



# Heart of darkness

**K**arl Ammann is more than an award-winning wildlife photographer. He is also a conservation activist who has alerted the world to the horrors of the bush meat trade that is wiping out whole colonies of Africa's great apes. Among numerous awards, Karl won the World in our Hands category of the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year award five years in a row, from 1996 to 2000.

He first came to Africa more than 30 years ago and spent years in the Masai Mara and Serengeti making what he calls 'world in order' images of the wildlife which present an image of harmony in the wilderness. It is an image

that he says is now largely a myth. Karl feels much of the blame lies with photographers, film-makers, media editors and conservationists.

In 1988, he realised the full scale of the bush meat trade when travelling on one of the huge Zaire River boats through the jungles of central Africa. At journey's end he counted 2,004 smoked primate carcasses and around a thousand more fresh ones, stored in special bush meat freezers. This encounter changed the way he worked, as he used his camera to show the grisly realities of man's mistreatment of wildlife and the environment. Some of his pictures aren't pretty.

**KEITH WILSON** How does someone with a degree in economics and another in hotel management end up becoming a professional wildlife photographer?

**KARL AMMANN** By deciding that there might be other things to life than a career and making money. In my case, I actually played it pretty safe and built a luxury tourist camp in the Masai Mara which allowed me to effectively employ my hotel background and at the same time spend every day – when making my regular visits to the camp – several of the best

**ABOVE** One of Karl Ammann's 'world in order' images: two elephants silhouetted against a sunset sky in the Masai Mara, Kenya



## INTERVIEW

KARL AMMANN

photography hours in the bush. In retrospect, I got involved and promoted the kind of eco-tourism which today I would classify as part of the problem.

**KW** Tell me about your first impressions of Africa and of the wildlife you encountered?

**KA** It was more the wide open spaces which was something quite different from Switzerland. Then the cloud formations; there was the feeling of being a lot closer to the sky than in any other part of the world I had lived. Along with the wildlife, it was a combination which attracted me from day one onwards.

**KW** At what point did you decide that a future as a wildlife photographer was better than as an economist?

**KA** After I sold my share holding in the Masai Mara camp and had enough in the bank for a new start, knowing that I could always go back into the hotel/consultancy business.

**KW** Who were the photographers that you most admired when starting out?

**KA** In the early days there was a German photographer who I got to know when he came to Nairobi after some long stints in the Serengeti or the Ngorongoro Crater. His name is Reinhard Kuenkel and he was one of the first to push the envelope with his photography. There were artistic aspects incorporated which up to then I had rarely seen in any coffee table book.

*'Anybody trying to make a film about the degradation, the corruption and the rest of the environmental impact associated with mass tourism will soon learn that it is not what the editors are looking for. It is not sellable'*

**KW** What were the most important lessons you learned from other photographers?

**KA** I studied a wide range of the coffee table titles on display in various Nairobi bookshops. I tried to figure out why some of the pictures had more appeal than others and what the photographer had done to achieve that appeal. At the time this did not mean sitting at the computer

and producing wildlife computer art.

**KW** When you started out did you believe that taking photographs of wild animals in their natural surroundings would genuinely help their cause, or was it more important for you to make money?

**KA** Neither. Photography was always a reason to be out there. I never became

one of the technical camera buffs. For me cameras were the tool to get images, images were the tool to justify being out there and spending time, energy and fuel to roam parts of Africa. I do not believe

**BELOW** Sprinting cheetah. Karl spent his first two years in the Masai Mara studying cheetahs. The photographs were published in his first book, *Cheetah*, in 1984



**ABOVE** The head of a mountain gorilla on a plate, a victim of the bush meat trade which Karl has been documenting since the late 1980s

that the 'world in order' wildlife photography really contributes to conservation. This is largely wishful thinking. As it stands the overcrowding of many of the national parks in eastern and southern Africa are counterproductive to the kind of Africa experience which was still there a decade ago. The wilderness in these regions is now largely gone. Today, many of these ecosystems are largely managed by man; natural selection no longer dominates. Wildlife photography and film-making have contributed to this state of affairs.

**KW** Many wildlife photographers claim to be concerned about animal welfare and conservation. What do you think is the most effective type of picture for aiding the survival of an endangered species?

**KA** Most professional wildlife photographers

need to make a buck. This is ten times easier to do with the beautiful 'world in order' images. It is then logical to pretend that this imagery will encourage others to do their share in terms of conservation, and as such it is the way to go. I feel at this stage it might achieve the opposite. Just today I read in the *East African* that the Tanzanian government has decided to upgrade the Serengeti as a major new economic area with Tarmac roads and a new airport for large jetliners, bringing bed capacity from 940 to 4,500 by 2012. That will be the end of it as far as I am concerned but it illustrates again that a good marketing job is being done in selling African safaris. The film-makers and photographers play a large part in projecting a wilderness which hardly exists today. Anybody trying to make a film about the degradation, the corruption and the rest of the environmental impact associated with mass tourism will soon learn that it is not what the editors are looking for. It is not sellable.

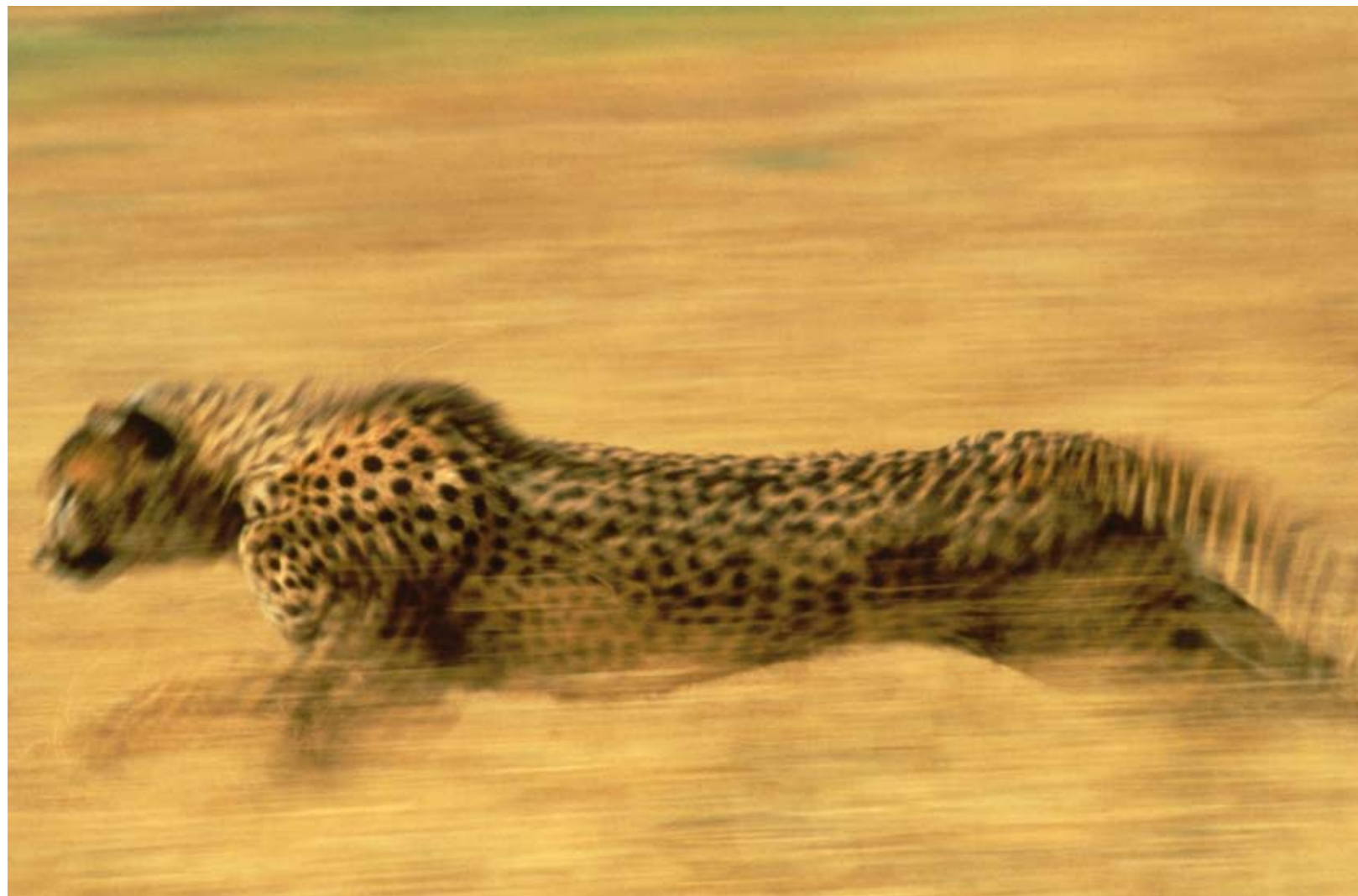
**KW** What made you decide to concentrate

on the darker side of man's mistreatment of wildlife and the environment?

**KA** It was there, I saw it on all my trips without having to look too hard. In many areas, once I started looking, things were a lot worse than I had expected. The approach of window dressing and looking the other way meant that even concerned individuals had no clue what was really going on. I felt the time had come to take away the excuse: 'I did not know...' That meant getting to the policy makers as much as the animal and nature lover.

**KW** You are renowned for documenting the brutal realities of ivory poaching and the bush meat trade. Apart from raising public awareness, is there anything more photography can do?

**KA** If editors stopped wanting to only entertain (more so with commissioning editors running the worldwide natural history channels); if the preconditions stopped being: a happy ending, a conservation success story, a hero; if photographers and film makers had the





## INTERVIEW

option to explore the darker side of what runs in the name of conservation, eco tourism and sustainable development, then maybe photography could play a role. I read a review of a coffee table elephant title the other day in which the reviewer pointed out it was like somebody having done a photographic essay of the wildflowers of Auschwitz while the Holocaust was going on. Photographer Art Wolf recently stated in an interview: 'Virtually everywhere we go there is an environmental component. We don't beat people over the head with it. We try to find good things to say, and if the news is

*'The switches have been switched and in my opinion it is too late. Basically for me the only thing left is to try to take away the excuse: 'I did not know...' from as many as I can'*

not good then we say: "There is a lot of work to be done here".'

I feel that we are missing the last chance to beat people over the head.

**KW** You have been highly critical of the methods of wildlife conservation groups, describing some as 'Band Aid Conservation'. What do you mean by that and what would be your own preferred approach?

**KA** If there were enough 'experts' advocating a radical chemo or radiotherapy, maybe there would be a chance. However, human nature will always go for the easy solution, which does not hurt. As long as the witch doctors (read NGOs) peddle their Band Aid solutions, neither the average person in the developed world, nor the policy makers will consider a drastic, new and potentially a lot more expensive approach. They have become part of the problem and not the solution, by selling the feel-good approach to conservation.

**KW** On your website you say 'the natural world is dying of a terminal cancer', which suggests it is already too late. If that really is the case, why do you keep going?

**KA** In many parts the switches have been switched and in my opinion it is too late.

I am doing much less today than a few years ago. Basically, for me, the only thing left is to try to take away the excuse: 'I did not know...' from as many as I can.

**KW** Some photographers shoot stock imagery of captive, habituated, even tame animals, which are then passed off as being shot in the wild. What do you think should be done to stop this growing practice?

**KA** As long as the picture buyers do not care because they feel the public does not care, nothing will change. Let somebody

do an exposure of what is going on in the captive animal photography circuits, let an editor of a major newspaper create some awareness. So less consumers can say they did not know...

**KW** What changes have you seen in the

**BELOW** Two young elephants playing, from Karl's 1998 book, *Little Bull: Growing up in Africa's Elephant Kingdom*

type of wildlife imagery that sells?

**KA** For many years now I have not shot much 'world in order' imagery, the type that tends to sell, and as such I have not really kept up with the market. As far as my stock goes the images which trigger an emotional response or suggest 'real wilderness' are still the images which seem to sell best. However, I am going back and doing more of the world in order images in the near future. I will go to places like Samburu and Serengeti as soon as possible as long as the ratio of wildlife versus cars is still in favour of the cars. It is going so fast it is the last chance.

**KW** So, with more than 30 years of experience as a wildlife photographer behind you, what is the single best piece of advice you would give to anyone today embarking on a career as a wildlife photographer?

**KA** Don't plan on a 30-year career. ■

■ *Karl Ammann will be speaking at the WildPhotos 2007 symposium at the Royal Geographical Society, London, 26-27 October. For more information and to purchase tickets for the event, visit [www.wildphotos.org.uk](http://www.wildphotos.org.uk)*

■ *To see more of Karl's powerful photographs visit [www.karlammann.com](http://www.karlammann.com), [www.bushmeat.com](http://www.bushmeat.com)*

