



‘May he walk in peace’

PRINCE BERNHARD OF THE NETHERLANDS (1911 – 2004)

Iain Douglas-Hamilton remembers a man who fought long and hard to advance the conservation cause in Africa – and around the world.

Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands died of cancer on 1 December 2004 at the age of 93. While he had a long and distinguished career in Europe’s turbulent 20th Century, he will be remembered in Africa primarily as one who tirelessly promoted the wildlife cause over many years.

All his life he used a position of privilege to fight for matters of principle. As a German Prince he married Princess Juliana of the Dutch royal family. When Germany invaded his adopted country he backed the Free Dutch at a time when it looked as though the Nazis could never be defeated. He became a Dutchman among the Dutch, and a symbol of the resistance. And when the allies finally triumphed he never forgot the ordinary people who had joined the resistance. To the end of his days, any resistance fighter, however humble, could approach the Prince if he or she needed support.

After World War Two he helped to rebuild the economy of a shattered country, travelling on government missions all over the world. He founded the Bilderberg Group, a debating forum for politicians, businesspeople and other prominent figures. Always a personable consort to Queen Juliana, he had a great sense of humour, a good memory for names and faces, and he mixed easily with people from all walks of life.

He extended his great moral support for the underdog, both intellectually and practically, to beleaguered wildlife across the world. Using his influence and bringing in a network of wealthy friends, he played a pivotal role in establishing the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Part of his success came from ingenious methods of raising

large sums of money through his patronage of the 1001 Club.

Under his leadership, the WWF became a powerful global force for the conservation of nature. PB, as he was affectionately called, took part in many bold initiatives that have succeeded in creating more space for nature and better protection for the environment. Throughout, PB made and maintained his own direct contacts with people in the field, always wanting to know exactly what was going on at the cutting edge of conservation.

The achievements of many conservationists were recognised through the Order of the Golden Ark, an award that was entirely PB’s idea, and which he personally bestowed every year on recipients at Soestdijk Palace.

The Golden Ark was given both to those struggling in the field and to prominent leaders. The aim was to reward creativity and effectiveness among leaders in nature conservation around the world and to engage science, the media, and corporate and political leadership in the conservation movement. Past recipients include Richard Leakey, Jane Goodall, David Attenborough, King Carl Gustav of Sweden, Prince Phillip Duke of Edinburgh, former Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta, Edmund Hillary, Sylvia Earle, Norman Myers, and Roger Tory Peterson. But there were also many names wholly unknown in the public sphere, of people who were singled out for their special work or dedication.

While the Ark may at times have been given to political leaders who did not deserve it, in general it became one of conservation’s highest awards, creating a sense of international recognition for services to nature. Inspired perhaps by his own experience of the value of decorations given to resistance workers during the war, PB tried to distribute it widely and fairly. To date,

300 people worldwide have received the Order of the Golden Ark.

PB’s life was always in the spotlight, and when he made mistakes, which being human he did, he faced the consequences – and never ran for cover. In more than 70 years of active public service, he never shirked his duty. This, along with his open and friendly way with people, resulted in lasting popularity. If ever there was a man who could “walk with kings nor lose the common touch”, that man was PB. At the end of his life, he was still a pillar in the lives of many people high and low.

Friends based out in the field got used to receiving occasional calls – usually in the early mornings – from the Royal Palace of Soestdijk, probing for “news from the front”. When PB did call, he always showed a genuine concern for one’s health and well-being before moving on to the pressing issues of the day. He sometimes called those whom he knew to be experiencing difficulties just to offer them some peace of mind.

PB’s attitude to wildlife was typified by remarks he made at the opening of the CITES convention in 1989, just before the ivory trade was banned globally. “Where there is a question of doubt,” he said, “the benefit of that doubt should be in favour of the animals.” His opening remarks were



followed by one of the most intensive debates in conservation history, culminating in the ivory trade ban, a move that has significantly improved the status of most of Africa's elephant populations.

PB was an avid flyer, piloting everything in his long life from Spitfires to huge military transport planes. In a flying career spanning 53 years he flew more than 200 types of aircraft. In his advanced years, nothing gave him greater pleasure than to escape from his entourage (sometimes causing no little anxious concern) and to take the controls of a small single-engine plane and fly over the immense landscapes of Africa.

A flight of fighters were to provide his military epitaph. As his funeral cortege drew up to the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft, three F16s well throttled back flew over in tight formation with a solitary Spitfire Mark IX struggling to keep up. As they came roaring over the church, the Spitfire pulled steeply upward and soared into the clouds, leaving a gap to create what is known as 'the missing man formation'. Of sound mind even at the age of 93, PB's death will leave a gap in the lives of many people who came to rely on his strong moral support and personal commitment.

At his funeral and from the tributes in the Dutch press, it became evident how extensive his personal network was, and how popular he was with the Dutch people. Many a tear glistened on the cheeks of resistance veterans who shared their reminiscences of PB on public television.

In his later years he was continually on the telephone to friends around the world, either to cheer them up, or listen to their problems, to give support or just to revel in the give-and-take of friendly conversation. While such a personal network can never encompass everyone on this wounded planet who is striving to protect wildlife, he did the best he could. Through all his sicknesses he faced death with great courage and never gave up, but when he knew he was going to die he composed his mind to the fact, put everything in order, and rang up his innumerable friends to say goodbye.

PB once drew a picture of an elephant walking away with the caption "May he walk in peace". This is what he spent so much of his life trying to achieve, to help animals and people in far-off corners of the world to preserve their space – and their peace. Above all he strove to reward people who have dedicated their lives to the conservation cause.