

The Elephant Whisperer

Jennifer Crawford received the sad news about Lawrence Anthony's death just after she finished writing her article. One of the last to interview him, she re-wrote before print because everything had changed.

I sit staring at a blank Word document glowing on my laptop with the hum of the air conditioner stealing the silence. I've deleted my story, on deadline. I close my eyes. I see his herd of elephant trumpeting, flinging their rumpled trunks from side to side in distress, kicking up the dust and then slowly, mournfully carrying their great bulk up to the lodge to pay their last respects to one of their own – Lawrence Anthony. Oh, his beloved elephants would know of his death. Readers of his book, *The Elephant Whisperer* would understand this.

Lawrence was an extraordinary man whose controversial plans to stop rhino poaching would have made a powerful difference – and may still. His next book, *The Last Rhinos*, is due out in weeks. Hollywood has been chasing him to make a movie of *The Elephant Whisperer*.

I'm far from the beauty of Thula Thula Game Reserve, two hours north of Durban, where I'd recently been and spent time with Lawrence and his wife Françoise. I'd returned. I finished writing the story the very night he died. The early morning call left me shocked and deeply sad. I read through the story I'd written after receiving the news. I delete it because it was about Thula Thula, the luxury tents, the chalets around the lodge, the cuisine, the game drives. It seemed trivial now. The story needed to be about Lawrence, only.

He was a writer who feared neither the truths that had to be spoken nor the action that needed to be taken when it came to conservation. He was a tall man with a dense beard who wore glasses and a peak cap. He had a gentle way, but was one of the fiercest conservation warriors.

His last book, *The Last Rhinos* is about his efforts in the Congo. In 2007 he went deep into the jungles of the Democratic Republic of Congo to meet with leaders of the notorious 'Lord's Resistance Army' (LRA) a Ugandan rebel group involved in a twenty-year war with the Ugandan government. He was the first outsider to be granted permission to enter the LRA's secret jungle bases.

During his time living with the LRA, he addressed the entire military high command on the need for peace. He reinforced previous agreements reached in Juba Southern Sudan with the political wing of the LRA to protect the critically endangered northern white rhino and the Congo pygmy giraffe and grant indemnity to conservationists and game rangers in the war zone.

This created an international legal precedent as the first time an agreement between warring parties on nature and environmental protection had been submitted as an official document to United Nations sponsored peace talks.

Lawrence worked in his own country too, working extensively with communities and their leaders, achieving many conservation milestones and was in the

midst of numerous projects.

Commenting on this new book, he'd said: "The new book, yes, well it is going to cause a few problems perhaps. It is controversial, but I operate that way. What has to be done has to be done."

The book is due to be released at a gala dinner, also a fund-raiser, where President Jacob Zuma is said to be a guest of honour. At the time of going to press the dinner was still set to be held. The funds were going into anti-rhino poaching. When I asked him what for, specifically he told me:

"I operate unconventionally. The rhino poaching is riddled with corruption at the highest levels. South Africa has outstanding investigators, they need to be employed, be independent, and the corruption can be cracked. This will change the situation completely. I intend to use the money to fund the investigations and set up an anonymous tip-off line."

I don't know who is going to take up the cudgels and assume enough work was in place for it still to happen. Lawrence acted on instinct and with courage. In 2003 at the height of the US invasion of Iraq, he stepped into this war zone to save the animals from the Baghdad Zoo.

We'd discussed the legalisation of trade in rhino horn, and of legal hunting. His views were clear.

"I fully understand that legal hunting has served its conservation purpose in creating more land for animals.