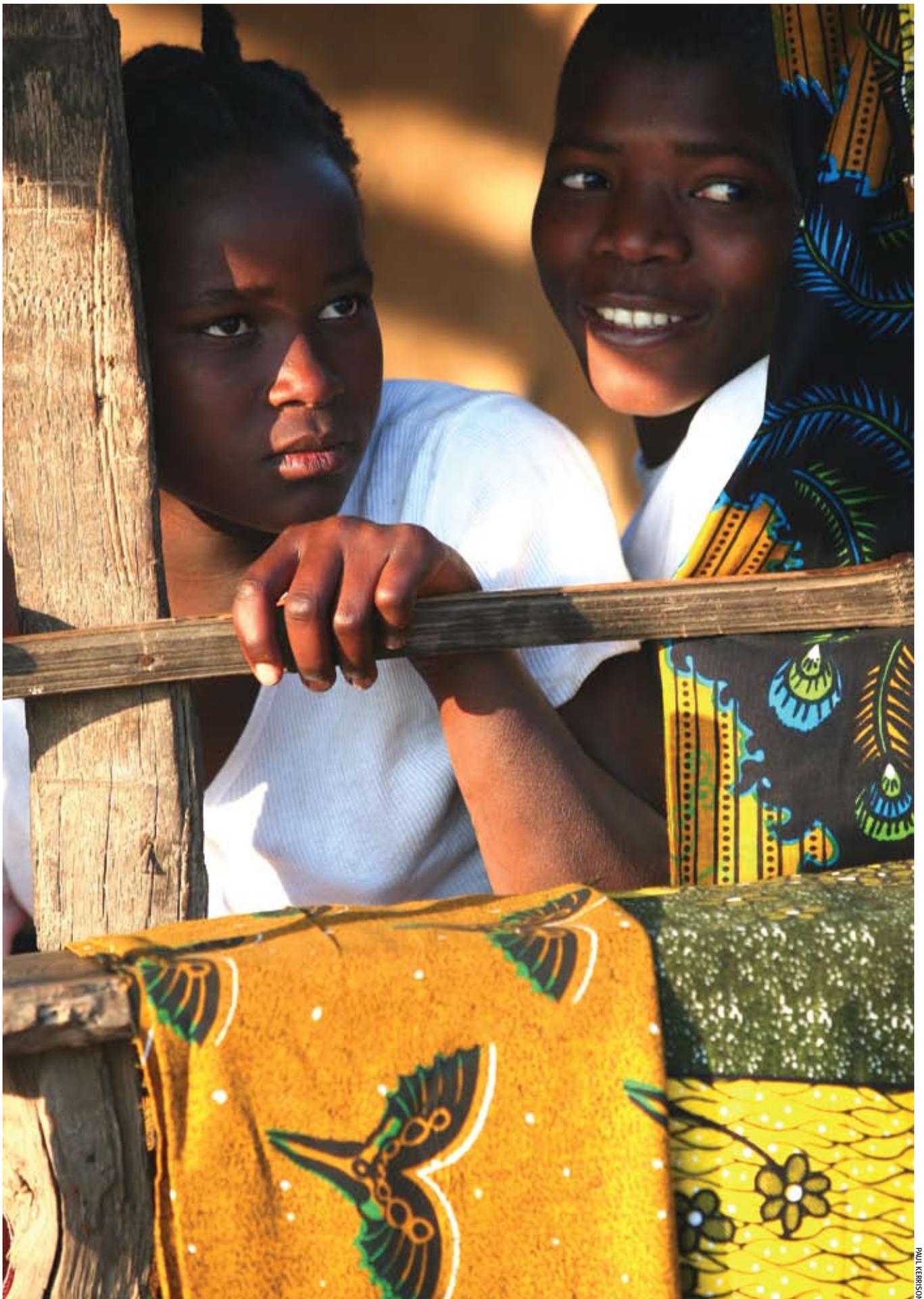
Carr is quick to name others involved with Gorongosa; he feels their stories should be told, rather than the focus being on him. “Let's look at some of the other interesting actors in the equation: Mateus Mutemba, our Community Relations Director, in his mid-30s, his grandfather was killed fighting their war of independence; Carlos Pereira, Director of Conservation, born and raised in Mozambique, suffered through the war. The idea of somebody who was born and raised in a war-torn country who is now restoring it, is every bit as interesting as some American who showed up here. I had every opportunity in the world in my own life; these guys had to fight for it.”

What comes across constantly in our conversation is Carr's respect for the local people who work with him, to the extent that he plans to reduce his input over the next ten years. “The Mozambican leaders in Gorongosa don't need me to make their decisions. Sure, a handful of foreigners showed up initially and there was some international intervention, but we've moved beyond that now. I have great confidence in the Mozambicans. They know their own land, their own laws, their own culture, and they are proud of their national park. I think it's good if Mozambicans stand up and say 'Gorongosa is a world treasure. We love it. We'll take care of it.' That is what's happening now.”

One thing is certain, if they have just a fraction of Carr's passion for Gorongosa, then its future is in very safe hands. 🐾



PAUL KERNSON



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