

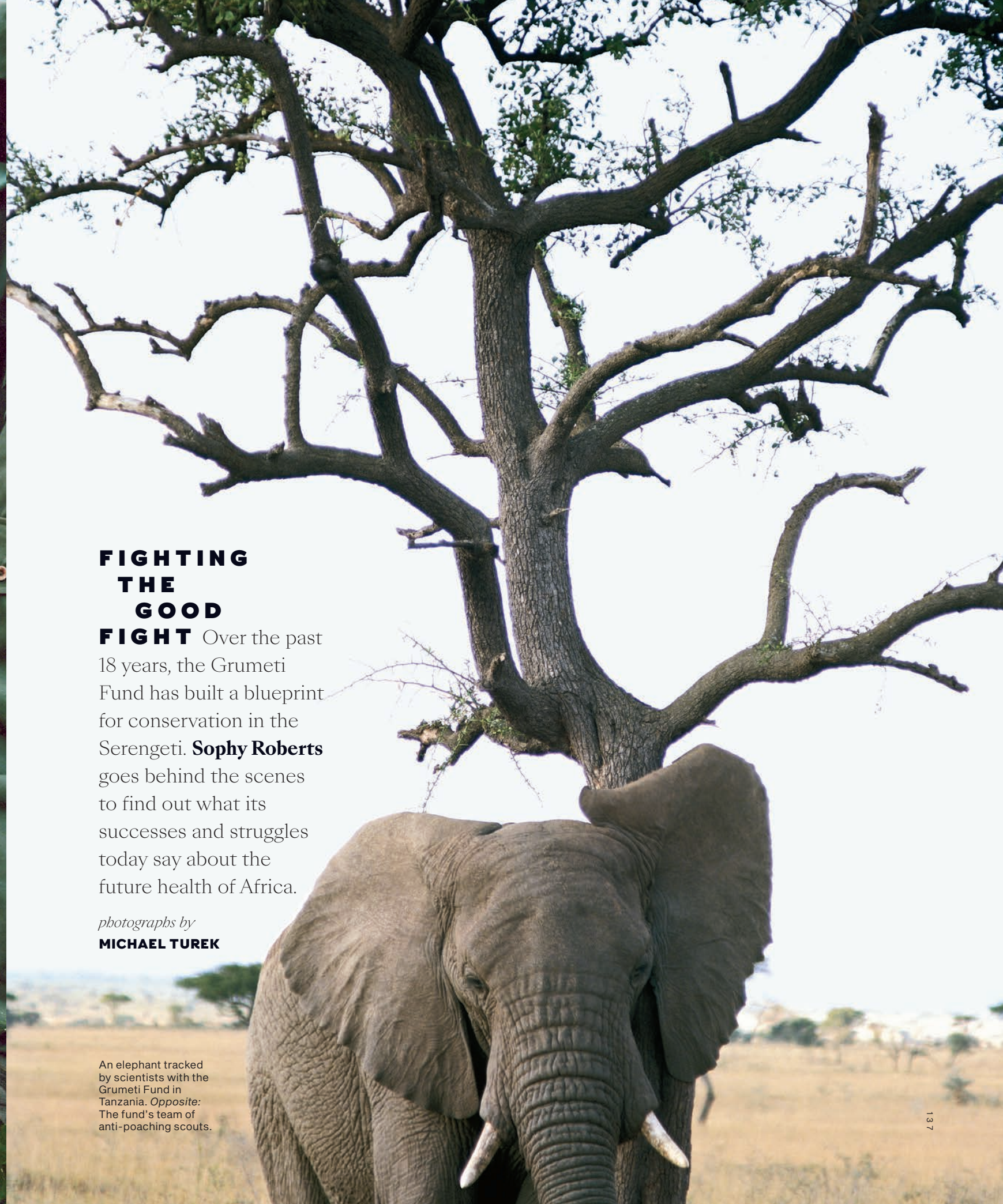


FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

Over the past 18 years, the Grumeti Fund has built a blueprint for conservation in the Serengeti. **Sophy Roberts** goes behind the scenes to find out what its successes and struggles today say about the future health of Africa.

photographs by
MICHAEL TUREK

An elephant tracked by scientists with the Grumeti Fund in Tanzania. *Opposite:* The fund's team of anti-poaching scouts.



**13
YEARS
AGO**

DEPARTURES published a feature about the Grumeti Reserves, a conservation project in Tanzania that had set aside more than 500 square miles of the greater Serengeti, and was starting to run luxury photographic—as opposed to hunting—safaris. The western corridor of this iconic ecosystem had suffered years of exploitation, with land parcels routinely handed out to hunting companies by the Tanzanian government in five-year leases, then passed on to the next concessionaire after the animals had been decimated, including by bushmeat poachers. Tanzania needed a new, more sustainable way to monetize its wild places, and Grumeti’s bold initiative provided a possible blueprint, given that the new investor had secured a unique 30-year lease (under a government initiative called Special Investor Status) on the hunting blocs that made up the Ikorongo Game Reserve, in addition to a 99-year lease on Sasakwa Hill, where the main lodge now stands. The leaseholder was the hedge fund manager Paul Tudor Jones II, founder of the Robin Hood Foundation. His tourism partner was Singita, the most polished of all the African lodge companies, founded by South African Luke Bailes, who was taking a risk on a landscape he described to me in the early days as “poached to hell and gone.”

It was a compelling model, kick-started by private wealth and advertised to the world by the glittering face of a top travel brand. But would it be dependent on Tudor Jones’s cash? Tourism alone can rarely pay for conservation; the costs of operating remote, seasonal camps are too high. There have been numerous attempts to find another way, among them the

work by African Parks, which secures at-risk ecosystems throughout the continent by partnering with national governments. African Parks has shown that conservation is built upon relationships, from a president’s office to pro bono security consultants. Grumeti’s path through the private sector was different. In its early days, when it was essentially being bankrolled by a single billionaire, it needed to prove itself so it could pull in new benefactors, new conservation partners, and government goodwill. It also needed to prove itself to local communities—that families would benefit enough to want to stop poaching bushmeat, their age-old method of survival. They needed to believe that saving wildlife would benefit *them*, not just visitors from abroad.

This magazine had articulated the first winds of change just at the moment when the magic of this part of the Serengeti—the golden light, the thundering wildebeest migration, the glimpse of a leopard drinking from the edge of a pool—had

begun to pull in wealthy international guests for luxurious, but also meaningful, safaris. According to Will Jones, founder of Journeys by Design, a tour operator featured in the piece, the story generated \$1 million in sales. “I realized then how the most sophisticated travelers in the world were hungry for purpose,” said Jones recently. “Spending wasn’t enough. They wanted best-of-the-best luxury, but also to feel like they were part of a bigger conservation narrative.”

The Grumeti landscape—the scale of the plains and the wildlife they sustain—arouses something primal: The heat, the dust, life, death, light, and darkness spark the fight in every species, including our own, to conceive and to protect the things we love. These feelings, which any visitor encounters every day in the Serengeti—in the way an elephant shields her calf or mourns the passing of a matriarch—are what draw me back to this achingly beautiful place. I’ve ridden Grumeti’s acacia-pricked savannah on horseback, and I’ve



Above: Rian Labuschagne, head of the Frankfurt Zoological Society’s Serengeti Conservation Program, and his wife, Lorna. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A living room at Singita’s Sabora Tented Camp; an ostrich on the Sabora plains; a Grumeti-funded English class for fifth graders; a lioness watches at Sabora; Amos Matiko, whose honey-pressing business was launched with help from the Grumeti Fund’s Enterprise Development Program; head scientist Kristen Denninger Snyder tracks wildlife; the fund’s head of special projects, Grant Burden, inspecting a rhino enclosure; giraffes grazing courtside at Sabora. Center: Longtime Grumeti scout Gotera Magesa Gamba.

When the elephant’s mother, bellowing, flings herself at her calf, her fear and relief palpable, it is one of those moments when conservation is the simplest decision in the world.

watched the sun sink as stars rose over what felt like an infinite earth. I’ve listened to hyenas laughing in the middle of the night from the other side of a thin canvas sheet. I’ve immersed myself in extreme luxury at each of the five lodges and camps that have opened in the concession in the past ten years. I have also listened to the rural communities that live side by side with the wildlife tell their stories. Then came the moment when I was stopped in my tracks, not by a lion but by a vegetable seller in a market. She had launched her business with a loan from the Grumeti Fund, a nonprofit devoted to anti-poaching, ecosystem management, and community relations. She called Tudor Jones “the white god.”

Her remark chilled me, because it articulated a growing anxiety in the conservation world about power and race relations. Moreover, politics aside, what use is a god if he can be hit by a bus? Would the project collapse? The hope in that vegetable seller’s remark felt dangerously fragile. What plans were there to make the model transcend its philanthropic beginnings and continue to grow? *Sustainability* is a buzzword easily bandied about; picking the concept apart is what matters in a world in which we are losing species and habitats every day.

That’s why I’ve come back to the Grumeti Reserves. An eastern black rhino is arriving at the camp after a 7,000-mile flight from Port Lympne Reserve in England, as part of a program to reintroduce rhinos to an ecosystem where, in the 1980s, they numbered fewer than ten. Would the male rhino’s journey, from its birth in captivity to its release in the wild, symbolize a bigger success story? When Stephen Cunliffe was appointed executive director of the Grumeti Fund five years ago, he was adamant about his first principle: “Every day my team is investing a lot of energy, blood, sweat, and tears. All of us want to know that, whenever we move on to the next phase in our careers,

the Grumeti Fund is here forever, that it wasn’t all for nothing.”

I am staying back-of-house with the lodge’s staff, guides, pilots, and consultants. This is deliberate. I don’t want to confuse my reporting about the conservation and community initiatives of the Grumeti Fund with the seductive power of the Singita lodges, where you experience the dream of the African safari rather than the reality.

A BBC team is here working on a series about the Serengeti. A German crew is present to record the rhino arrival. A group of teachers from Concordia College in Minnesota is working with the Grumeti Fund for the next month, operating weeklong English courses for local children. Kristen Denninger Snyder, head scientist and human-wildlife relations researcher, is training the next generation of Tanzanian scientists—students who attended the country’s best colleges with scholarships from the Grumeti Fund. Also present is Nick Bester, a South African conservation management consultant I had worked with in a nearby buffer zone called Maswa. Like the Grumeti Reserves, Maswa provides a critical safe area for wildlife to seep out of Serengeti National Park.

The staff canteen is heaving with people and thieving baboons. Everyone is buzzing about Zambezi, the rhino arriving in a few days. Fewer than a thousand of his kind remain in the world—the same number that used to live in the Serengeti alone. Zambezi will be a potential breeding partner for Laikipia, a 17-year-old female currently under watch in a 112-acre “intensive protection zone.” Eventually both will be released, along with Grumeti’s third rhino, Eric, into the Ikorongo Game Reserve, in the western Serengeti, where their bloodlines will hopefully invigorate their species’s gene pool.

“Because of Tudor Jones’s investments, we have the means to protect rhinos, and the space and habitat,” said Grant Burden,

Grumeti’s head of special projects. “Our aim is to reestablish a population in a place where they can thrive.”

JUNE 27.

Cunliffe and Burden have flown to London to accompany Zambezi. While waiting, I meet with Wes Gold, head of anti-poaching and law enforcement, in his office at the fund’s Joint Operations Center. This is where the special operations group is based. The 16-member team is headed by Kabichi Suma Mwarancha, a Tanzanian who in his nine years of service has been shot with a poisoned arrow, attacked by a lion, and slashed by a poacher. I meet Gotera Magesa Gamba, another local, once a poacher himself, now the anti-poaching head of operations. The team lives in an adjacent dormitory, ready to respond in minutes to intelligence from the fund’s operations room, where EarthRanger technology (provided by Vulcan, Inc., a philanthropic venture by the late Paul Allen) gives real-



From left: The canine unit of the Grumeti Fund, trained trackers of bushmeat, ammunition, and other scents associated with poaching; Eric, a 2,550-pound eastern black rhino on the Grumeti Reserve.

team deactivated 1,392 last year). Even more significant, says Gold, is what the fund’s intelligence work confirmed: Local men and women were no longer poaching to feed their families but for sophisticated crime networks. It was something of a revelation, says Gold. The fight against ivory poaching is a cause celebrities can rally behind. Bushmeat is a less sexy issue that struggles to garner support.

As the days pass, I become aware of how organizations like the Grumeti Fund need community buy-in. The fruits of wildlife security and high-end tourism have to pay dividends for families who can’t secure jobs as game scouts (the fund employs 165 people, of whom only seven are expats) or in Singita housekeeping (the tourism partner employs 750-plus locals). So I shadow Frida Mollel, head of community outreach, to the village of Bonchugu, a two-hour drive from headquarters along the reserve’s border, where I meet Amos Matiko, the 54-year-old owner of a fledgling honey-pressing business.

The scene is humble: dusty houses, children peeking out of doorways, women gathered around a cooking pot, dogs begging for scraps. Then we arrive at a sky-blue building, with neat grills over the windows and bees buzz-

ing along the edges. Matiko now has 50 hives. He is completing his second business course with the Grumeti Fund and will have weekly visits from its program officers over the next 18 months. It’s one small example of an ever-widening reach. The Grumeti Fund has now led business development courses in 90 percent of villages along the reserve, reaching 396 people. While the honey initiative is no pot of gold, it is a sign of community empowerment. The fund’s larger ambitions tell a different story, which becomes evident through an examination of its financing. In 2015, all but \$70,000 of the fund’s \$5.5 million budget was the founder’s money. Cunliffe has since streamlined spending, cutting \$1.4 million from the budget. He has also worked with Tudor Jones to bring in fresh support. In 2018, Danish billionaire Anders Povlsen became a second core donor. Separately, plots for private houses were sold to a pair of owners who will each contribute \$250,000 a year in conservation taxes.

Cunliffe’s sustainability plan also attempts to increase collaboration among African conservation organizations—an impressive thing to watch. When an elephant bull wanders into the reserve, Denninger Snyder calls for him to be col-

lared with a GPS chip so that he can be prevented from going where he will be attacked, whether by a poacher or a farmer whose crops he threatens. After a quick phone call to Kenya’s Mara Elephant Project, a collar arrives by Cessna.

But it’s when everyone’s backs are against the wall that I see the true power of the network underpinning Grumeti’s future. On the same afternoon when we expect Zambezi to arrive, a four-seater plane lands on Grumeti’s runway. In it are Rian Labuschagne, head of the Frankfurt Zoological Society’s Serengeti Conservation Program, and his wife, Lorna, who have spent years in African conservation, first working for Grumeti, then in Chad protecting elephants. Both are excited, but also anxious about Zambezi’s relocation; their experience has told them not to assume success. They prove to be right when a few hours later, news breaks at last light, first in camp, then around the world: Zambezi has died in transit, a risk always present in translocation, given how an animal may respond to sedation and the stress of a flight. In the canteen, people are crying. The anti-poaching team is silent. “We have no choice but to take these risks,” Labuschagne wrote to Burden that night, “and we must take them again.”

The next evening, ashen-faced and exhausted, Burden arrives back in Tanzania, clinging to his two young children. “The bigger picture is that an entire species is at stake,” he tells me over dinner. “You can’t put a price on that. We have to keep going.”

“Since I started, we’ve built the Grumeti Fund on collaboration,” says Culliffe. “The first year, the phone never rang, and no one came to visit us. But bit by bit, momentum started to pick up. Now we are sustained by a web of partnerships. Since Zambezi died, the phone hasn’t stopped ringing.”

As I witness the surge of support on social media, I can see that Zambezi is emblematic of the way that conserva-

tion entities, whether private or public, are sharing science, knowledge, and even equipment to ensure the survival of threatened species. On the morning I leave, the Tanzanian Wildlife Authorities send a vet to help Nick Bester release an elephant calf caught in a snare. I see video footage later of the calf struggling to its feet as the anesthetic wears off. When its mother, bellowing, flings herself at her calf, her fear and relief palpable, it is one of those moments when conservation, whatever the risks and disappointments, is the simplest decision in the world.

Losing rhinos, in transit or to poaching, isn’t good for PR, but hours after Zambezi’s death, Tudor Jones is back on the phone, telling his team that they must continue with an even bolder plan: to bring ten rhinos from South Africa to Grumeti in the biggest translocation in Tanzanian history.

SEPTEMBER 10.

Three months have passed since Zambezi’s death. Today, nine carefully sedated South African rhinos are in individual metal crates aboard a chartered 747 bound for Kilimanjaro. One rhino had a heart attack even before leaving South Africa. On the ground in Tanzania, the Grumeti Fund staff anxiously wait. It’s 4 A.M. when the plane lands. The staff quickly transfers the crates to a smaller plane that will make two trips—the first carrying six rhinos, the second carrying three—into the Grumeti Reserves. Veterinarians monitor every rise and fall in the rhinos’ pulses. Also watching closely are officials from the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, for whom this is a major event, increasing the country’s population of rhinos by 10 percent.

Finally, after landing at Grumeti, the rhinos are released into their enclosures, where they feel the Serengeti between their toes for the first time. On the other side of the fence, nobody is allowed to talk above a whisper. However, Mzee

Dickson, Grumeti’s head rhino keeper, lets out his version of a champagne cork as he tenderly sprays one of the animals with a hose.

The cost has been extraordinary—a multimillion-dollar project bankrolled by several private donors. But as Tudor Jones said to me at the outset: “The Serengeti is the most important ecosystem in Africa. This is where the blueprint of public-private partnerships needs to be perfected for the rest of the continent’s special places.” The Serengeti rhinos epitomize the challenges, but also the opportunities, of Africa. Get it right here, and maybe our children will have the chance to experience the continent as we have, as something infinite and bigger than ourselves, of life, death, and, ultimately, renewal. ☺

GRUMETI’S PARTNERS

One measure of success on the Serengeti has been the proliferation of safari companies such as Singita, which, in addition to its conservation-oriented properties in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Rwanda, operates Singita Grumeti (▣ singita.com), a network of lodges and camps across the Grumeti Reserves in Tanzania. The Mara Elephant Project (maraelephantproject.org) focuses on protecting elephants via herd monitoring, anti-poaching efforts, and human-elephant conflict management. In addition to conservation, the Grumeti Fund (grumetifund.org) supports partnerships benefiting education, women’s rights, security, and business development.

A view from an anti-poaching observation post of a balloon drifting over migrating buffalo.