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Richard Leakey in Sanders Theatre: 'How can we introduce thinking that puts a dollar value on nature, and on natural beauty?' Leakey asked. 'Why should a Picasso be worth \$40 million, appreciating every year,' when the Serengeti isn't? (Staff photo by Stephanie Mitchell)

**HARVARD GAZETTE ARCHIVES****Leakey: Save the Serengeti***Kenyan discusses desperate need for funding for Africa's wildlife***By Elizabeth Gehrman**

Special to the Gazette

In his introductory remarks at a lecture Sunday night (April 21) sponsored by the Museum of Natural History (HMNH) at Sanders Theatre, Mellon Professor of the Sciences and Pellegrino University Professor *Emeritus* E.O. Wilson called Richard Leakey "a heroic figure" whose "life is an

epic." He briefly recounted Leakey's bio: The son of the paleoanthropologists Louis and Mary Leakey, as a young man Leakey "switched to the family business - namely discovering fossils in East Africa that illuminate African animal history and the early evolutionary history of the human species." He went on to become director of the National Museums of Kenya and of the Kenya Wildlife Service; to lead the ban on the ivory trade; to raise \$150 million for wildlife conservation; and - despite an airplane crash that cost him both his legs but "scarcely slowed him down" - to be appointed head of Kenya's civil service and secretary of the cabinet.

"He did all this, I'm embarrassed to admit," Wilson said, "without ever attending Harvard."

Leakey, one of the world's best-known conservationists, was in town to collect the Roger Tory Peterson Medal, established in 1997 by the HMNH to keep alive the memory of Peterson, a naturalist who pioneered modern field-guide writing and is often credited with having done more than any other 20th century American to kindle public interest in and concern for the natural world. After University Marshal Richard Hunt presented the award, whose past recipients include Wilson and former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, Leakey delivered an extemporaneous lecture on "National parks: Do they have a place in conservation strategies for the 21st century?"

His answer to that question was an emphatic yes - "perhaps more so today than at any time since the first national park was created in this country" in 1872. He pointed out that with the exception of the United States and a few other Western nations, most countries' national parks are operating under pressures so enormous that their very existence is threatened. "If we do not protect the national parks and other protected areas in the tropics and parts of the developing world," he said, "they could well be gone within the next two decades."

That's a startling concept to many Americans, who take for granted the continued preservation of natural areas such as Yellowstone, Acadia, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon, which are seen as a kind of cherished birthright. But the story of national parks in Kenya is quite a different one.

The first was created there just after World War II, during a time when officers and soldiers were being given virgin-land grants. "There was as much wildlife in many areas beyond the boundaries of the park as there was within the park," said Leakey - until Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963. At that time, the parks began to attract tourism, he said, "but more importantly some of the areas adjacent to the national parks began to attract a new settler, the indigenous person who was now being given land" in crucial buffer and migration zones. This created virtual "islands" of lush habitat surrounded by human activity.

Blacks in Kenya began to complain that they had not been consulted when the parks were established. Large tracts of land had been taken away from the people who now needed it, who were suffering from famine and "a shortage of everything," Leakey said. The land was given for the benefit of the animals. "And who benefits from the animals," he asked, but again, North Americans and Europeans.

Government officials in Kenya, he said, are aware of the advantages of nature tourism - 80 percent of the country's GDP is derived from it. But "the people who are expected today to live in harmony with this wildlife," Leakey said, "have a very different expectation of life than their ancestors did 50 years ago or 100 years ago. Today, people want resources to send their daughters and sons to college, to university - even, some would say, to Harvard. Is it realistic to expect zebras and wildebeests and cheetahs to generate enough money for all these families to have that aspiration?"

"People expect to get treatment for disease, they expect access for certain procedures, they expect roads, they expect security. They demand things that cost money, and these little national parks, some smaller than others, cannot possibly generate enough money through tourism to sustain themselves in terms of management costs, and to provide a meaningful contribution to the livelihood of the people who live around them.

"Expectations that were being met are no longer being met, and a sort of benign acceptance [of the parks] has turned to a very pointed dislike, and disgust for the broken promises that the wildlife managers have offered." The problem is compounded by tribal affinities that are put ahead of national interest, by climactic changes caused by global warming, and by management difficulties such as the lack of wildlife corridors and deforestation from elephant overpopulation in some parks.

Because the people of Kenya are "increasingly encouraged to change governments through democratic election" and politicians have begun to pander to their wishes, the chances of the parks' survival are "very slim" unless something is done immediately.

"A country like Kenya will never be able to afford," said Leakey, "for many many years to come, to take public money to sustain conservation." One idea, of course, is that nature tourism can pay. "But what happens," Leakey asked, "when the people don't come because they've lost their nerve to fly?" Since the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, Kenya has lost roughly 45 to 50 percent of its tourism dollars. Ground patrols to protect elephants from poachers have been cut, aircraft have been grounded, and money for bridges and fences has dried up.

"How can we introduce thinking that puts a dollar value on nature, and on

natural beauty?" Leakey asked. "Why should a Picasso be worth \$40 million, appreciating every year," when the Serengeti isn't? He noted that in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania combined, tourism revenues and monies from nongovernment organizations fall below what it actually costs to run the national parks and protected areas by a mere \$20 million to \$30 million annually.

Leakey hopes that by March 2003 he will be ready to present his case and begin an endowment fund to protect the majestic animals that once roamed freely. "Because when the areas have gone," he said, "gone under the plow, under settlement, under residential properties, they cannot be brought back. And one of the great parts of the global heritage will be lost for all time."



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