

Protecting the Future of Nature

An Interview with **Ginette Hemley**,
Senior Vice President, Wildlife Conservation, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)



African Elephant in the Maasai Mara National Reserve captured by WWF-U.K. Ambassador and photographer Conor McDonnell while visiting Kenya with the Our Planet team and WWF Kenya in October 2018.

EDITORS' NOTE *Ginette Hemley oversees WWF's programs to secure a future in the wild for the world's most endangered and iconic species. An authority on endangered species and conservation policy, Hemley has developed and launched global recovery strategies for critically endangered species and has engaged key constituencies in unique partnerships to secure long-term solutions, from local community groups to national policy makers to multinational companies. She previously served as WWF's Senior Vice President for Strategy & Science, as Managing Vice President for Conservation, and as Director of TRAFFIC. A wildlife ecologist with over 30 years of international conservation experience, Hemley received a B.S. in biology from the College of William & Mary, studied history and philosophy at Oxford University, and is an ELIAS Fellow with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*



Ginette Hemley

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *For nearly 60 years, WWF (worldwildlife.org) has been protecting the future of nature. The world's leading conservation organization, WWF works in 100 countries and is supported by more than one million members in the United States and close to five million globally. WWF's unique way of working combines global reach with a foundation in science, involves action at every level from local to global, and ensures the delivery of innovative solutions that meet the needs of both people and nature.*

Will you highlight the history and heritage of WWF and how the organization has evolved?

WWF was founded in 1961 as an organization dedicated initially to saving endangered species at a time when wild species and wild places were coming into the public eye as something we needed to protect. Our evolution as an organization in many ways tracked the growth of the modern environmental movement. Many conservation groups sprung up around that time and we chose to focus internationally because we saw that the rate of environmental change in Africa, Asia and Latin America was really accelerating, particularly on the wildlife front, and few organizations were addressing it.

There was a massive problem with poaching and over-hunting so that was the initial focus of the organization. Our first international campaign was to save the black rhino, whose numbers were plummeting. Ninety-five percent of black rhinos were lost in Africa in 20 years. While we initially focused on individual species, as the science evolved to help us understand how nature was interconnected, we realized we had to consider whole ecosystems if we were going to save nature. We had to go bigger. We had to integrate our goals with development goals because it was often the case that the people living closest to nature in some of these far-flung places were facing high-levels of poverty, but also happened to be the most important stewards of nature and wildlife. We now focus on an integrated approach to conservation, looking at how people and nature interact and the importance of ensuring that both people and nature thrive.

What are the biggest threats to wildlife today?

Wildlife faces two big threats today. The most immediate one is the illegal wildlife trade, and the other one is habitat loss. The illegal wildlife trade has exploded as a threat in the last decade and is largely driven by growing demand, as you would expect, but is also facilitated by organized criminal networks. In places like Asia, where the middle class in China and Southeast Asian countries has grown, products that were once not so affordable have become widely affordable, such as ivory which comes from elephants.

This has led to a poaching crisis in Africa. For example, until four or five years ago, as much as 10 percent of Africa's elephants were lost each year to poaching for the illegal ivory trade. It is under better control now, in part because we have engaged with some of the largest e-commerce companies in the world whose platforms have become major marketplaces for illegal wildlife products. As with everything, wildlife products have increasingly gone online.

A few years ago, we began working with the biggest companies in the e-commerce sector, including Google and eBay and Microsoft, and the e-commerce giants in China, Alibaba

and Taobao, who have come together to commit to reducing the illegal online wildlife trade by 80 percent by the end of 2020. This has been a critical effort to get after one of the most important outlets for wildlife trafficking today.

Another area where technology is helping to accelerate conservation is with on-the-ground anti-poaching efforts. We have a great partnership with the company FLIR, one of the leading makers of sophisticated thermal imaging infrared cameras that detect heat over relatively long ranges. This provides park rangers the ability to detect intruders coming into conservation areas that may be intending to poach. By setting up enhanced surveillance systems with this equipment around the perimeter of parks or wildlife reserves, rangers are better able to quickly detect and take action against potential poachers.

We are involved in an effort right now to scale up the use of those cameras in Kenya to help secure the rhino population across the country over the next few years and we are very excited about bringing the new technologies with FLIR and other partners into our conservation work.

To address the huge challenge of habitat loss, we work on several levels. Globally, we tackle the major forces behind it, such as agricultural and infrastructure development, by promoting better policies and practices within government institutions and companies. On the ground the formula for saving endangered species is really quite simple in principle. We need to secure critical habitat. We need to ensure that wildlife has enough to eat and is protected from poaching. And importantly, we need to ensure that the people living closest to wildlife have a stake in conservation. To do this, we help governments around the world strengthen their systems of protected areas, like the wonderful national parks we have in the United States, including ensuring that local communities benefit from those protected areas through ecotourism, park employment or other economic opportunities. We have wonderful examples of where the formula is working – we are today seeing the recovery of endangered tigers in India and Nepal, and of elephants and rhinos in Namibia – with benefits to communities growing. That is a formula for success. ●