

David Hoyle, Gibbs' 1982-187 (June 2017)

We were saddened to hear of the passing of David Hoyle in June 2017.

The following obituary was compiled from contributions by dozens of David's friends, colleagues and family members:



David John HOYLE (1969–2017), of Crondall, Surrey, was a social scientist who devoted his life to protecting African forests and natural ecosystems for the biodiversity they harbour; for the indigenous people and communities that depend on them; and to secure their vital role in mitigating dangerous climate change for the benefit of us all.

The second of three children born to Mike and Marion Hoyle, David enjoyed a happy upbringing in Farnham with a spell in Egypt (1975–77). His love of wildlife was sparked by his maternal Grandfather, John who introduced him to the trees, birds and flowers in his garden. David schooled at Barrow Hills before going to Lancing College, West Sussex for O and A Levels. A geography field trip to Malawi seems to have first triggered David's lifelong passion for Africa. He went back to teach in Zimbabwe before reading Human Geography at Reading University (1988–91).

He then volunteered with VSO in Mpika, Zambia (1992–94) on the Integrated Rural Development Project, a pioneering programme strengthening institutional capacity of local government to plan and implement decentralised rural development. Working as an Appropriate Technology Trainer, David threw himself into his work and the local community, helping them to identify solutions using local materials, and easily adopted techniques to support self-sufficiency. Building on the work of previous volunteers, David scaled up the introduction of innovative clay ovens, reducing demand for charcoal and saving household expenses. He also developed community approaches to ox-cart making, thereby improving transportation of goods and people leading to economic and community benefits. He also trained livestock keepers to use sheep and cattle skins to make leather, thereby increasing their incomes.

David then completed a Masters in Natural Resource Management at Edinburgh University (1994–95). A series of conservation related voluntary and research jobs followed, in Scotland, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, leading to the first of many spells with WWF, working in Zaire, Kenya and Tanzania, for which he raised funds and promoted the essential social aspects of conservation.

In 1999, David ventured to Nguti, in the densely forested South West Region of Cameroon with the Wildlife Conservation Society, managing community based conservation projects in the biodiversity hotspot that spans the Cameroon-Nigeria border. There, he engaged with local communities, traditional authorities, government decision makers and the private sector alike to address threats to biodiversity, and raise funds for his conservation work – skills that served him well thereafter. David employed a number of young graduates from the local community to build his team. One of them, Marceline, would become his wife in 2002. From that point on, David was widely known in Cameroon as “Moyo” or “in-law”, in Pidgin – a language he spoke fluently. Before leaving, David founded the NGO Nature Cameroon to sustain efforts after the WCS project closed. After his years of service to the community, the people of Nguti bestowed on him the title of “Quarter Chief”. Thenceforth David, alongside the region’s elites and diaspora, never tired of contributing to local development and environmental protection in Nguti.

Returning to UK in 2004, the young family chose Crondall Village as their home. David managed WWF’s Eastern African Ecoregion programme in Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique protecting the region’s marine ecosystems and rapidly declining coastal forest. As well as securing substantial resources from UK and multilateral donors, David was one of the early movers to court large corporate sponsors such as Old Mutual, Vodafone and Barclays to boost funds. During this time, he also worked on the “Good Woods” initiative, an alliance of wood-carvers and traders, community development organisations and conservation groups in Kenya to optimise sustainable management of sought-after hardwoods for musical instruments and wood-carving, improving revenues for local communities.

In 2007, Africa beckoned again, taking the family to Dar es Salaam where David worked with his colleague and close friend Dr Amani Ngusaru to establish the Coastal East Africa Initiative which went on to become one of the best-performing of WWF’s 12 global priority programmes. In particular, they worked across the WWF Network to bring north and south together, inspiring some excellent collaboration, and began transformational work to improve tuna fisheries and forest trade throughout the region. David also produced a series of videos that bear witness to the devastating effects of climate change on wildlife, freshwater habitats, urban environments and local livelihoods in fragile East Africa.

Thence to Cameroon once more from 2010–12, where, as WWF’s Conservation Director he coordinated programmes and large teams supporting anti-poaching, law enforcement and Protected

Area management across the country. He also led policy and high-level advocacy work to protect Cameroon's forests from the rapidly emerging threats of mining, forestry and agro-industrial investments. He spearheaded one of Congo Basin's first "REDD+" projects to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, as part of global efforts to mitigate climate change. Starting with WWF and continuing later with Wildlife Works, David worked intensively to secure the almost pristine 1-million-hectare Ngoyla Mintom forest massif from logging and land use change, a long-term initiative that is gradually gaining ground. He also facilitated the production of Phil Agland's second documentary for BBC about the plight of the Baka Pygmies in Cameroon.

For the last four years, David has worked with ProForest, Oxford, where, as Conservation and Land Use Director, he brought his two decades of hands-on experience to bear on the challenges posed by the expansion of agriculture and forestry in tropical developing countries, thereby making a huge contribution to efforts to reduce deforestation. Travelling widely, he led work on testing, refining and negotiating consensus around global methodologies to identify High Conservation Values and High Carbon Stocks, both essential to guide decision making in a new generation of agricultural development that integrates conservation, climate-smart decision making and community development, in face of ever-growing pressure for land to meet the burgeoning demand for commodities.

His patience and foresight was invaluable in turning vision into reality, especially in Gabon where he worked between 2013 and 2017 with Olam International on a nationally important project to establish over 50,000 ha of independently certified, carbon neutral, socially responsible and biodiversity-friendly palm plantations. Always focused on the end goal, David was able to reconcile diverse stakeholders with very different priorities and synthesise many overlapping land use demands to broker spatial and management plans which satisfied very high standards of performance.

He also headed the Africa Palm Oil Initiative, under which major Private Sector companies who are signed up to the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020, negotiated commitments and a set of principles with Governments to ensure zero-deforestation supply chains for operations throughout Central and West Africa. This work culminated in seven African Governments signing the TFA 2020 Marrakesh Declaration for the Sustainable Development of the Oil Palm Sector in Africa, at the COP22 Climate Conference in Nov 2016.

As remarkable as his professional achievements, is the way in which David achieved them. Colleagues from every institution he served have shared testimonies of a man who was a treasured and respected member of every team he worked with for his very special combination of talents: adaptable, collaborative, constructive, energetic, modest, patient, practical, positive, but also honest about challenges and problems, a man who took his responsibilities seriously, but always did so with patience, humour and warm-heartedness to others, brightening every meeting and encounter. His approach to his work and life were one and the same - David engaged people as equals in an open, respectful way, always with a smile on his face and always with a sense of fun. David was both practical and firm in his judgement of how to carry out fair and equitable development, often taking a tough stance in order to ensure the right outcome – and more often than not, got what he wanted!

David was also an accomplished photographer – his wildlife pictures often featured in company publications. His human touch enabled his lens to capture the perfect moments of people too, looking relaxed, happy or both.

In his private life, David was a committed family man - a loyal son, beloved brother and a proud husband and father. But his love and generosity did not stop at his own 3 children – he also put many members of his extended family, and other promising students from the Nguti community through school and university.

David actively engaged with every community in which the family settled, participating enthusiastically in church and social life, supporting charitable causes, including years of support to an orphanage in Dar es Salaam. When in UK, David visited local schools, inspiring youngsters about the importance of protecting the environment, and avoiding climate change.

The huge outpouring of grief following the shock announcement David's departure - from his immediate and extended family, from the entire community of Crondall and many others he has lived in, and the world of conservation across many continents - is testament to the love and respect he shared with, and earned from all who had the pleasure to meet him.

There is no explanation that satisfies our efforts to understand the cruel irony that, after a life dedicated to protecting forests, and evading the very real dangers of living, working and travelling in remote parts of Africa, David was snatched away by a modest Cherry tree, blown onto his car roof by unseasonably high winds at 07.10 am on 6th June 2017 - just 5 minutes from his home in Crondall. He died instantly, and probably didn't even see it coming.

The faithful, as David was, struggle to find some divine purpose in his early exit. The scientists among us might explain it as a cruel case of the climate change feedback, prematurely taking away one of the all-too-rare persons who have committed so much effort to address climate change, thereby exacerbating the challenge of reducing its predicted devastating impacts on the habitats and people that David held most precious.

In life, David always had a knack of gathering people together and galvanising them to do more than he, or they, could possibly have done alone. In death, he's done it one last time – plans are already advancing to put together a fund to sustain the work and spirit that David embodied. He will not be forgotten.

David is survived by his wife, Marceline and their three children, his brother Nick, sister Julia, and both his parents.