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Did American conservationists in Africa go too far?

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Elephants have their protectors in Zambia's North Luangwa National Park.

In the early nineteen-seventies, Mark and Delia Owens, two graduate students in biology at the University of Georgia, were seized by the idea of resettling in remotest Africa. They organized an auction, sold their possessions, and used the modest proceeds to buy camping equipment and a pair of one-way air tickets to Johannesburg. When they arrived, in January, 1974, Delia, the daughter of a Georgia trucking executive, was twenty-four years old. Mark, who grew up on a farm west of Toledo, Ohio, was twenty-nine, the divorced father of a four-year-old boy named Christopher.

Mark and Delia had scoured the map of Africa, searching for a site so isolated that its wildlife would have no knowledge, and no fear, of humans. They eventually found their way to a place called Deception Valley, in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana. It was a perfect spot for the Owenses to make camp. The wildlife there had not been depleted by poaching, as it had been in other parts of Africa, and though the valley was in many ways an unforgiving place—temperatures can climb above a hundred and twenty degrees in summer—it was distant enough from the capital, Gaborone, to insure that they would be left alone to do their work. The Kalahari is virtually empty of people: the Owenses later wrote of living with only “a few bands of Stone Age Bushmen in an area larger than Ireland.”

In their book “Cry of the Kalahari,” which was published in 1984, the Owenses described their dreadful living conditions: “We rationed ourselves to seven gallons of water each per week, for bathing, cooking, and drinking. The water from the drums tasted like hot metallic tea, and to cool it for drinking, we filled tin dinner plates and set them in the shade of the acacia. But if we didn’t watch it closely, the water would quickly evaporate or collect bees, twigs, and soil. After washing the dishes, we took sponge baths in the dishwater, then strained the coffee-colored liquid through a cloth into the truck’s radiator.”

Despite penury, loneliness, and drought, they established a viable research station, and, over several years, they gained the trust of several prides of lions and clans of brown hyenas. In the manner of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Joy and George Adamson, the Owenses spent thousands of hours recording the smallest details of their subjects’ behavior. Early on, Mark Owens went to South Africa to learn how to pilot small airplanes, and the Frankfurt Zoological Society, which became the Owenses’ most important sponsor, gave him money for a single-engine Cessna. He used the plane to make aerial surveys of the Kalahari’s wildlife, and he and Delia conducted close observation of the social life of hyenas, learning about their surprisingly communal behavior. By writing about the exploits of these predators in vivid and accessible prose, they attracted popular attention and funding for their work. They cultivated reporters who came to Deception Valley, and told their story not as one simply of carnivore research but as a tale of young love in a hard land.

In “Kalahari Romance,” an article Mark Owens published in *International Wildlife*, he described his ideal day: “We land in the grass, most likely in a place never visited by modern man, and sleep in the open under the wing. Now and then we wake to watch the gentle sweep of the Southern Cross through the sky. Knowing that no one on Earth knows where we are, or could ever find us, we feel special, as if we are the only two people in the universe.”

But eventually the complexities of the human world would intrude. One day, while flying over the central Kalahari, Mark Owens came across an enormous migration of wildebeest. He followed the path of the migration until, to his bewilderment, the animals suddenly stopped. Stretched before them was a steel-wire fence, more than a hundred miles long, erected by the government of Botswana to prevent the spread of foot-and-mouth disease to the country’s cattle. Many animals had died of dehydration, and carcasses were strewn on the ground. As the surviving wildebeest funnelled along the fence in search of water, they entered a hunting area, where poachers lay in wait. As Owens looked on, the poachers killed animals en masse.

“We watched through binoculars as the slaughter continued along the shore,” Owens wrote in “Cry of the Kalahari.” “Trembling with rage, I pushed the control wheel forward and we plunged toward the lakeshore. The poachers were preoccupied with their butchery and did not see the aircraft until it was at ground level, roaring across the plain toward them at 160 miles an hour.”

Mark and Delia urged government ministers and game-management officials to protect the animals, but their pleas were rejected. “Almost everyone we knew told us to forget it. ‘Cattle is too big an industry; you’ll never get them to take down the fences,’ ” they wrote. “Since no one within the country would listen to our recommendations, we decided to try to publicize the issue worldwide, to enlist the support of prominent people outside the country who perhaps could encourage the Botswana government to review the problem.”

One day, government officials in Gaborone summoned Mark and Delia to a meeting. When they arrived, they were told that they were being expelled from the country. Botswana was a major exporter of beef to Europe, and the government was embarrassed by the Owenses’ campaign. According to Jonathan S. Adams and Thomas O. McShane’s book “The Myth of Wild Africa,” Quett Masire, the President of Botswana at the time, said of the Owenses, “If you cannot operate within the bounds of government, whom you are a guest of in this country, to work these issues out, then work elsewhere.”

The Owenses felt roughly handled. Mark Owens later told *People*, “They fingerprinted us, threatened us, treated us like criminals. We weren’t allowed to call the Embassy or get a lawyer. We lost everything. It took a lot of healing to get over it.” By then, the Owenses had finished their graduate studies (Mark earned an M.Ed. and Delia a Ph.D.) and gained some renown for their work. After they returned to the U.S., they enlisted a number of politicians—several congressmen; Andrew Young, then the mayor of Atlanta; and Vice-President George H. W. Bush—to lobby the government of Botswana to reverse its decision. Months passed before Botswana did so, and in the

meantime the Owenses searched for another game park in which they could continue their research on large mammals.

In the Northern Province of Zambia they discovered a place that seemed to fit their needs. The North Luangwa National Park, named for the river that forms its eastern boundary, is twenty-four hundred square miles of mopane forests, grasslands, leadwood and sausage trees, and lagoons filled with hippos and crocodiles. Outside its borders is more wilderness, thousands of square miles of forests and plains inhabited, like the park, by a great range of Africa's most extraordinary mammals. The profusion of wildlife has made the Luangwa Valley a dangerous place for humans. Each year, crocodiles, elephants, and lions kill dozens of people who live in the mud-hut villages that are scattered across the region.

By the time the Owenses arrived, in 1986, North Luangwa was, in their telling, a national park in name only, undeveloped, unvisited, unguarded, and inaccessible by vehicle for much of the year because of flooding. Mark Owens said of the park, "Here's where civilization ends." In a lecture at the National Geographic Society, in Washington, D.C., in 2006, he described the challenge of settling in North Luangwa. "We had to first survey a way in from the air. And we found an old poachers' route that snaked its way down the three-thousand-foot Muchinga Escarpment," he said. "So we set about doing that . . . encountering creeks and rivers and streams, of course, that had to be crossed. And no way to cross except these footbridges."

In "The Eye of the Elephant," the book the Owenses published in 1992 about their experience in Zambia, they described the moment they realized that they could find contentment in North Luangwa. They were visiting the confluence of the Mwaleshi and Luangwa Rivers for the first time. "The floodplains near and far are spotted with wild animals: six hundred buffalo grazing across a grassy plain; fifty zebras ambling toward the river to drink; a herd of waterbuck lying on a sandbar downstream," Mark wrote. "Where the two rivers join is a large pool crowded with a hundred hippos, their piggy eyes on us, their nostrils blowing plumes of water in the setting sun as they twiddle their ears. After our tangle with the bramble and the broken woodland, Africa has won us back."

But within days of making the torturously slow descent from the escarpment down to the river basin, they found evidence of rampant poaching. In "The Eye of the Elephant," in which Delia and Mark write alternating chapters, Mark Owens told of a terrible discovery:

"Mark, look over there!" I stop the truck and we walk to a thin grove of trees near the edge of the dead woodland. Five elephant skulls, bone white and half the size of bathtubs, are scattered about the area with pelvises, leg bones, ribs, shoulder blades, and other remains. Horrified, we notice skeletons lying everywhere: one here, five over there, six there.

"The bastards!" I kick the dust. . . .

Now we understand why we have not seen a single living elephant, or a sign of one, in the eight days since we entered the park. We are standing in the midst of a killing field. . . . Although we have not yet run into poachers, it must be only a matter of time until we do. There will be no ignoring them, running from them, pretending they do not exist. If we stay here to work, we will have to do something about them.

When they finally did see a small family of elephants, by a river, they noticed their skittishness. "The elephants are so frightened by humans that they will not drink," Mark wrote. "At this moment, in August of 1986, we pledge to each other: no matter what it takes, or how long, we will stay in North Luangwa until the elephants come to drink at the river in peace."

In the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties, there was a spike in the killing of Africa's savanna elephants, caused largely by increased demand in Asia for ivory carvings. In 1979, there were about a million three hundred thousand elephants in Africa; ten years later, the population had fallen by half. By the late eighties, some countries, including Kenya, had found the problem serious enough to institute a shoot-to-kill policy, allowing poachers to be shot on sight. Zambia, which had no such official policy, was heavily afflicted by poaching. Its central government was corrupt in places, and ineffective at policing the country's distant corners. For poachers, North Luangwa's isolation made it a favored hunting ground.

Hunters had always taken game in North Luangwa, but they mainly "shot for the pot," killing animals to feed their families. Until the arrival of the British, in the early nineteen-hundreds, there were several villages of the Bisa and Bemba tribes in the North Luangwa wilderness. The animals that lived among them—wildebeest, warthogs,

impala, elephants, and buffalo—were their only source of protein; livestock could not coexist with the tsetse flies that are endemic to the area. The British expelled the villagers from the valley in order to create the game reserve, but the Bisa and Bemba, who were relocated to the Muchinga Escarpment, continued to visit the park, to hold religious ceremonies at tribal burial sites and to hunt on ancestral lands. These hunters, like many in Zambia, did not consider what they did poaching, and they resented the imposition of Western notions of animal welfare and animal rights on their societies.

But the ivory boom in Asia brought commercial poachers to Luangwa. They included Zambians and foreigners, some of them veterans of the region's many civil wars and insurgencies, and typically employed local villagers as shooters, trackers, and carriers. These large-scale poachers, who shot for ivory, for rhino horn, and for the "bush meat" markets in the cities, were armed with AK-47s and other automatic weapons, and operated in large groups. They were the ones mainly responsible for the decimation of North Luangwa's elephant population.

Alexandra Fuller, the author of "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood," and a friend of the Owenses, said that the nineteen-seventies and eighties were a devastating time for Zambia's wildlife. "There were lorries coming out of the park with hundreds of tusks," she said. "All sorts of people were funding their wars using the ivory out of the park." In 1960, the park held about seventy thousand elephants; by the nineteen-eighties, the population had been hunted almost to elimination. The Owenses estimated that by the time they arrived, in 1986, there were only five thousand elephants in the park. Ivory was priced at more than a hundred dollars a pound on the international market, and for the people around North Luangwa the elephants became, by necessity, an industry.

The Owenses established their camp on the site of an evacuated Bisa village, and named it Marula-Puku, after the marula tree and the puku, a type of antelope, both common in the area. On their way into the park, they visited the Mano game-scout station at the park's edge, not far from their camp. The station was the best equipped in the vicinity; the Owenses wrote that the four other stations around the edge of the park had only seven scouts among them and were unable even to mount patrols. But even Mano was in disarray. Only a handful of scouts were posted there, and they received little support or direction from the government. In Mark Owens's National Geographic Society presentation, he displayed a photograph of the scouts he met. They were bedraggled and unarmed. "Who could blame them when they said, 'Hey, we can't help you to go chase poachers. Are you nuts?'"

The Owenses realized that to stop the killing they would need to find employment for local people who would otherwise aid poachers. The people in the villages surrounding the park had negligible incomes and sporadic access to sources of protein. In one village, Chishala, the Owenses created a collective that gathered grass to use as roofing material for huts; they said they established good relations there, even with people who were known to have worked as carriers for commercial poachers. In "The Eye of the Elephant," they told of a gift they made to the village, from the air. "Mark swoops in low, as though he is going to land on the field, and at the last second flings a soccer ball from the plane door. It falls among the young men and children, and a game begins on the spot," Delia writes. "I can see that Mark has drawn an elephant on the ball and written, 'Play Soccer, Don't Poach Elephants!'" The soccer ball symbolized to Delia a bargain she struck with the people of Chishala: in exchange for economic aid, the villagers would promise to curtail poaching. Over time, the Owenses, raising money in the United States, built a small network of grinding mills, fishponds, and sunflower-oil presses, with the goal of weaning local people from illegal hunting, and from providing help to the battalions of commercial poachers passing through their villages on the way to the park. But one of the scouts assigned to North Luangwa soon informed the Owenses that men from Chishala were serving as meat carriers for poachers based in another village: " 'From Chishala!' I cry out," Delia wrote. "Those men we gave jobs, and the soccer ball?"

The main impediment the Owenses faced was the inertia of the scouts assigned to protect the park. The scouts were nominally under the control of Zambia's park service, but they were paid, at best, irregularly, and were in only intermittent communication with their superiors. The poachers were well armed, and the scouts were intimidated. They told Mark Owens that some of the more fearsome poachers possessed powers derived from witchcraft; they could become invisible, or ford rivers without being eaten by crocodiles. The realization came to Mark Owens that he should help lead the scouts himself. This prompted strong disagreements with his wife: "He believes that we

should get personally involved—flying patrols, airlifting scouts, going on antipoaching foot patrols with the guards,” Delia wrote. “I argue that we should supply them with good equipment and encouragement, but we should not personally go after the poachers, for then they will come after us.” In the end, the Owenses arranged with the government to be named “honorary game rangers,” a title that, they wrote in “The Eye of the Elephant,” gave them authority over the scouts in the park.

In a 1990 profile of the Owenses published in *Sports Illustrated*, titled “Light in the Darkness,” Maryanne Vollers described the difficulties they faced: “Shuffling papers, repairing broken equipment and pampering the game scouts suck up most of the Owenses’ energy.” Vollers flew with Mark Owens as he searched the forests for poachers’ camps, and she watched as he tried to organize effective foot patrols of the park. “All the scouts have new sleeping bags, boots and rations supplied by the Owenses,” she wrote. “The lead scout tells Mark that his men cannot go on patrol because they don’t have enough cornmeal and salt. ‘You’ll go on patrol, or you’ll bloody walk out of this park!’ Mark snaps as he climbs back into the cockpit.”

To encourage the scouts, Mark devised a bounty program, in which members of teams that captured at least five poachers would receive an extra month’s pay. By this point, he was augmenting the salaries of scouts regularly. (He did so with the help of wealthy American donors, including Paul Tudor Jones, a Connecticut hedge-fund manager who established a hunting preserve nearby in the late nineteen-eighties.) Still, motivation was a problem. “Mark and I have the authority to order the scouts on patrol,” Delia wrote. “But we do not want to command them; we want them to come on their own.”

The Owenses’ other work—funding modest businesses, beginning a program to educate children about the wildlife near their villages—seemed to be paying more impressive dividends. Vollers quoted Delia as saying, “Imagine us walking into these primitive villages where the children are hungry, and saying: ‘If you stop shooting wild animals, tourists from America will come, and you’ll have jobs and food.’ We thought they’d look at us like we were crazy. But they’ve caught on.”

By the early nineties, the park showed substantial signs of recovery. The Owenses, operating out of the park and out of an office in Mpika, the largest town in the area, had trained, fed, clothed, and armed about sixty motivated scouts in the park. Their small industries kept people employed. Medical care for the villagers had also improved; over time, the Owenses supplied clinics, held workshops in AIDS prevention, and trained traditional birth attendants. The most significant advance, though, came from outside the park. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species voted to ban the selling of African elephant parts. As legal importation became impossible and legitimate dealers abandoned the business, the price of ivory dropped by as much as ninety-six per cent. The number of poached elephants in North Luangwa decreased, too; the Owenses reported twelve dead elephants in 1991, compared with a thousand the year they arrived.

Still, poachers continued to infiltrate the park, and to the Owenses they seemed more dangerous than ever. Word reached them that one band of commercial poachers had targeted them for assassination, blaming them for ruining their business. These threats—and the shooting of an elephant near their camp—provoked Mark to intensify his antipoaching activities. For some time, he had made regular night flights over the park, in search of meat-drying racks and the campfires of poachers; he would fly low, intentionally backfiring the plane and frightening away the hunters. Now he decided to escalate his efforts. In his National Geographic lecture, he explained his new tactics:

We received a radio message that Bernard Mutondo [one of the commercial poachers] was coming to camp to shoot elephants, to kill them. . . . That evening I went to the airstrip with Kasokola, my most trusted assistant. And I took the door off the airplane and turned the right-hand seat around and strapped him in, with a shotgun across his lap. No, this wasn’t loaded with conventional ammunition. It was loaded with a special shell that shoots firecrackers. . . . It shoots cherry bombs, honestly. And it projects these to one hundred yards, and they go off with a tremendous roar and a flash of light and smoke and everything. And they’re perfectly harmless—farmers use these things to scare marauding animals away from their crops . . . but of course poachers wouldn’t know that.

Owens finally found Mutondo’s camp, along the Mwaleshi River. As he flew by, he said, the poachers fired on the plane with AK-47s, but he decided to circle back:

As we came in the second time, Kasokola was ready, and we put the first firecracker straight into the campfire. I was so proud of

him. And it blew up and it blew burning embers into Mutondo's nice new tent. And it went up in a sheet of flame. And there were a few more exchanges of gunfire, him shooting at me with an AK and us shooting back with firecrackers. But they eventually dropped everything and took off like rats. And this was so successful that we went on to raid other camps with firecrackers that night and for many nights after that.

Mark's night flying strained his health, and his marriage. "I am two hours overdue by the time I get back to Marula-Puku," he wrote. "Delia meets me at the workshop, her face pale with worry. 'Mark, where have you been? I was about to call out a search.' 'I've been out counting dead elephants, where else!' Slamming the door of the truck, I stomp off to the kitchen for a cup of black coffee. For some time I have been living out of my coffee cup, drinking a brew so strong it is like a thin syrup. The caffeine gives me the kick and the courage to do what I have to do, but increasingly it is running my brain and my mouth. My fuse is very short." Gordon Streeb, a former U.S. Ambassador to Zambia, recalled Mark's devotion to the animals. "When I was there, he would take the airplane up in the dark. He was determined to win this battle," Streeb said. "Part of his mystique was that he was Rambo-ish—he would scare the hell out of the poachers. He was hellbent, he was so obsessed with getting rid of the poachers."

Delia wrote that she told Mark, "I'm not sure this is worth dying for anymore. If your dying would change anything, then maybe it would be. But it won't. And I don't want you to die for nothing! I want to stop the poaching as much as you do, but you've crossed over the line, and I can't go on like this." She moved out of Marula-Puku and established her own camp on the banks of the Luangwa, a four-hour drive away.

Over time, Mark and Delia reconciled, and she returned to Marula-Puku. Mark also was able to see his son more often. Christopher Owens had been raised in Maine by his mother and stepfather; in his early twenties, he began spending summers at Marula-Puku. He was strongly built—six feet tall and two hundred and forty pounds—and a martial-arts expert. His father assigned him to teach the scouts hand-to-hand combat.

As Mark and Delia grew close again, they began collaborating on "The Eye of the Elephant." It was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1992, and brought them a new level of attention. In 1994, they received a call from Janice Tomlin, a producer for the ABC news-magazine show "Turning Point." Tomlin had seen the Owenses interviewed on the "Tonight Show" and was taken with their story. She met them in New York, and they agreed to participate in a documentary about elephant poaching.

ABC dispatched a crew to North Luangwa in 1994, led by a producer named Andrew Tkach, with Deborah Amos as the reporter. Tkach returned in the summer of 1995, with Meredith Vieira in Amos's place. The episode aired nationally on March 30, 1996. The hour-long show, titled "Deadly Game: The Mark and Delia Owens Story," opened with an onscreen warning: "The following program contains some scenes of violence which might be upsetting to viewers." Diane Sawyer, who shared anchor duty on the show with Barbara Walters, introduced the broadcast from New York. "They went halfway around the world to follow a dream," Sawyer said. "An idealistic American couple—young, in love. But a strange place and time would test that love."

Mark Owens is seen early in the documentary wearing camouflage, and with a pistol at his waist. "It was like going back in time to a time before, when all was right with the earth," he says. Meredith Vieira, who is now the co-host of NBC's "Today" show, was then the chief correspondent for "Turning Point" and appears throughout the program. "This is the real Africa, the way it was two hundred years ago," Delia tells Vieira. Vieira, who is shown accompanying the Owenses on a walk to see a family of elephants, describes North Luangwa as an "uncharted wilderness," and discusses the difficulties the Owenses faced in combatting poachers: "For more than three years, the Owenses begged unsuccessfully for government support." Vieira reports that the Owenses, frustrated, decided to work around the government.

The confrontation with poachers brought troubles. Delia Owens tells Vieira that "there were several assassination teams that were sent down by poachers with the intent to kill us. I mean, lions don't frighten me nearly as much as humans." Vieira's voice-over suggests that the threats created trouble in the marriage, and Delia says of her husband, "He was just out there. I couldn't reach him anymore. He had become—he doesn't like for me to say it, but I think he had become truly obsessed."

The film cuts to Mark Owens: "To fly at night, to be shot at time and again, even to be hit, to go back up and

keep doing it night after night without—without a military to support you, knowing that you’re ruining your marriage—”

Delia Owens says, “I kept saying to Mark, ‘If you die, then we’re going to lose everything. Then we won’t be able to save the park.’ I was so sick with worry. And you shouldn’t love anybody that much, but I did, so I just reached the point I just couldn’t take that anymore.”

The documentary suggests that the conflict between scouts and poachers had grown violent. Mark Owens is seen supervising the scouts’ firearms training, and at various points in the broadcast he carries a pistol, a hunting rifle, and an AR-15 automatic rifle. Later, he orders his scouts, “If you see poachers in the national park with a firearm, you don’t wait for them to shoot at you. You shoot at them first, all right? That means when you see the whites of his eyes, and if he has a firearm, you kill him before he kills you, because if you let him get—if you let him turn on you with an AK-47, he’s going to cut you in two. So go out there and get them. Go get them, O.K.?”

He explains to Vieira, “I’m not comfortable at all with it. I’m absolutely uncomfortable with it. Sometimes poachers are killed and occasionally scouts have been killed.”

There is no mention in “The Eye of the Elephant” of incidents in which scouts killed poachers. But on “Turning Point” Owens says, “On some occasions, I do pick scouts up, and if they’ve killed anybody they aren’t going to tell me.”

Delia tells Vieira, “It was a moral dilemma that we had to go through. But we made the decision: Yes, we would continue to support the scouts.”

Then comes an arresting sequence, one seldom seen on national television: the killing of a human. Vieira introduces the scene: “We were allowed to accompany patrols in Zambia after we agreed not to identify those involved, should a shooting occur. On this mission, we would witness the ultimate price paid by a suspected poacher.” A game scout in a green uniform walks in what appears to be a recently abandoned campsite. A pouch on the ground contains shotgun shells, and the scout removes a few of them to show the camera. The scout waits for the person camping there, a suspected poacher, to return. A new scene begins, and Vieira continues her voice-over: “Our cameras begin rolling again after a shot is fired at the returning trespasser.”

Onscreen, the scout is shown from behind, running through brush and carrying a rifle. He approaches a man wearing a gray jacket and brown pants, lying prone in a small clearing. The man tries to move, lifting his head a few inches off the ground. The scout, his face blotted out electronically, fires a single shot at him. At this moment, a second figure is seen in the background. His face and upper body are blurred, so that even his race is obscured, but he is dressed in green and appears to be carrying a rifle. The camera turns to the wounded man, and Vieira says, in a voice-over, “The bodies of the poachers are often left where they fall for the animals to eat.” She pauses, and says, “Conservation. Morality. Africa.” Then, from offscreen, come three more shots. The camera stays focussed on the wounded man, lying on the ground. His body jerks at the first and third shots. Then it is still.

The next sequence features a conversation between Vieira and Mark Owens, who says, “It’s the reality—the messy reality, I’m afraid.” Vieira responds, “It is. It’s very messy. It almost gives conservation a very ugly name.” Owens replies, “But that’s the reality. It’s ugly why? Is it ugly because of the elephants? They haven’t done anything wrong. It’s people who make it ugly.”

Vieira asks, “Do you feel that sometimes an animal’s life is worth more than a human’s life?”

Owens answers, “Worth more to whom? The elephant or the person? Ask the elephant. And ask the human. You’ll get two different answers.” In a voice-over, Vieira says, “Mark Owens calls it a ‘hardening of the human spirit,’ the ultimate price he has paid to work here.” The film returns to Owens, who says, “It’s a very dirty game. It’s a measure of the desperation of the situation, I think.”

Vieira does not indicate whether she, her producer, and her cameraman tried to learn the identity of the dead man, or whether he was a meat poacher, a commercial poacher, or simply a “trespasser,” as she calls him. The execution of the alleged poacher is not mentioned in the remaining twenty-five minutes of the broadcast.

The documentary was well received by critics. In the *Washington Post*, Tom Shales praised the program, as well as the work of the Owens. “Somebody has to care,” he wrote. “In this case, Mark and Delia Owens do. They

have given their lives over to a passionate campaign to save endangered African elephants.” Shales does not mention the killing of the alleged poacher, and writes that the show “makes a persuasive case for doing whatever can be done” to keep wildlife safe.

Apparently, though, “Deadly Game” did not sit well with some of the Owens’ supporters. In an April, 1996, letter to donors, Mark and Delia wrote, “We know that a few of you are concerned about some of the footage from that program, and we want to ease your minds.” They go on, “The ‘shoot to kill policy’ is only used by Zambian government Game Scouts in self defense. It is NOT a policy of our project.” They also write, “We were not involved in this incident, or in any other incident of this nature.”

In another letter, written that same month, the administrative director of the Owens Foundation, Mary Dykes, who is Delia Owens’s sister-in-law, wrote, “ABC was looking for sensationalism. They insisted on going on patrol with the game scouts alone over and over but never said what they had encountered. We were just shocked.” Dykes went on, “From what we have been able to find out about the incident, the scouts felt so protective of the unarmed camera and sound people that they killed the poacher—who was, indeed, heavily armed and, according to Zambian law, subject to ‘shoot to kill.’”

But there is no evidence in “Deadly Game” that the alleged poacher was heavily armed, or armed at all, when he was shot, and it is by no means clear that Zambia tolerated the killing of poachers. The ABC program asserted that Zambia had an unwritten shoot-to-kill policy, and the Owens later said that a former tourism minister named Christon Tembo visited the North Luangwa area shortly before the ABC crew arrived and told scouts that they could shoot poachers. But Zambia has never had a written shoot-to-kill law, and the government has stridently denied supporting such a policy informally; on occasion scouts who shot poachers have faced punishment.

When a videotape of the documentary first made its way to the Zambian government, in the summer of 1996, officials expressed consternation that the country was portrayed as a place where game scouts were allowed to preemptively kill suspected poachers. The Zambian national police launched a homicide investigation, and the Owens’ North Luangwa Conservation Project was seized by the government. The investigation, however, encountered several difficulties. The first was the absence of a body. As the current national police commissioner, Graphael Musamba, explained in an interview, “The bush is the perfect place to commit murder. We have this all the time in the Northern Province. The animals eat the evidence.”

The investigators were also hampered by the absence of the ABC cameraman and producer, who had long since left the country, and of Mark and Delia Owens themselves. They had departed on what they called a regularly scheduled leave to America in September, 1996, shortly after the videotape was seen by Zambian investigators. In their absence, the American Embassy in Lusaka took up their defense. One Embassy cable from this period, which referred to the “continuing investigation of the Owens for complicity in the alleged shooting of a poacher,” suggested skepticism about government officials in the area: “Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of vehicles, computers, equipment and supplies (virtually all donated through the Owens Foundation and the Frankfurt Zoological Society) remain at the mercy of Parks Department officials,” the cable reads. “In addition a decade of work by the Owens and their supporters has come to an end, hundreds of Zambians who worked for the project”—the cable reports that some sixty game scouts were in the Owens’ direct employ—“must now wonder how they will feed themselves, and Zambia’s North Luangwa National Park once again lies open to unrestrained poaching.”

The Owens, in what they hoped was a temporary exile in America, solicited a letter from ABC News to absolve them of responsibility for the shooting. Janice Tomlin, who first suggested the Owens as a subject for an ABC documentary, wrote to the U.S. Ambassador in Zambia, Roland Kuchel, “I have learned that the footage that was broadcast on our program of a poacher being killed has created a problem for the North Luangwa Conservation Project. I can assure you in the strongest way possible that neither Mark nor Delia Owens nor any other North Luangwa Conservation Project staff were even in the area at the time of this shooting.” Tomlin, who was not in Zambia during the filming, says that she based the letter on information from the Owens and from ABC’s producer and cameraman.

The American Embassy warned the Owens not to enter Zambia until the controversy was resolved. In a

consular memorandum of December 3, 1996, an official wrote that the Owensens “had better have ironclad assurances that they have been exonerated and that all arrangements are in place for their uneventful return before they consider such a move.” Kuchel told me that Zambia’s justice system was thoroughly corrupt, and he feared that if Mark Owens were held in a Zambian jail, he would be raped and infected with H.I.V.

In 1997, a year after “Deadly Game” was aired, Mark Owens wrote to the Zambian attorney general to clear his name. In the letter, he said that it was the ABC producer—he does not name him, but Andrew Tkach was in charge of the filming in Zambia—who insisted on filming poachers. “The producer was so desperate to find a poaching incident that, on several occasions, his own cameraman and sound technician argued openly with him, saying that he was compromising the integrity of the entire film with his obsession to find a poaching incident,” Owens wrote. “To satisfy his thirst for poaching, tour operators and safari hunters were alerted to report finding any poaching incident.”

But the person who alerted locals to look for poaching was Mark Owens. Adrian Carr, a white Zambian, is one of the leading safari operators in the valley. ABC hired his company, on the Owensens’ recommendation, to establish a camp for its crew near Marula-Puku, and Carr also supplied ABC with drivers and guides. The Owensens were once friendly with Carr—they thank him in their book “Secrets of the Savanna,” published in 2006, for his “friendship, support and dedication to the conservation of wildlife in Zambia”—but they appear to have fallen out. Carr said that at first he supported Mark Owens’s efforts to secure the park but grew concerned about his approach to wildlife conservation; the Owensens said that the relationship soured because Carr was envious of the success of their programs. In 1994, Carr recalled, in the days before filming began, Mark Owens paid him a surprise visit. “He ‘Apocalypse Now’ed into the camp with his helicopter,” he said. The ABC News crew was due in the Luangwa Valley shortly, and Owens seemed eager to provide them with dramatic footage. “He was actively trying to get some poachers for the film crew,” Carr said.

The Owensens have claimed that several of Mark’s statements in “Deadly Game” were misconstrued. They say that Mark’s instruction to scouts to kill poachers was taken out of context. At the time of the filming, Owens says, he had just learned that three corrupt policemen, dressed as scouts and armed with AK-47s, were coming to the park to kill him and any scouts they encountered.

Adrian Carr calls this claim an “overdramatization of the reality.” In his view, “It wasn’t as bad as they thought, especially when they were living behind sandbags.” He said the Owensens might have been the targets of violence “in the early days, but not toward the latter years. This is absolutely exaggerated.” And in the video Mark Owens tells the scouts, “All right, gentlemen, what we have this morning is a number of poaching pressures in the national park.” He makes no reference to policemen.

Owens also wrote, in his letter to the Zambian attorney general, that the AR-15 automatic rifle he is seen carrying in the ABC broadcast was a fake. “It was made for me in South Africa, out of wood, and it is identical in appearance to a real weapon,” he wrote. “I carried this replica in my helicopter from time to time, and let it be seen by scouts and a few captured poachers so that the word would spread that I was heavily armed and therefore not a ‘soft target.’” In the video, though, Owens, carrying the AR-15, backs the ABC crew away from an elephant as it mock-charges, and says, “We don’t want to end up having to shoot her.” When I asked Vieira about this recently, she said, “The guns looked real to me. I’d be freaked out if they weren’t real. What was he going to do if the elephant charged? Yell ‘Bang, bang?’”

In the broadcast, Owens tells Vieira, “I love life in general so much that to be brought to the point of having to extinguish human life to protect wildlife is a tremendous conflict and contradiction. But give me another solution. It’s why we still have elephants here.” He later wrote, “I was not speaking of Zambia in particular, but of Africa in general. . . . I merely stated that I regretted that humans were sometimes killed in defense of wildlife; not to imply that I was doing it, or Zambia’s game scouts were doing it.” But in another exchange Vieira asks him specifically about his work with the scouts of North Luangwa, who Owens says would not tell him if they had killed poachers. “You’re the one who’s helped the scouts reach the point where they’re capable to go in there,” she says. Owens replies, “Well, that’s true, but I’ve laid that question to rest for myself. I say, I’m not the one pulling the trigger.”

Years passed, and though no charges were brought and no warrants filed over the killing of the poacher, the Owens never returned to Zambia. Investigators there are still eager to talk to them. I recently visited the headquarters of the national police in Lusaka, where I met Biemba Musole, the deputy commissioner in charge of criminal investigations. In 1996, as a young detective, Musole had led a team of three investigators to North Luangwa, where he spent a month searching for clues about the identity of the dead man and his killer. “We knew it was difficult to recover a body, because any corpse left in the wild will be eaten, but we thought we could learn the name of the man,” Musole said. The team travelled from village to village with a generator, a television set, and a VCR, and played the ABC videotape for hundreds of villagers. “It’s wilderness up there,” he said. “To drive from one village to another takes a whole day.” Musole said he found the people in the area willing to help, and in some cases frightened and resentful toward the Owens scouts. But they still could not identify the shooting victim. “We asked in every village if someone had gone missing in the time period, but no one in the immediate surrounding villages said, ‘Yes, this is the person.’”

I told Musole that I had spent more than a month travelling across northern Zambia as well, trying to learn more about the killing. “This is a very difficult case to crack,” Musole said. A letter from the Zambian inspector general, sent in 2004, acknowledges the difficulty of the case. “I have enquired on the matter but no-one confirms the allegation of shooting,” he wrote. “A senior officer is reported to have been sent to North Luangwa to investigate the report but nothing was confirmed.” Musole said he thought he could solve the mystery if he could interview members of the ABC team and Mark and Delia Owens. When I asked if he thought the police would eventually drop their investigation, he said, “There’s no statute of limitations on murder.”

Forty miles west of the North Luangwa park is Shiwa Ng’andu, the lake of the royal crocodile. It was on these shores that, according to legend, a crocodile ate David Livingstone’s dog, and it was here, fifty years after Livingstone’s early explorations, that an eccentric Englishman named Stewart Gore-Browne decided to build an expansive plantation. Gore-Browne arrived in Northern Rhodesia during the First World War, as a member of a commission drawing the borders of southern Africa. He had dreamed of being the lord of a manor, and by 1926 he had completed the construction of a Tuscan-style mansion on twenty-three thousand acres of farmland. The monocled Gore-Browne lived out his life as the baron of Shiwa Ng’andu, hunting, farming, and building a factory for the processing of tropical oils. Thousands of Zambians depended on the semifeudal Shiwa plantation for their existence, but Gore-Browne became known over time for his advocacy of African self-rule. When he died, in 1967, he was hailed as a Zambian hero.

Today, Shiwa House, as it is known, is managed by one of Gore-Browne’s grandsons, a man in his fifties named Charles Harvey. When Mark and Delia Owens arrived in northern Zambia, they visited Shiwa before establishing their camp in the park. Gore-Browne’s daughter and son-in-law, Lorna and John Harvey—Charles’s parents—were their hosts. “They stayed with my parents in their forty-room house,” Charles recalled. “They were fed a proper English breakfast and sent on their way.” According to Charles and his brother, Mark, the Owens followed a dirt track first carved out of the bush by John Harvey. Charles Harvey said, “They came and looked at the maps, and my father talked to them about the difficulties of setting up camp in the park, but they were determined to go, so my parents kitted them out.” The Harveys were supportive at first, but soon came to see the Owens as self-aggrandizers. “I didn’t realize this quite at the time, but they were set on making it seem as if they were the first white people in the park, and my parents disturbed that image,” Charles Harvey said.

Stewart Gore-Browne and the Harveys are not mentioned in “The Eye of the Elephant” or “Secrets of the Savanna,” although Lorna and John Harvey were murdered in 1992 by men suspected of being poachers and ivory traders. “Mark and Delia talk a great deal about being targeted for assassination by poachers, but my parents were actually assassinated by men we believe were part of a poaching syndicate,” Charles Harvey said. The Owens say that they had a falling out with the Harveys after they reported their father, John Harvey, for poaching and Mark Harvey for running substandard safari tours.

Charles Harvey and I spoke on a night drive through the enormous Shiwa estate, passing herds of zebra, impala, and wildebeest. “We should have known sooner what they were doing. They stole my father’s cook the first day,” he

said. “We weren’t used to that American style of behavior.”

In “The Eye of the Elephant,” the Owens make repeated mention of the cook, a man named Sunday Justice. Delia wrote of one of her first conversations with Justice, who was in his early twenties at the time. “Tell me, Sunday, can we fly to that village?” she asked, naming a village reputedly populated by poachers. Justice responded, according to Delia, “Oh no, Madam, that village is very much on the ground.” She continued, “I smile behind his back for a long moment. All morning I have noticed Sunday stealing glances at the plane.” She asked, “You like the airplane, don’t you, Sunday?”

“Yes, Madam. I myself always wanted to talk to someone who has flown up in the sky with a plane.”

“Well, you can talk to me,” I say, as I pour salt into a jar.

“I myself always wanted to know, Madam, if you fly at night, do you go close to the stars?”

I explain that on earth we are so far from the stars that being up a few thousand feet does not make any difference in how close they look. But I don’t know if he understands, so I end by saying, “When you fly at night, you feel closer to the stars.”

On one of my visits to North Luangwa, I came across Sunday Justice, who was then working as a safari guide. When I asked him about the conversation, he laughed and said, “I always knew what an airplane was. I used to fly to Lusaka all the time with John Harvey.” As a child? “Yes, as a child and as an adult.” After leaving the Owens’ camp, Justice said, he worked for the Zambian Air Force.

The Owens’ writings on occasion convey archaic ideas about Africans. On the Web site of the Owens Foundation, Africa is referred to as “the Dark Continent,” and throughout “The Eye of the Elephant” the Owens expressed a desire to live in an Eden-like Africa, free of the complications created by the presence of humans. In “Secrets of the Savanna,” they issued a strong call for human population control in Africa. “Unless human numbers are in balance with those of neighboring wildlife populations, the decline of wildlife will continue to be a hard reality,” they wrote. “Despite the ravages of AIDS and a plethora of other diseases, Africa’s populations continue to outstrip the carry capacity of the continental resource base.” Zambia, though, is larger than France, with only one-fifth the population. Mark Harvey told me that the Owens earned a reputation in the valley for their intolerance of local people. “Their whole attitude was ‘Nice continent. Pity about the Africans,’ ” he said. P. J. Fouche, a professional hunter who manages a hunting concession in a game-management area outside the park, said that Mark Owens developed a proprietary feeling about the park’s wildlife. “He didn’t want them”—the Africans—“to be anywhere near his animals. That’s how he saw the animals, as his.”

After Sunday Justice left the Air Force, he returned to the valley, where, he said, he met a hardened Mark Owens. At first, he said, “Mark was interested in science.” But over time his focus changed. “He was very angry with poaching. He loves the elephants, so all the killing made him very upset.”

As Mark Owens assumed more authority over the valley and the game scouts, he extended his campaign against poachers beyond the borders of the national park. The Owens now had a Bell helicopter as well as the Cessna, and the scouts were highly mobile, thanks to trucks provided to them by the Owens’ conservation project. In “The Eye of the Elephant,” Delia described the first of a regular series of “village sweeps”: “The scouts raid villages all night—bursting into poachers’ huts while they sleep—and drive back to Mano in the morning, their truck loaded with suspects.”

The Owens at one point asked the U.S. government to provide financial support for their village sweeps. In a proposal for funding submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1994, they described their tactics: “Wildlife officers sweep into villages at night to seize poachers and their weapons before they can be used to kill elephants. More than fifty firearms were confiscated during a single sweep in August of 1993.” The proposal, which was unsuccessful, also refers to “Airborne Quick Response and Special Unit Scouts (trained in paramilitary tactics and to work with aircraft).”

“The Eye of the Elephant” does not provide many details about these raids, but, in villages around the park, residents told me that the scouts beat men they suspected of poaching. In a village near Mpika called Chita, residents awoke one night to the sound of truck engines. Scouts swarmed the village. They were armed with rifles. One villager, who asked to be identified only as Mutolo, described what happened: “The scouts took the men to one side

of the village and they began to beat the ones they said were poachers. They beat them hard with their hands and rifles.”

Some of the villagers told me that scouts turned their houses upside down, searching under beds and sleeping mats for weapons and in the rafters for dried meat. (It is against the law in Zambia to raid a house without a warrant, but the villagers I spoke with said the scouts offered no documents that would have justified the raid.) Another witness, Agatha Chipole, said that her son was among the men the scouts were looking for. She admitted that he had poached in the North Luangwa park, but only to provide meat for his family. One man, who also asked not to be identified, said, “Two scouts held me up and a third one hit me in my penis area with his rifle. They were asking me, ‘Where are the guns?’ ” The villagers I interviewed said the scouts collected between ten and fifteen weapons that night. Four men, a villager told me, were taken to the hospital in Mpika for treatment after the raid.

The Owensens have denied harming poachers, or encouraging scouts to do so. Mary Dykes, of the Owens Foundation, wrote, “Had the Owensens adopted any policy that supported the abuse of poachers and poaching suspects, the many villages and their tribal leaders, not to mention corrupt officials needing an excuse to get rid of them, would have immediately had them arrested.”

But many scouts told me that poachers captured in the park, often local residents who were working as meat carriers, were taken to the Mano compound, or on occasion to Marula-Puku, for detention and questioning. One man, who described himself as an Owens scout and asked to be identified only as Mvulu, said that prisoners were sometimes brought to Marula-Puku, tied to a stake, and left out in the sun. “We would make them understand that poaching was not a good job for them,” he said. Another scout who worked in the park in this period, Henry Kampamba, said, “Mark Owens told us that anyone with meat or a weapon should have a beating.”

In interviews, scouts who say they once reported to Mark Owens, as well as former employees of the Owensens’ North Luangwa Conservation Project, defended the tactics used to suppress poaching. I asked Mutale Kasokola, who is depicted in “The Eye of the Elephant” firing cherry bombs at poachers, if he thought the rough methods were justified. “These poachers were very bad,” he said. “They were very dangerous people. They had to be stopped. Mark Owens said we had to do anything to stop them, or else the elephants would all die.”

In letters and e-mails to me, the Owensens and their advocates argued that Mark Owens’s militant persona in Zambia—as portrayed in “The Eye of the Elephant” and in the ABC documentary—was simply a performance designed to make poachers believe that he was dangerous. Owens says that during his cherry-bomb campaign he spread rumors in the valley that he was firing live ammunition. “I actively promoted the idea that these were more than firecrackers, with people I know who would leak this information to the poaching community,” he said. “I wanted them to think that these were RPGs or something more formidable because I thought we were on the verge of being killed.” But Kasokola, who described the Owensens as generous benefactors, told me that on occasion scouts fired live ammunition. “We only threw cherry bombs on the poachers from the airplane,” he said. “When we got the helicopter, the scouts would fire bullets at the poachers from the helicopter.” He explained, “The poachers had AK-47s and would fire at the plane and the helicopter.”

The Owensens also denied that poachers were held under arrest or questioned at Marula-Puku, or that anyone was tied to a stake in the sun or beaten. In a letter to me, Donald Zachary, one of their attorneys, wrote, “Scouts occasionally passed through or near their camp with captured poachers, and they would stop for water or a brief rest.” During those times, the scouts would handcuff prisoners to a tree, but only for a few minutes and “in the shade.”

But another former employee of the Owensens, Hammer Simwinga, who now heads a community-development program in Mpika, said that on occasion captured poachers were held temporarily in a small building in Marula-Puku, where, he said, scouts would “get information about who was coming into the park.” In his view, the antipoaching techniques of the scouts were necessary, even if they sometimes became “rough.” “The important thing is to extract information,” Simwinga said. And though the scouts’ work could cause controversy, “there is sympathy for the methods because they worked.” He said he heard of villagers having disappeared inside the park, but had no knowledge of killings. Simwinga later recanted much of what he had told me, and in an e-mail to Mark Owens,

whom he refers to as “Dad,” he promised his continued support.

Like other supporters of the Owenses, Simwinga said that the couple’s achievements in the valley—the introduction of effective tactics to wildlife protection, and the projects in the villages that brought health care to people who previously had none—outweighed whatever harm may have come to subsistence poachers and their families. In an e-mail to a Zambian critic of the Owenses, Alexandra Fuller wrote, “Yes, people went missing while poaching when the Owenses were in Zambia and they still do—why do you think the Owenses have become a scapegoat for this? Poaching is, was and always will be a risky business.” She went on, “It’s a high-risk game and the Owenses cannot possibly take the heat for all the bodies left in that valley!” Fuller told me that she had investigated the various allegations against the Owenses while writing an article about Zambia, which was published in *National Geographic* in 2005, and had been unable to substantiate any of them.

The Owenses, through their attorneys, said that Mark Owens could not be responsible for what the scouts did, because he did not command them. “Once Mark transported the scouts to a poaching area, he flew away,” Zachary wrote. “What the scouts did on the ground with poachers was simply not Mark’s business.” Neither Mark Owens nor anyone associated with his project, they said, “ever recruited, commanded or paid salaries to any government game scout.” Malcolm Boulton, who worked for the North Luangwa Conservation Project, largely in the Mpika office, also says that Mark did not lead the scouts.

But scouts I spoke to in a number of villages in the Luangwa Valley told me that Mark Owens had clearly been their commander. And in “The Eye of the Elephant” Delia Owens wrote, of the scouts, “Mark creates special units for those who perform well, and they are issued extra equipment—new guns, jungle knives, binoculars, compasses.” Mark writes that though he would prefer not to assert his rank, “I have full authority over the scouts.” In a scene from Maryanne Vollers’s *Sports Illustrated* profile of the Owenses, Mark spots a poaching camp from the air. “Mark spends the next days orchestrating a manhunt,” she wrote. “He dispatches two patrols of eight scouts apiece to the site of the poachers’ camp. The scouts capture three poachers, but the main gang splits up and heads for the escarpment. Mark radios headquarters to set up ambushes along the exit routes from the park, but it is too late.”

On my three trips to North Luangwa, I made several visits to the Mano camp and interviewed a dozen veteran scouts about Mark Owens. They were complimentary, in part because the Owenses had outfitted them with superior equipment and rations. John Chibeza, an Owens scout, told me his fellow-scouts felt that they were elite soldiers. “He would call us shock troops,” Chibeza said. “The other scouts were jealous of us because Mark Owens was our commander. He was an expert in combat.” (Chibeza retracted this after speaking with Hammer Simwinga.) Although Owens did not serve in the U.S. military, several of the scouts I interviewed believed that he was a Vietnam veteran; in the “Turning Point” documentary, Owens says, in reference to North Luangwa’s troubles, “Frankly, it reminds me of—a little bit of Vietnam.”

P. J. Fouche, the hunter who manages a concession on the edge of the park, told me that scouts would salute Owens when he appeared. “Something happened to him over the years,” Fouche said. “He would be more threatening in person. He was always armed, and he always seemed ready to fight.” Fouche and Owens were once allies in the fight against poachers, but fell out over what Fouche said were disagreements about tactics. The Owenses maintain that Fouche was upset with them because their U.S. Fish and Wildlife grant application competed with his.

“They thought they were kings,” Fouche said of the Owenses. “He made himself the law, and his law was that he could do anything he wanted.” Fouche said that, before his disagreement with Mark Owens, scouts under Owens’s command would patrol Fouche’s concession. I asked him if the scouts killed suspected poachers in his area.

“Of course,” Fouche said.

“Did Mark Owens know that the scouts were killing people?” I asked.

Fouche handed me a letter that he said Owens had faxed him in 1994. It was written in part as a plea to Fouche to help raise funds for the Owenses’ project, and it listed some of Mark Owens’s antipoaching accomplishments. “To date I have flown eight airborne antipoaching operations over your area, including four in which I inserted scouts on ambush,” Owens wrote. “Two poachers have been killed and one wounded that I know of thus far, and we are just

getting warmed up.”

In the letter, Owens described his plans to recruit more scouts for his “Airborne Special Operations.” “These officers will be used with the chopper on shock operations, in which we hit the worst poachers very hard and with lasting effect. This has worked to such a degree in the park that we have recorded only a single elephant poached in North Luangwa Park since the beginning of the year, and a buffalo and warthog as part of the same incident.” He went on, “Now that we have secured the park, our strategic plan is to keep pushing the poachers back until we have created a broad safety zone or buffer area on all sides of North Luangwa. In this way we not only take care of poachers attacking the park, but also the ones who are punishing the [game-management areas]. Believe me it is already working.”

He complained that he was being “stigmatized” as a preservationist—someone opposed to legal hunting. “We have secured, and are busy securing not only your hunting area, but that of Jones, and others as well,” he wrote, referring to Paul Tudor Jones, the hedge-fund manager. (Jones would not comment for this article, but his spokesman Steven Bruce said, “At the time, Mr. Jones had no knowledge of these activities. He abhors murder and would never condone such actions.”)

At the end of the letter, Owens asked Fouche, who was then in America, for help in equipping his scouts: “Anything you can do to help keep our anti-poaching efforts alive in your area will, I guarantee, pay big dividends for your safari business, and very soon,” he wrote. “On that note, would it be possible for you to bring back as much ammo as you can: 12 gauge 00B, 30.06, 300, 7.62 short (AK), and some cracker shells (for pest control)?”

Over the past several years, the Owensens and their attorney Robert Ivey have threatened legal action against a number of people in the U.S. and in Zambia who raised questions about their behavior in Africa. Mark Owens’s letter to Fouche has been a particular point of contention. Ten years ago, Sharon Healey, a graduate student at the University of Denver’s International Human Rights Advocacy Center, got a copy of the letter. She contacted the Owens Foundation about it, and said that Mary Dykes “justified the contents on the grounds that it was a war zone, that Fouche was being overrun with poachers and was begging Mark for help.” Some years later, Dykes resumed contact, Healey said, and told her that the letter was “dictated by Mark when he was out in the bush to an Owens employee” and that the contents might have been garbled in transmission. In 2005, Robert Ivey wrote Healey and claimed that the letter had in fact been written by an employee named Malcolm, under Mark’s name and in his voice. (This is an apparent reference to Malcolm Boulton, who has denied any knowledge of this letter or involvement in its writing.) Ivey sent a document from the Owens Foundation that argued that the Fouche letter contained “certain words such as ‘messieurs’ . . . that Mark Owens does not use.” Further, it said, “Mark has never used the phrase ‘all grin from ear to ear,’ ” which occurred in the letter.

Donald Zachary, another of the Owensens’ lawyers, recently gave me a slightly different explanation. He wrote, “We believe someone took bits out of a typed letter Mark actually did write but added some aggressive language and faxed it, possibly from the Owensens’ machine in Mpika when no one was in the office.” Zachary suggested that the person who sent the fax was involved in a conspiracy, orchestrated by officials opposed to the ban on ivory trading. Then, last week, Mark Owens wrote to say that he might have written the letter after all. Although he had no specific memory of the fax, he recalled that around the time it was sent he had talked to a group of scouts who had been fired on by poachers, and he surmised from their behavior that they had shot back. Not long after, he said, Fouche was frightened by an attack on his camp. “When drafting the fax to Fouche, if in fact I did so, my experience with the scouts on the Luangwa River must have been fresh in my mind,” Owens wrote. “Knowing Fouche’s very real fear that his concession area was under threat, I likely wanted to reassure him that we had done something significant to defend his camp and personnel.” He went on, “It appears that this fax states something that I did not know for certain—that two poachers had been killed and one wounded when scouts returned their fire while crossing the river. . . . I may have decided that it would be more satisfying to Mr. Fouche if I tried to ‘quantify’ the episode, or perhaps I simply stated my conclusion to a staffer who chose those words. I do not know. In any case, the ambiguous statement that ‘we are just getting started’ did not mean that anyone was just getting started shooting poachers, but only that we had just begun fielding antipoaching patrols in that area.”

There were three sets of gunshots in the killing shown in “Deadly Game.” The first shot, the one that knocked the alleged poacher down, was fired before the camera began rolling, according to Meredith Vieira’s narration. The second shot—the first to be heard in the video—came from a thin black man in a green uniform. The third came from offscreen, fired by an unidentified shooter. On my visits to the North Luangwa region, I had asked about the scout in the video, a man I eventually learned was named London Kawele, but I was told that he had been transferred to another part of Zambia, or that he was dead. The ABC documentary doesn’t indicate who fired the first and last sets of shots. In the absence of a witness’s testimony, there has been a persistent controversy about what actually happened on the video—who the other shooter was and, in some quarters, whether a killing happened at all.

Owens gives his interpretation of the shooting in his letter to the Zambian attorney general: “I have no direct evidence of what I am about to suggest, however, based on what I have been told by others, I believe that the following may describe what actually happened: I believe that one or more game scouts, excited by being filmed for international television, shot a poacher in front of the camera.”

In the intervening years, supporters of the Owenses have put forth various other explanations. Mary Dykes told me that the scene might have been filmed in Zimbabwe; she also suggested that ABC News could have staged the shooting with actors. Gordon Streeb, the former U.S. Ambassador to Zambia, also said that this was possible. “My judgment is that they more likely staged something that was fake for visual effect, and no one was killed,” Streeb said, adding that ABC “could have been in Zimbabwe.” Streeb said he found the film suspicious because “when you hear the gunshot go off, the body twitches, but you don’t see blood spattering. Beyond that gunshot, there’s no evidence.”

Andrew Tkach, the field producer of “Deadly Game,” who spent a month in North Luangwa in the late summer of 1994 and visited again in the summer of 1995, said that the documentary accurately portrayed events in the park. Janice Tomlin, who is now a freelance producer in Texas but was then serving as the senior broadcast producer of “Turning Point,” said, “I can categorically tell you that any project I’ve ever been involved with, any program—‘60 Minutes,’ any program—that there has been no staging of any event.” She was adamant that the killing was videotaped by a cameraman named Chris Everson as he accompanied scouts on patrol in the park. The executive producer of “Turning Point,” Betsy West, who became a top executive at CBS News (and who later resigned, with others, in the wake of the controversy that cost Dan Rather his job), told me that she had “the utmost confidence” in Tkach and Everson. “Andrew is very good, especially in Africa and other far-gone places, he’s very rough and ready, extremely reliable and honest, so I totally believe him,” she said. West, who now teaches at the Columbia School of Journalism, went on, “Chris Everson is one of the great cameramen based in Africa. I can’t imagine that anything they reported would be amiss.”

According to Chris Everson, though, the documentary did not present the whole truth. I reached him early this year at the winery he owns with his wife in the Cape Province of South Africa. (Everson still works as a cameraman, mainly for “60 Minutes.”) For the first time, he spoke of what he saw. It was not the Zambian scout, he told me, who fired the first shot or the last shots: it was Christopher Owens, Mark Owens’s son.

“It’s a very complicated story, it was a very emotional thing, it was a very bad thing,” Everson said. “It’s something that never should have happened.” Christopher Owens, who was twenty-five years old at the time of the incident, was spending the summer with his father and stepmother at Marula-Puku. On the day of the shooting, Everson said, Mark Owens flew him, along with Christopher and the scout, London Kawele, to a remote location within the park. It was an unusual group; scouts rarely went on patrol without at least three other scouts.

According to Everson, Mark Owens left the three men in the park and returned to his headquarters. They quickly came across an abandoned camp and waited in ambush. When a suspected poacher entered the camp, Christopher Owens opened fire. “I don’t know what was going on in Chris’s mind,” Everson said. “He had a rush of blood to the head. I don’t know why he shot him in the first place. I don’t.”

Everson began filming after Christopher fired the first shot, the one that felled the man Meredith Vieira described as a “trespasser.” Then the scout fired at the man, who was now on the ground; this is the first shot heard in “Deadly Game.” Everson said he continued filming as Christopher, who was standing off camera, fired the three

final shots at the man's body. "I should never have allowed it to happen," Everson said.

I asked if he had considered alerting the police in Lusaka that he had witnessed a killing by an American visitor to Zambia. He said, "That was way above my pay scale. I was working for ABC. It wasn't my business to do that." Everson would not say how he got back to camp after the shooting, but he said that he did not see Christopher Owens again.

Vieira's voice-over does not acknowledge the blurred figure that appears in the background shortly before the three final shots, and makes no mention of Christopher Owens's presence. I asked Everson why the ABC documentary did not reveal that an American, Mark Owens's son, had shot the alleged poacher. He said he did not know.

In the days after the shooting, a strange tension settled over Marula-Puku. In the camp at the time were, among others, the Owenses, Andrew Tkach, Chris Everson, and Deborah Amos, who was the on-camera reporter first assigned to the Owenses' story. Amos told me she remembered meeting Christopher Owens in the Owenses' camp, but during her stay "he disappeared," she says. "I don't know what they did with him, but he was gone." Amos, who is now a reporter with National Public Radio, said the atmosphere at Marula-Puku became especially strained after a videotape went missing. "Andrew's hut was broken into and some film was stolen," she said. "They said that a hyena stole the film. He got the film back somehow."

Amos said that Tkach told her about the shooting only after they left the Luangwa Valley and went south, to the Zambezi River, for a rafting trip. "Andrew said after all this, 'Mark's son killed somebody.'" She said Tkach explained that he withheld the information because "he didn't want to hurt the interview" she was soon to conduct with the Owenses. "He knew that this was a holy-shit piece of film," Amos told me. "He had the film of the son killing a man in the bush. I was shocked that he didn't tell me they filmed a murder. I didn't know that Andrew had a snuff film. As a journalist, it's very puzzling to me. I was completely oblivious to this. I asked myself, 'Why the hell didn't he tell me?'"

Tkach didn't discuss with Amos the idea of reporting Christopher Owens to the Zambian authorities. Nor would he speak to me about the circumstances of the shooting, citing a confidentiality agreement with sources he would not name.

Chris Everson told me that he did not know what happened to the body. But the Zambian police detective in charge of the investigation, Biemba Musole, told me that it was removed by Mark Owens, a claim that Owens vehemently denies. According to Musole, his investigation found that Owens arrived at the scene soon after the shooting and, with the help of scouts, placed the body of the alleged poacher in a cargo net and flew it to a nearby lagoon. There he dropped the body in the water.

Musole's findings were shared with various Zambian government ministries. In a letter, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Tourism, Romance C. Sampa, wrote that the investigation disclosed that "the poacher shown being shot in the video was not shot by any of the Wildlife Scouts but by a son of Dr. Mark Owens who had come on holiday." (Sampa does not acknowledge that a scout fired the second shot.) Sampa went on, "The body was airlifted by tying it to a helicopter and somehow thrown out whilst airborne. The helicopter was being piloted by Dr. Mark Owens at the time."

Musole said he wanted to travel to the United States to interview the Owenses, as well as members of the ABC crew, but that the government could not afford to pay for the trip. He remains frustrated by ABC's decision not to report the killing. "The ABC News show is an accessory to murder, either after the fact or during the committing of this murder," Musole said. "The cameraman and reporter are accomplices to this. The docket is still open on this case. Why won't the cameraman come in and tell us what he saw and show us his film?"

Jeffrey Schneider, a spokesman for ABC News, said that ABC would not make available the video that Chris Everson shot in the Luangwa Valley; he likened this request to "asking for another reporter's notebook." He also told me that he was unable to describe ABC's discussions about airing the piece, because the network no longer employed any of the people responsible for the episode. (Roone Arledge, who was president of ABC News at the time, retired in 1998; he died four years later.) "We don't know all the facts, so we're not in a position to defend or

comment on their conduct and decisions,” Schneider said. “The report states on the air that they had made an agreement in advance not to identify people involved in the patrols as a condition of allowing them to accompany the patrols. These sorts of agreements can raise tricky ethical questions about how far you should go in making promises of confidentiality.” The Owenses, for their part, said that they made no such agreement. They also maintained that they had successfully petitioned ABC not to rebroadcast the program, although Schneider said that the network could find nothing in its records to confirm this.

Schneider said that Diane Sawyer, who hosted the “Turning Point” episode, would not be available for comment, and suggested that she had played only a small part in making the piece. “Diane was the on-air anchor for that hour, but there were executives, and an executive producer, and a producer and a reporter, Meredith Vieira, who were responsible for the content of the hour,” he said. “Diane’s role was to introduce the piece.”

Vieira first arrived in Zambia the summer after the shooting occurred, and said that she didn’t remember the specifics of her time there. “I parachuted into the story,” she said, as was often the case. But she said that the process of putting together pieces was a careful one. “The producer would structure it, Betsy would weigh in, Janice Tomlin would weigh in, and there would be screenings and tweakings. . . . I was certainly involved in the writing. I don’t remember the full extent of it.” She said that Tkach never told her the identity of the shooter. “There was a controversy about where the shot could have come from,” she says. “That was a gray area.”

She said that she could vaguely recall a confidentiality agreement, but wasn’t privy to it. “I can’t imagine why we wouldn’t identify the person, if it was an American,” she said. “I would think that Betsy would have had to have known that an American had killed a person. I don’t think Andrew could have kept that to himself. There would have been real legal issues. Why would they keep an agreement like that if an American had killed someone?”

Betsy West said that she was on maternity leave during the first trip to Zambia and played a “limited role” in the story’s production. Decisions about what could be reported, she said, were “made by my bosses at ABC News.”

In 2006, ten years after the Owenses left Zambia, Houghton Mifflin published their third book, “Secrets of the Savanna.” Like “The Eye of the Elephant,” this book is about their experience in Zambia, and covers much of the same time period, but with significant differences. In the earlier book, Mark and Delia write of their antipoaching operations in detail; in the later one, they address them only fleetingly. Most notably, there is no mention in “Secrets of the Savanna” of the ABC documentary, or the controversy and police investigation that followed. Instead, the Owenses blame their departure on corrupt officials who were intent on stopping their antipoaching activities and seizing their project’s assets.

In one scene, they write of an informant identified as “Talky,” who came to camp to give Mark dire news. “Sir, you and Dr. Delia are in very much danger,” he said. “You can be put in prison or even killed anytime.” Talky said that two Zambian officials, Banda Famwila and Romance Musangu, were working to push them out of Zambia. (The names Musangu and Famwila, the Owenses said, are pseudonyms.) The Owenses explained that “high-level officials in Lusaka were upset because the project had shut down poaching and they could no longer get ivory or game meat from North Luangwa. Working through Banda Famwila, the Parks regional field commander in Mpika, they were planning to put an end to the project one way or another.”

A few days later, the Owenses wrote, they left Zambia for America. While in the U.S., they learned that their project and its assets had been seized by the government. An American Embassy document indicates that officials warned them to stay out of Zambia until the homicide investigation was complete, but the Owenses reported, “The U.S. ambassador advised us that since the people who orchestrated the illegal action were still in powerful positions, it would not be safe for us to return to Zambia.” They go on, “It seemed that the ivory dealers had finally succeeded in closing down the project.” Alexandra Fuller, in her article for *National Geographic*, suggested that they had many enemies there. “Mention the Owenses’ names in certain circles in Zambia, and you will be likely to hear the rumors that have grown up around them, fueled by a misunderstanding of their work, by a provincial mistrust of foreigners, and by a barely concealed envy of their well-funded projects.”

The Owenses told me that officials associated with a conservation project called ADMADE engaged in a conspiracy to shut down the North Luangwa project. The former director of operations of Zambia’s Anti-Corruption

Commission, Paul Russell, told me that Mark Owens provided information to his commission about institutional malfeasance, and Russell claimed that U.S.A.I.D. had stopped funding ADMADE in 1996. But officials at U.S.A.I.D., the World Wildlife Fund, and the Wildlife Conservation Society, all of which had been connected to the program, offered no information about ADMADE, which ended in 2000. Russell told me he could say nothing more about the matter, because as a former government employee he was subject to a confidentiality agreement. He wrote about the Owens, in an e-mail to Alexandra Fuller, "It is true that they were not very popular. The wildlife scene in Zambia had for ages been the sole preserve of a number of white farmers who 'knew' how to tackle the problem." He wrote that he had encountered opposition when he tried to instill new ideas. "The same thing happened to Mark and Delia," he added. "Their style was different: better planned, methodical and strategic." Russell also wrote that the Owens had donated a Toyota Land Cruiser to the Anti-Corruption Commission.

At the end of "Secrets of the Savanna," the Owens told of discovering another new wilderness: Boundary County, Idaho, where they would settle after their departure from Zambia. In the book, Mark wrote, "I am falling in love with this new land, bewitched by its marshes, moose, mosses, mushrooms and moons. . . . A wolf's long, mournful song rises from the larches at the base of the mountains and soars across the valley. It is alone. I pause to savor the echoes of its last call until they are lost among the peaks and then head for the house again. But in the gathering darkness, deep behind my soul, someone, something, whispers 'Africa.'"

Boundary County, in the northernmost part of Idaho, is an isolated place, with a population of ten thousand spread out over twelve hundred square miles of mountains and forests. The people include polygamous Mormons, a large community of Mennonites, and the occasional white supremacist, but mainly they are conservative ranchers, farmers, and loggers, who, by reputation at least, are resentful of environmental activism. So a certain amount of suspicion greeted Mark and Delia Owens when they came to the county fourteen years ago. "Idaho's a tough place," Mary Dykes said. "Mark and Delia faced the same problems up there they faced in Africa. Some of the neighbors are pretty harsh."

The Owens live on a five-hundred-acre ranch on the slopes of the Purcell Mountains, in an area known as Curley Creek. Among the first things they did when they took ownership was to try to claim a county road that passes their property, erecting a sign that identified their land as "Thunder Mountain Ranch."

"They made a lot of enemies when they first came here," Ray Chaffee, who lives several miles from the Owens' ranch, said. Chaffee, who sells homemade honey out of his residence, told me that local people resented what they saw as the Owens' high-handedness. The county determined that the road was not private, and the Owens removed the sign, he said. "Then there were some people who were worried because they put some of their land into a conservation easement. Everybody sort of knew they were against logging." In 2000, another controversy erupted when the Owens sued the county in a tax dispute over the conservation easement. According to an Associated Press article, Delia Owens claimed the county's attempt to collect taxes on their land grew from "opposition to the Owens Foundation for Wildlife Conservation's campaign to preserve Kootenai Valley lands for wildlife through conservation easements." They later abandoned the suit.

The Owens became involved in a state-sponsored effort to trap and tag the region's few remaining grizzlies. Darrell Kerby, a former mayor of Bonners Ferry, the nearest town to the Owens' ranch, said that, over time, Mark Owens became more moderate in his approach to his neighbors. "He realized he couldn't come in and just tell people what to do," Kerby said. "This isn't Africa."

One day this winter, I made a visit to their ranch. The Owens had long declined to speak with me. It was snowing when I arrived, and the clouds had settled on the slopes of the mountains behind their log cabin. As I pulled up their drive, I saw Delia Owens emerging from a barn on the property. She was feeding hay to a herd of deer that had gathered near their cabin.

Delia became agitated when I introduced myself. "I'm going to have a stroke right now. I'm going to have a heart attack," she said. "How in the hell did you find us?" She composed herself, and asked me what I wanted to know, and I told her I hoped to talk about the ABC video. "By the time they came, the poaching was over," she said. "They were waiting for some action. We told them poaching was over. They just wanted something sensational."

I asked Delia about the accusations that her stepson had shot the man in North Luangwa. “Chris wasn’t there,” she said. “We don’t even know where that event took place. It was horrible, a person being shot like that. We think people say Chris did this because they got confused, because the cameraman was named Chris, too,” she said. “We don’t know anything about that trip.” (Donald Zachary later wrote to me that Christopher Owens denied being involved in the shooting.) I told her that I had heard frequently in the valley that Mark carried poachers in the cargo net underneath his helicopter. She laughed and said that the people around the park were confused because Mark once gave Christopher a ride in the cargo net. “I know how the rumors about dropping poachers in the river got started. Mark put Chris in a harness under the helicopter and gave him a tour of the valley. Imagine that view! I was going to do it, but I got too scared. So people saw Chris in the harness and they assumed it was a poacher.”

I asked Delia if her husband was available to speak to me. She waved to the mountains behind us and said, “He’s up there.” She added, “He’s going to be very angry you’re trespassing.” She said that she and her husband would not allow me to talk to Chris Owens, who now lives in Maine. “He might say something that you could misinterpret,” she said. “He’s trying to get his life together. Just leave him alone. You have something to ask him, ask us.” She told me, “Chris came in the summers to help out. He was involved with the scouts. He was involved in their training in various aspects.” She would not elaborate further.

As we talked, Delia again grew upset, and she walked off toward the deer, who were feeding a few yards away. She pointed out a doe to me. “This one is named High Cheeks,” she said. The snow was coming down harder, and she looked back at the mountains. She told me Mark would be back soon. “He’s going to be upset that you came onto the property.”

She said that she and Mark had no knowledge of poachers being killed. “We don’t know anything about it,” she said. “The only thing Mark ever did was throw firecrackers out of his plane, but just to scare poachers, not to hurt anyone.”

I noted to her that Mark wrote in a letter to P. J. Fouché that he knew of two poachers who had been killed by his scouts. It was then that she asked me to leave the property. “Why don’t you understand that we’re good people?” she asked. “We were just trying to help.”

In the years before “Deadly Game” was broadcast, Christopher Owens twice came to Zambia for the summer to visit his father and stepmother. One of Mark’s sisters, Anne Owens, told me that Mark “didn’t see Christopher growing up very much,” and that he greatly enjoyed his visits. The Owenses said that he was well received by the scouts. “They all loved Chris,” Delia said. They would run footraces, she said, in what she described as “mini-Olympics.” Mark Owens said, “They even had a nickname for him, Mboo, which means buffalo.”

But interviews with game scouts suggest that Christopher was a controversial presence in the camp. One of the scouts, John Chibeza, remembered him in disagreeable terms. “Chris Owens beat us,” Chibeza said. “He was an expert in martial arts. Mark said he would whip us into shape. He would beat us. He would beat us with sticks. He was a very bad man.” (Chibeza later recanted this as well.) The scout Henry Kampamba said that Christopher Owens, like his father, “was very angry at the poachers.” Kampamba said, “He said you should teach them a lesson to make sure they don’t come to the park. The lesson was to beat them. There were many beatings.”

The use of physical force—and sometimes excessive physical force—by the authorities in Zambia has been commonplace, according to the U.S. State Department’s human-rights reports on the country. The most recent report states, “Police and government officials encouraged police officers to use their weapons when apprehending suspects, despite a 2006 government directive that restricted the use of firearms by police officers and a 2006 government pledge to retrain police on the use of force.” So it should not be surprising to learn that game scouts committed acts of violence against poachers; scouts and their commanders were operating without much government oversight. And it would not be surprising to learn that the Zambian government, eager to maintain the country’s tourist trade, did not always care to know how the scouts went about protecting their country’s valuable wildlife, as long as it was protected.

What is surprising is that a foreigner with no law-enforcement experience came to direct and arm a group of game scouts, and then appointed his son to instruct them in martial arts, and allowed him to accompany a scout on a

patrol. Christopher was not an honorary game ranger, like his father; he was, according to the Zambian police, visiting the country on vacation. Mark's decision to involve Christopher in his work has haunted the Owens family. But the impression that Mark and Delia Owens leave—in their writings and speeches, in the ABC documentary, and on those who have observed them closely—is that they believed so fervently in the righteousness of their cause that they were able to dismiss all criticism. “My memory of them was that they saw themselves as saviors of these animals,” Meredith Vieira told me. “They were highly emotional about it. The level of caring was very deep, but a corruption of values could come with that. They were adamant about saving these elephants.”

Their cause, to protect elephants, has justice behind it, and only ivory collectors might disagree. Adrian Carr, who has lived in the Luangwa Valley most of his life, wrote to me, “I have worked in wildlife for the past 40 years and I am fully aware and endorse the fact that in Conservation Law Enforcement, the threat of lethal force is ever present. The rules of engagement must be clear and the use of that force responsibly applied.”

Chief Chifunda, one of the chiefs whose ancestral territory was taken by the British to create the North Luangwa Park, put it differently. “He scared my people,” he said of Mark Owens. “The man has an illness. He loves animals more than he loves people.”

Christopher Owens has led a tumultuous life since he left Zambia. He has been arrested numerous times, and in 2001 he was convicted for misdemeanor assault after attacking a man in a Portland bar. He has since pled guilty to misdemeanor charges of assault and terrorizing. Christopher is now divorced, with a young son. At various times, he has lived in Biddeford, Scarborough, Old Orchard Beach (where he worked as a bouncer), and Belfast, where his mother and stepfather live. But he was nowhere to be found when I visited. When I called his stepfather, Michael Towey, he denied knowing anyone named Christopher Owens.

In December, 2003, Christopher was living in the town of Palmyra. According to a neighbor, Christopher Silva, Owens was hunting in the woods near his home when he shot and killed one of Silva's dogs and injured another. “One of the dogs came out of the woods with one of his legs missing, and so I ran out and looked for the other one,” Silva told me. “I found the body hidden under some leaves.” The police searched Owens's house soon after, and found a rifle with a scope attached.

In a statement for the police, Owens wrote that he believed the dogs were actually coyotes. “I heard coyotes in the distance ‘yipping,’ ” he wrote. He claimed he saw two coyotes chasing a doe across a road. He fired two shots at them. “I was so excited, because I had never shot a coyote before,” he wrote. He had brought a friend to the scene, and together they found the dead animal. “I said, ‘Wow! That's a dark-colored coyote. I've never seen one that dark before.’ ” His friend noticed a collar on the dog, and they removed the tag, Owens says, and called a veterinarian. “I was afraid that someone might do something to my child/house/vehicles if they found out,” Owens wrote. The jury hearing the case did not believe his explanation of the shooting. In April, 2005, he was convicted on a misdemeanor charge of cruelty to animals.

After they left Zambia, Mark and Delia Owens feared that North Luangwa National Park would be overrun by corrupt government forces—the same men who, they say, drove them out and shuttered their project—and that the elephants would again be hunted nearly to elimination. But the park did not suffer in their absence. The Frankfurt Zoological Society, their main funders, moved quickly to reestablish operations at Marula-Puku, with the Zambian government's endorsement. The society recruited a young South African couple named Hugo and Elsabe van der Westhuizen to take up residence in the park. Hugo told me, when I visited him there, that his first act was to recalibrate the relationship between the game scouts and the conservation project.

“I told the scouts to stop saluting me,” he said. “I'm not the big bwana. I'm not the commander. I'm an adviser. It's not the role of foreign visitors to Zambia to run around with guns.” The society also permanently severed ties with the Owenses, ending what Delia Owens described as a long and amicable relationship, marred only by some senior officials' jealousy of their successful foundation. According to Markus Borner, the society's top official in Africa, the organization was unaware of the controversies surrounding the Owenses until a Zambian delegation came to its Frankfurt headquarters. “We first learned that things were not right when the principal secretary of the Ministry of Tourism visited Frankfurt and informed our executive director that the project was closed down and all equipment

impounded,” Borner said. “We were also told that the Owenses had fled the country.” He went on, “From this point it was run as an F.Z.S. project with close support and supervision from the F.Z.S.”

During my last visit to the park, I witnessed something extraordinary: a male black rhino at close quarters. The rhino was enormous—the scout I was travelling with put his weight at more than twenty-five hundred pounds—but he seemed unbothered by the presence of humans. A pair of well-armed and attentive scouts were standing by, essentially as personal bodyguards. Poachers had killed all of the park’s rhinos by the nineteen-eighties, but the Frankfurt Zoological Society, working with the Zambian Wildlife Authority, has reintroduced them to North Luangwa, and today their population has grown to twenty-three. The elephants, too, have recovered their numbers in recent years. “We’ve reintroduced the black rhino here, and we do this without telling the entire world how brave we are, without publicity stunts,” van der Westhuizen said. He and his wife stayed in the park from 1997 to 2006. “In my time, there were very few cases of elephants being shot only for their ivory—I would say about fourteen in total,” he said. “Elephant poaching in North Luangwa is under control.” And though Zambia and Tanzania recently petitioned to loosen the strictures on selling elephant parts, with the price of ivory rising again, the U.N. decided last week to keep the ban intact.

Even the Owenses’ most severe critics acknowledge that Mark’s approach to conservation saved the lives of elephants. But the price, Markus Borner suggested, was too steep. He said that when he visited North Luangwa he learned “quite a lot about what had been going on, from the expatriate and local staff.” He said, “These were very dark times for us, and I would like to keep it history.” Today, he noted, North Luangwa is “the safest and best maintained park in Zambia.” ♦

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