

SOUTHERN AFRICAN ENCOUNTERS, by SABINE BERNERT

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I met Sabine Bernert for the first time in Paris in February 2007. She was among the many people lined up after one of my lectures to have their books signed. She brought me a small book of photographs she had taken when visiting our sanctuary for orphan chimpanzees, The Jane Goodall Institute Chimpanzee Eden, South Africa. I could see at once that here was someone who cared deeply about the subjects of her photographs. There were many people waiting that day, and there was unfortunately no time to talk. In her copy of *In the Shadow of Man* I remember having written “Follow your heart”. And that is just what Sabine did.

By the time we met again, one year later, Sabine had joined the Jane Goodall Institute in France and done some work as a volunteer, knowing it was important to sensitize the people of France to the plight faced by chimpanzees in the wild. The Jane Goodall Institute France had organized a striking exhibition of about twenty of her photographs of the chimpanzee orphans she had met in Chimp Eden. The pictures were displayed on the outer walls of the Conseil Régional d’Ile-de-France, in the centre of Paris, and I could see many passersby gazing up at the greatly enlarged photos, amazed by the obvious similarities between ourselves and the chimpanzees, our closest living relatives. The photographs were accompanied by short texts telling the tragic stories of the early lives of each of the chimpanzees pictured.

And now, as part of her dedication to helping wildlife in Africa by raising awareness, Sabine Bernert has produced this inspiring book “Rencontres Africaines.” In her own life Sabine has been inspired by the people she meets, such as those introduced in this book who have devoted their lives to working to save endangered species. And so she decided to share some of her own experiences, hoping to raise readers’ awareness of the plight of these animals.. She showed us that each one of us must play our part in preserving the wild life and the wild places of our planet before it is too late.

I would like to share one of the stories close to my heart about a chimpanzee named JoJo. He was born in Africa, his mother was shot by poachers when he was about two years old – you can only capture an infant by killing the mother. He was sent to a zoo in North America where, for over ten years, he lived in a small cage, by himself. Eventually a new director raised money for a big enclosure surrounded by a moat filled with water. A group of 20 chimpanzees was assembled, which included JoJo. After they had been introduced to each other, they were left to themselves. At first all was well – and then one of the group challenged JoJo with the vigorous dominance display of the adult male. JoJo, terrified, climbed the barrier intended to prevent chimpanzees drowning in the deep water beyond, and ran into the water to escape his aggressor. But JoJo, like all chimpanzees, did not know how to swim. Three times he came up, gasping for breath, and then he vanished under the water.

Having witnessed this scene, one of the zoo visitors, Rick Swope, immediately jumped in to help, despite being told that male chimpanzees are stronger than men and potentially dangerous. Somehow he got JoJo's 130 pound dead weight over his shoulders, climbed the barrier, and pushed the barely conscious chimpanzee up onto the bank of the enclosure. Then turned to rejoin his family, at whichpoint everyone began screaming at Rick to hurry back – three adult males were approaching, hair bristling, to see what was happening. At the same time JoJo was sliding back into the water – the bank was too steep. Rick went back, ignoring the approaching males and the screams of the people, managed to push JoJo up to where the ground was level before climbing back over the barrier to safety. When asked what had made him risk his life to save a chimpanzee he answered: "I looked straight into his eyes, and it was like looking into the eyes of a man, and the message was: won't anybody help me?".

That appeal for help is all around us if we will only open our eyes and our hearts. In "Rencontres Africaines" you can, through Sabine's lens, look into the eyes of Sally the young female chimpanzee, those of CP the cheetah, or of Nelson the Cape griffon vulture. In all there is a silent message, a plea for help. These animals are representatives of endangered species and without our help they will, like the Dodo – the bird endemic to Mauritius which became extinct at the end of the 17th century - disappear from the planet as a result of the relentless growth of human populations and our exploitation of the planet's rapidly dwindling natural resources, the wild places are shrinking, and more and more species are becoming endangered.

The only hope for wildlife on planet Earth is if we all play our part to stop this happening. And the good news is that everywhere I meet people who, like Rick, have seen the appeal for help and have jumped in to do their bit.

Of course, most of us will not be able – or qualified – to devote their lives to working full time with endangered wildlife, like the people introduced in this book. Yet each one of us can play our part – helping to raise awareness. Sabine does this through her writing and photography, inspiring others to get involved. Some people help by raising money, volunteering their time, or working with children (for example, becoming involved with the Jane Goodall Institute's Roots & Shoots programme for youth). And we can all make changes in our life style so as to leave as light an ecological footprint as possible and lead a more environmentally sustainable life. Only when everyone becomes involved can we hope to save life on earth, as we know it, for future generations. It is up to us, to you and me.

So thank you Sabine for this book, for these wonderful images, for this timely message. May it reach into the hearts of those who read it and inspire in many a new determination to do their part, to make a difference.

Jane Goodall PhD, DBE

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PRELUDE

Insight.

Having practised as a lawyer for nearly twenty years, my destiny didn't seem to include creative works such as this, but as I turned forty, my childhood dreams started taking the upper hand. Nursed on Edgar Rice Burroughs' stories of "Tarzan of the Apes", my dream world was shaped by the African jungle, far removed from the legal jungle which later constituted my daily life. Until the discovery of a country, an animal species and some dedicated people created the spark which triggered this adventure and turned my life upside down.

April 2006

A few days before a trip to Namibia, a televised documentary caught my attention. Born among the wild animals: Cheetah, my brother, by Etienne Verhaegen, tells the story of the young "CP" (initials for "Conservation Project"), a cheetah born in captivity, rejected by his mother and raised by the Bruce family. In the heart of the Tsaobis reserve, located in the north of Namibia, we discover the daily life of this beautiful amber eyed feline, cuddled by his favourite sister, Tanya, a 17-year-old girl, jogging by her side in the wild and lunching with the Bruce family at their table.

I devour these images which echo my daydreams of long ago. But at the same time I experience a feeling of unease. With the passing of the time, which somewhat mellows the self-centredness of childhood, I cannot remain indifferent to the consequences of this domestication which excludes the wild animal from its own world.

It is towards this train of thought that the documentary guides us when presenting a turning point in the life of CP with the coming departure of Tanya, who has to continue her studies abroad. Who will take care of the tamed cheetah? She decides, in spite of her family's more realistic opposition, to "reintroduce" CP to the reserve and to teach him to survive by himself. Of course, without his human sister to protect him from unknown dangers, the experiment quickly fails and the cheetah is repatriated home, more dead than alive, bitten by a snake. He will probably finish his life peacefully in the garden.

So ends the film, with a very singular conclusion, "CP symbolises the problem raised by this particularly vulnerable animal and nobody has found an easy solution to prevent it from disappearing. Some say to let nature follow its course. But that would undoubtedly lead to the cheetah's extermination because their genes are fragile and most of the farmers surrounding them hostile. There are those who give them affection and tenderness in captivity. Are we not going to create a new species of domesticated cheetah? After all it took only fourteen generations to change the wolf into dog".

What to make of this astonishing message? Does the survival of species on the brink of extinction depend on their domestication? Wouldn't this rather be a first class funeral? The reference to the wolf is revealing: which kind of large domestic cat will the cheetah become, the feline equivalent of my Yorkshire terrier?

I still have this disturbing message in mind when I fly off to Namibia a few days later. It is during the first leg of my journey, at "Amani lodge", a few kilometres from the capital city Windhoek, that the eye-opening encounter takes place. Things don't happen by chance, or so they say.

Olivier Houalet is French. At the turn of the millennium, he settled in Namibia with his father to devote himself to the preservation and reintegration of African Big Cats.

Having proved himself to the small circle of people dedicated to the preservation of big cats, Olivier was entrusted with five little male orphan cheetahs by the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

For these cheetah cubs whose future was so dark, Olivier's vision went further than giving affection and tenderness in captivity and decided to raise them differently. The young cubs would grow up together in a vast enclosed mountainous area, and learn how to hunt in a group, preparing the ground for a real reinsertion.

The experiment has borne fruit and it is with amazement that I discover what I like to call the "mountain cheetahs", today 3 years old. Roaming freely on mountainous grounds and hunting large prey together, has transformed the timid cheetah cubs into vigorous, dominating males. As soon as possible, they will be released in a zone of the reserve far away from any farms. Wild and free, they will, perhaps, produce triumphant progeny far removed from the CP experiment.

So here we are. The encounter with this feline enthusiast was the spark which gave meaning to the long work of creation that I had devoted myself to over these last years, guided by the desire to share the animal magic in Africa. The scenario took shape: to make the passion and courage of the actors in wildlife preservation known to the larger public, so doing my bit in the process.

Back in France, the project took shape. Patrice Deyglun, an old friend and highly skilled pilot and his wife Nadine, proposed that we travel through Southern Africa by Cessna, to meet the people who run protection and reintegration projects for African fauna in danger, to bring back stories, images and emotions.

October 2006

After long months spent pouring over maps, eyes glued to computer screens and our noses stuck in the atlas and guide books, we finalize our first itinerary. This notebook traces our first trip in autumn 2006 and those which soon followed.

Off we go!

