

The Telegraph

Lawrence Anthony

Lawrence Anthony, who has died aged 61, was a South African conservationist, known as “The Elephant Whisperer”, and made world headlines in 2003 when he arrived in war-torn Baghdad to rescue the animals in Saddam Hussein’s zoo.



Lawrence Anthony Photo: CAMERA PRESS

March 8th, 2012, Durban, South Africa – In his native South Africa, Anthony was a key figure in promoting the concept of joining tribal lands to game reserves in order to give remote tribal communities a vested interest in conservation. As well as creating two new African game reserves, he ran a private reserve of his own where he acquired his nickname after rescuing a herd of rogue elephants destined to be shot.

In 2003, as Anthony watched television footage of the bombardment of Baghdad, he recalled reading that the city had the largest zoo in the Middle East: “I couldn’t stand the thought of the animals dying in their cages. I contacted the Americans and the British and said, ‘You have any contingency

plans?' Nobody was interested."

Within days he was on the Kuwait-Iraq border, in a hired car packed with veterinary supplies. The Americans refused to let him cross, but Kuwaiti border guards allowed him through and, with two Kuwaiti zoo workers, Anthony joined the tanks and convoys heading to Baghdad.

When he arrived at his destination, in the ruins of the city's once majestic al-Zawra park, he found a "horror story". Met by a tearful Husham Hussan, the zoo's deputy director, Anthony was initially tempted to give up.

Clouds of flies swarmed over the carcasses of dead animals. Baboons and monkeys were running free, while parrots, falcons and other escaped birds circled overhead. Some of the lions had escaped; a bear had killed some looters. The surviving animals, including lions, tigers and an Iraqi brown bear, were starving and deeply traumatised. There was no food or water.

With a handful of helpers, Anthony began the urgent work of rescuing the surviving animals. With the city's infrastructure destroyed, water had to be dragged by bucket from a stagnant canal, while donkeys provided meat for the carnivores. "We went out and bought donkeys off the street and the donkey always had a cart, so the guys wouldn't sell the donkey without the cart," he recalled. "I still think of how we left those carts all over Baghdad."

Within weeks American and even Iraqi soldiers were putting down their weapons and mucking in: "We had Republican Guard soldiers working with American troops in the zoo two weeks after they were killing each other on the battlefield," Anthony recalled. Local mullahs instructed their followers that Anthony and his team should be left unmolested.

He worked in Baghdad for six months, during which time he transformed the fate of the zoo. By the time he left, the surviving animals were healthy, the cages clean and the zoo a viable operation once again.

Anthony was presented with the Earth Day medal at the UN for his work and was decorated with the US Army 3rd Infantry Division regimental medal for his bravery. He told his story in *Babylon's Ark* (2007, co-written with Graham Spence). When a Los Angeles production studio announced that it had commissioned a major Hollywood film about the Baghdad Zoo rescue, the craggy, bearded Anthony suggested that Brad Pitt — "a good likeness" — should be asked to play his role.

Lawrence Anthony was born on September 17 1950 in Johannesburg, where his grandfather, a miner from Berwick-upon-Tweed, had emigrated in the 1920s to work in the gold mines. His father founded an insurance business and, as he established new offices around southern Africa, Lawrence was brought up in a series of small towns in rural Rhodesia, Zambia, Malawi and finally Zululand, South Africa.

Anthony followed his father into the insurance business and later worked in property development. But his heart was always in the African bush he had

loved as a child. He became involved in working with Zulu tribespeople to try to rebuild their historical relationship with the bush, and in the mid-1990s he decided to turn his hobby into a career, buying the 5,000-acre Thula Thula game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal.

Subsequently he founded the Earth Organisation, a conservation group that encourages pragmatic local action, and was instrumental in the creation of two new reserves, the Royal Zulu Biosphere in Zululand and the Mayibuye Game Reserve in Kwa Ximba, which provide local people with jobs and income through tourism, while helping to secure the future of the region's wildlife from creeping development.

Elephants had never been part of Anthony's plan for Thula Thula, but in 1999 he was telephoned by a conservation organisation which asked whether he would be willing to take on a herd of nine animals which had escaped from every enclosure they had ever been in, wreaking havoc across KwaZulu-Natal, and were considered highly dangerous. Realising that the elephants would be shot if he declined, Anthony agreed to give them a home.

"They were a difficult bunch, no question about it," he recalled. "Delinquents every one. But I could see a lot of good in them too. They'd had a tough time and were all scared, and yet they were looking after one another, trying to protect one another."

Anthony decided to treat the elephants as errant children, working to persuade them, through words and gestures, that they should not behave badly and that they could trust him. He concentrated his attention on Nana, the matriarch of the herd: "I'd go down to the fence and I'd plead with Nana not to break it down," he said. "I knew she didn't understand English, but I hoped she'd understand by the tone of my voice and my body language what I was saying. And one morning, instead of trying to break the fence down, she just stood there. Then she put her trunk through the fence towards me. I knew she wanted to touch me. That was a turning point." Soon they were allowed out into the reserve.

Anthony and his wife, Françoise, became so close to the elephants that on some occasions they almost had to chase them out of their living room. Days after Nana gave birth to a son, she emerged from the bush to show off the newborn to her human friend. A few years later, after Anthony's first grandchild was born, he returned the compliment, though he recalled that it was some time before his daughter-in-law would speak to him again.

He told the story of the elephants in *The Elephant Whisperer* (2009, also co-written with Graham Spence).

Baghdad was not Anthony's only experience of working in war zones. In 2006 he convinced the leaders of The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has been involved in a bloody struggle with the Ugandan government for more than two decades, to sign up to a conservation project to save the northern white

rhino, one of the world's rarest animals. The LRA, notorious for its use of child soldiers and accused of numerous atrocities, had established a stronghold in the Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, home to the last four members of the species living in the wild.

When Anthony heard that LRA leaders were meeting the Ugandan government in Sudan, he gatecrashed the talks and subsequently became the first outsider to be granted permission to enter their Congo base.

When LRA officials signed a ceasefire with the Ugandan government in 2007, it included pledges to protect the rhino. Sadly, the ceasefire subsequently collapsed, and the white rhinos have not been seen in Garamba in recent years. It is feared that they have all been killed.

As well as winning numerous conservation awards, Anthony sat on the governing council of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a member of the Church of Scientology not, as he explained, because he believed in "aliens and all that" but because he liked its account of the nature of body and spirit.

Lawrence Anthony is survived by his wife and by their two sons. It has been reported that after his death his beloved elephant herd came to his house to say goodbye.

Lawrence Anthony, born September 17 1950, died March 2 2012