



GIRL POWER

Sue Watt visits Borana Conservancy in Kenya's Laikipia province, where she witnesses the powerful impact of its commitment to women in conservation and communities.

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MILLIE MUSEE,
BORANA GENERAL MANAGER

World Female Ranger Week celebrates women protecting wildlife and wild habitats," its founder Holly Budge tells me. "From rangers on the front line to guides to community leaders, women bring a depth of relationship, trust and long term thinking that changes lives."

There are few places where this is more apparent than at Borana Conservancy in Kenya's central Laikipia region.

"When you empower a woman, you empower the whole community," Milli Musee, Borana's General Manager, tells me over lunch by the pool.

Her soft voice belies an inner strength acquired through 20 years of running US army camps in the world's most intense war zones, among them Afghanistan and Iraq. Four years ago, a more serene world at Borana beckoned.

What resonated about her new employer was its ethos of regeneration. "I came from utter devastation, where people were in constant turmoil, to a place of peace, where they are working to heal, to support conservation and communities, to regenerate the land and empower women and children.

"My biggest achievement is that today almost half of Borana Lodge employees are female, with many leading departments. Every girl is an asset and they're happy. I've helped them to become proud of who they are."

Borana is one of only 12 operators in the world to achieve The Long Run's Global Ecosphere Retreat® status, a leading standard for sustainability in tourism. Unusually, it invests 24 per cent of room rates back into the land and local people.

"We're very much a women-led operation now and I celebrate that," Managing Director Michael Dyer says. "As well as Milli, we employ girls as mechanics and in the office; our clinic is run by a wonderful lady called Pauline; Jedidah is in charge of community outreach, and we have 13 female rangers."

VISIBILITY AND POSSIBILITY

Situated on the lower slopes of Mount Kenya, Borana Conservancy spans 140 square kilometres of cedar-forested hills and open grasslands, home to the so-

called 'Big Five', numerous rare species (including reticulated giraffe and Grevy's zebra) and 420 species of birds.

In 2013 Borana received its first 21 rhinos from neighbouring Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and from Nakuru National Park. The following year, fences between the two neighbours were removed, creating one of East Africa's largest and most successful rhino habitats, which today is home to nearly 300 rhinos.

There has been zero poaching in Borana for 11 years and I see several rhinos on my morning drive, young and old, black and white. I also meet 25-year-old Grace Sinante, a Maasai radio operator in the female ranger team, whose roles vary from general security and patrols to operation room duties.

We're in the hub of Borana's rhino conservation programme. Using EarthRanger software, patrols on the ground report rhinos' locations, their health condition and behaviour. "We even record when they're mating," Grace says.

This data, along with that from camera traps and collared lions and elephants, help to plan the deployment of rangers for rhino monitoring, to alert villagers should collared predators come prowling near livestock, and to arrange interventions that can save vulnerable animals.

"I've loved nature from my early years and my dream was always to work here in conservation. Now I'm living that dream," Grace says. "Borana is funding my diploma in wildlife management, and I want to stay here when I finish my studies. Many girls ask about my work and I encourage them to get involved in Borana's educational programmes and sponsorship."

Ruth Kateve, Borana's first qualified female guide, has similar conversations. "Girls often tell me 'I want to be a guide like you.' I tell them to work hard at school and not to give up. As a young girl, I knew in my heart I wanted to do this," she says. "I fell in love with wildlife watching David Attenborough: I loved how he could explain the wild."

Ruth came here as a waitress from Nairobi four years ago. "That's when I saw the rhinos and said I want to be in Borana." A single mum now aged 30, her mother encouraged her to follow her dream and ➔

CONSERVATION

helps to look after Ruth's daughter.

A friend employed as a guide in Maasai Mara was less encouraging. "I asked if there were vacancies in his camp. He said "Yes. But it's too hard for women. You couldn't change a tyre..."

Proving him wrong, Ruth is now studying for her Silver guide qualification and is supported by male colleagues at Borana. "They're my family when I'm here," she says.

Both Grace and Ruth are an inspiration to others, reminding me of Holly Budge's words: "World Female Ranger Week exists because visibility creates possibility. When a girl in a rural community sees women working with wildlife, she sees a future for herself and for the wild spaces she'll grow up defending. Women transform the entire ecosystem around conservation and their communities."

CHANGING TIMES

Around Borana, the communities are mostly Maasai and Samburu. Known for their bright *shukas* and intricate beadwork, these pastoralists have been clinging to their deep-rooted way of life where cultural gender inequality deprives women of education and employment. Their role was to bear and bring up children, with limited healthcare and non-existent family planning. Borana's mobile health clinic is changing that, reaching 10 remote villages weekly, with sexual health programmes for men and women.



SUE WATT



Right: Sarah Masieku beading



Above: Grace Sinante in the operations room

Left: Jedidah Kamoiro, Outreach Officer

Below: First female guide Ruth Kateve



SUE WATT; INSET: BORANA (2)

Borana also helps women earn their own income. Mazingira Yetu (meaning "Our Environment") is a former sheep-shearing barn now transformed into a thriving community education centre, run by Outreach Officer Jedidah Kamoiro and her colleague James Mungu, Education Officer. It's buzzing with Maasai women, their beadwork displayed beside them — a riot of colour in bracelets and bangles, necklaces, coasters, cups and saucers.

Beadwork is a way of life here, a traditional skill learnt young, and their eye-catching pieces are symbols of cultural identity and status. Sarah Masieku from Arijuju village teaches me to make a bracelet. I choose gold and blue beads, trying to thread them through the tiniest of holes, but my butterfingers can't cope and she gently takes over, creating a beautiful piece of jewellery within minutes.

"My mother taught me to bead. Growing up, I just did it for myself and my culture. But when Borana said it could be a source of income, I started selling my work to guests," Sarah says with quiet pride. "With my money, I buy clothes for my children and send them to school."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

"This ripple effect is huge," Holly from WFRW says. "UN research suggests 80 per cent of women's income goes into

the family. They buy land, build houses, put their kids through school, and have greater access to healthcare."

Mazingira Yetu supports ten schools in seven villages, building classrooms and funding 12 teachers' salaries. They provide breakfasts for nearly 4000 children daily, take pupils on game drives to learn about wildlife and technology, and teach organic farming to grow vegetables in schools. Over 50 students currently receive bursaries for higher education.

Crucially, they aim to nurture the women — and men — of tomorrow through mentorship and Teen Talk programmes on sexual health and relationships, even helping to dissolve gender bias with tag rugby games for boys and girls playing together.

"Early pregnancies are falling and girls' interest in career development is increasing," Jedidah says. "We're definitely making a difference."

Slowly but surely, in conservation and in communities, the women of Borana — and the women of tomorrow — are transforming their lives.

Sue Watt's trip to Kenya was organised by The Ultimate Travel Company. She was hosted in Laikipia by Borana Lodge and internal flights were provided by Scenic Wilderness. World Female Ranger Week takes place from June 23-30.