



Interview: Rod MacKenzie Photography: Claudia Jirka

IN MY EXPERIENCE

TV PRESENTER AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATIONIST SABA DOUGLAS-HAMILTON ON LIFE, LOVE AND FLATULENCE

MY NAME MEANS 'SEVEN' It was given to me by local tribesmen when I was born in East Africa (where I still live) at 7:00pm on 7 June 1970.

I GREW UP SURROUNDED BY ELEPHANTS My father is the zoologist Iain Douglas-Hamilton and my mother, Oria, owns the Elephant Watch Safaris in northern Kenya. My earliest memory must be when I was about four, when a bull elephant charged us in our open-topped Land Rover. Elephants were less used to people in those days.

I CAUGHT MY FIRST SNAKE AGED 13 I used to run wild in the African bush with my sister Dudu, tracking elephants, climbing waterfalls and scaling the rooftops of farm buildings. For us, these isolated surroundings were completely normal.

I NEARLY DIED WHEN I WAS 18 We were near the Ethiopian border in the middle of nowhere when I was bitten on the leg by a saw-scaled viper. It took 18 hours for a flying doctor to reach me, who thought I'd at least lose the leg. But I'm still here.

I STUDIED ANTHROPOLOGY AT ST ANDREWS UNIVERSITY IN SCOTLAND I wrote my thesis on Love and Sexuality Amongst the Bajuni of Kiwayu Island in Kenya. I suppose I wanted to understand better where I came from.

MAN IS CHIMP AND CHIMP IS MAN When making *Living with Chimpanzees*, my first film for the BBC Natural History Unit, I spent several days living in a forest with a group of wild chimps with nothing but the clothes on my back and a hammock. My co-presenter Alastair Fothergill and I were utterly dependent on them for finding food and water. They are so intelligent and so good at living in their environment.

LIONS ARE THE TOP CARNIVORE Early last year my sister Dudu and I filmed and produced *The Miracle Lioness*. This was about a most unusual lioness who adopted and loved a baby oryx. We've just made a follow-up program called *Heart of a Lioness*, due to be shown on the Discovery Channel later this year. This followed *Big Cat Week* for the BBC, a sequel to the *Big Cat Diary* series that explored the lions, leopards and cheetahs living in the Masai Mara in Kenya. Whatever you do, don't get down wind of a lion after it's eaten a zebra. Their farts are eye-watering.

WILD ANIMALS ARE LIVING ON BORROWED TIME The biggest problems facing wildlife are a lack of land and the expanding human population. I can't stress how serious this is. I just wish we could find a way of solving it. The world has to make conservation a priority before it's too late. I was horrified when I heard about the birth of the planet's six billionth human being – there are already too many people on Earth.

WE'RE BUSH GIRLS SO WE LIKE BUSH CARS My very first car was a Land Rover, a 1968 Series II, and my sister and I have both stuck with them ever since.

DON'T PANIC That's my motto if you get into trouble in the bush. You can get out of just about every situation if you use your head. Always carry a high-lift jack, an extra fuel filter and two spare tyres. And when you're changing a tyre, put one of the spares under the vehicle because high-lift jacks can collapse. If you don't have a jack, drive up on to a rock. You can drink the water from the radiator in an emergency, and top it up with urine if called for too. Oh, and don't dangle your arm over the side of the vehicle when you're out in the bush if you want to keep it.

NEVER PUT AN ANIMAL IN A DIFFICULT POSITION Instinct forces an animal in danger to make a split-second decision. It's the fight or flight reaction. And it's really not fair to allow a lion to attack you – if it eats you, the lion will be shot.

I DON'T WANT ANY ANIMAL TO BE AFFECTED BY MY STUDIES My primary aim is always the same, to approach wildlife with respect by trying to understand it as best as I can. I want to get up close to study an animal's behaviour and then leave again without it knowing that I've been there. We've only touched the very surface of learning about the ins and outs of animal behaviour. I realise that when I look into the eyes of every animal I meet. ☐ www.savetheelephants.com