

MASTER STORY TELLER

Over five decades writer **Brian Jackman** has consistently banged the drum for his beloved continent and the preservation of its wildlife and landscapes — his life's work bearing witness to the monumental advances in conservation, including the rise of ecotourism, as well as inspiring the next generation of travel writers. With his latest book, *Lion Song*, set to be published in March, **Sue Watt** chats to the acclaimed author about his lifelong love affair with Africa.

Q WITH OVER 50 YEARS OF AFRICAN TRAVEL, WHICH TOP THREE PLACES WOULD YOU RECOMMEND TO OUR READERS?

That's so difficult. Number one would have to be Namiri Plains, among all the kopjes and short grass savannah of eastern Serengeti. You can't beat its classic sense of space and distant horizons that go on forever.

Second, South Luangwa. There's nowhere better for leopards than Kaingo Camp — you'll see them for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And Mwamba is a divine little bush camp with a hide where lions, leopards and elephants come to drink.

And third, Botswana's Okavango

Five', but all around there's everything else, including an unbelievable number of wonderful birds. Get to know them and listen to the sounds of Africa.

Q YOU'VE BEEN WRITING ABOUT ECOTOURISM LONG BEFORE IT WAS A BUZZWORD — YOU MUST HAVE SEEN HUGE CHANGES?

Yes, especially in terms of going from trophy hunting to shooting with cameras. My dad used to bring books from the library written by old-time hunters of Africa. I wanted to see the elephants, lions, leopards and everything else but couldn't afford it.

Fortunately, in the 1970s, *The Sunday Times* editor Harold Evans employed me

Q DO YOU FEEL OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE FOR CONSERVATION?

I am hugely confident that if we guarantee the security of national parks and those special areas, then the iconic species and everything living in their shadow can endure. We've seen the success of bringing back leopards from the brink, after they were hunted for their skins, and elephants surviving the Ivory Wars, when places such as Tsavo became no-go areas.

That's turned around now and we owe such a debt to conservationist Iain Douglas-Hamilton, who spearheaded the opposition. I'm supremely confident that elephants will continue to be a part of Africa's wild places.

Q WHICH CONSERVATION PROJECTS HAVE MEANT THE MOST TO YOU?

I'm a passionate supporter of Douglas-Hamilton's Save the Elephants charity. Reporting for *The Sunday Times* on the fight to stop the Ivory Wars was so important to me. As was publicising the importance of the Mara conservation areas. They've been a big part of my life.

I also reported on the demise of Joy Adamson in Kenya, through which I had the good fortune to meet conservationists

Everything I've written has been a conservation crusade, begging people to go there

Delta, either Duba Plains with fantastic encounters of lions hunting buffalo, or Little Vumbura for its lovely combination of Land Rovers and *mokoro*.

I also love Naboisho in the Mara Conservancies, especially Kicheche Valley — probably my favourite camp in Africa.

Q DO YOU HAVE ANY NUGGETS OF WISDOM FOR FIRST-TIME TRAVELLERS TO AFRICA?

Learn some basic words of the local language to help break the ice. The indigenous Africans get into your head and you get into theirs: it's a lovely way of opening up a world outside your own.

Also, be prepared to be stunned. People want to see the so-called 'Big

as a travel writer. The first green shoots of environmental concern and conservation were poking through, and he realised what was happening but the word 'ecotourism' hadn't been coined yet.

So, I was there from the start and watched it evolve to today, where the survival of national parks and wild places is utterly dependent on well-managed ecotourism. It's now a huge industry, providing thousands of jobs. There's also more awareness of the importance of communities, and the Mara Conservancies are a classic example. The Maasai strike a deal with tourism operators to operate on their land, and they both benefit. It's a win-win situation.

George Adamson and Tony Fitzgerald. I remember George saying: "Who will raise their voice for lions when my own voice is carried away on the wind?" And over the years, I've tried to respond to that, to do my best for lions.

Q HOW CAN READERS BEST CONTRIBUTE TO CONSERVATION?

Simply by going to Africa. Tourist dollars help to underpin the whole show. If it's well run, it's the only way wildlife and wild places pay their way without destroying them. The dollars you spend filter back into the system; they pay for jobs for local people, and they keep the speculators, the hunters and poachers out of the parks.

ILLUSTRATION BY ASHLEIGH RIX



Q OF THE BOOKS YOU'VE WRITTEN, WHICH MEAN THE MOST TO YOU?

My new book, *Lion Song*, will be my last one for Africa. There's a line in it: "From childhood dreams to conservation crusade." Everything I've written has been a conservation crusade, begging people to go there. I'm so pleased I can go out with a shout instead of a whisper.

But the story I've been involved with most has been in the Mara and the years I spent with Jonathan Scott when we produced *The Marsh Lions*. It's about more than lions though, it's a hymn to the wonder of a very beautiful part of Africa.

Q AND WHAT THREE BOOKS WOULD YOU SAY BEST CONVEY THE SPIRIT OF AFRICA?

That's a tough call. Foremost has to be

Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*. Second, *Hunting with the Moon* by Derek and Beverly Joubert — it's Botswana most beautifully described. And third, *Among the Elephants* by Iain Douglas-Hamilton.

Q WHAT TIPS WOULD YOU GIVE TO BUDDING AFRICA WRITERS ABOUT CREATING GOOD DESCRIPTIVE STORIES?

When I was growing up, Henry Williamson's book *Tarka the Otter* got me going as a naturalist and conservationist. The sheer beauty of his writing was so lyrical and descriptive. So, with *The Marsh Lions* what I was really writing was *Tarka the Lion*.

Study the writers you love, like I did with Williamson and Laurie Lee. You're not copying them, but, gradually, you

absorb the way they write into your soul, until you find your own voice and you've got the air under your wings and you're doing it by yourself.

Q FINALLY, HOW WOULD YOU SUM UP WHAT AFRICA MEANS TO YOU?

It's the variety of wildlife and abundance — think of two million wildebeest, just for starters. And the space and distance — driving across the Serengeti to a horizon so immense and far away, it looks like the end of the Earth. You only have that in Africa.

Finally, the people — they have such big smiles and are so warmly welcoming. A lot of my friends are Maasai, and I think they understand that when it comes to Africa, lions and Maasai, I get it. I'm just so grateful for the life I've had there.