Obituary

Peter Mundy
1941–2023

Into Africa, a wildlife researcher’s legacy in a changing world

Professor Peter Mundy passed away in February 2023 after a spirited battle with cancer. Widely known for his scientific work on vultures—a lifelong passion studying threatened birds and human communities living alongside them. Peter’s journey across space and time took him from England to Africa, particularly Nigeria and later Zimbabwe. There, he championed ornithology, wildlife research, and mentored many scientists. He dedicated his life to training and changing the racial profile of African ornithologists and conservation ecologists—transforming from predominantly white to a more representative demographics of the continent.

Perhaps a brief reflection on Peter’s legacy in Zimbabwe where we, as black ecologists studied, could offer a glimpse into his contribution to science and transformation.

A man’s legacy is painted by many hands, those closest and furthest, and the strokes differ according to each person’s estimation and interaction with the departed. In our Nguni culture, a great man is celebrated with poems recited by Imbongi for posterity. We will not recite Peter’s prestigious international academic, research, and social achievements, nor his love for his friends and family. Our duty here as African Wildlife researchers is to recall his life, extraordinary personality, wisdom, and unsung efforts at championing black wildlife researchers.

Working as a wildlife researcher in Africa presents financial, logistic, material, and human capital challenges that combine to slow progress in research and implementation. The prevailing conditions experienced by Africans persist despite globalization and technological advances. These challenges can test the sensibility of an ordinary Westerner who is used to much smoother bureaucratic processes. In this regard, Peter was different. Although he grew up in England and retained a cockney accent, he was adventurous enough to leave for Africa in 1972 with a backpack filled with passion, flair, humour, propensity for action, and a dose of irreverence to fuel a chequered life. We’ve heard snippets of his exciting early life that included a musical stint, dancing with vultures, and of course, his famous book ‘The Comparative Biology of Southern African Vultures’ published the year we were born.

We remember our first sighting of Peter as he cycled into the National University of Science & Technology campus in Bulawayo dressed in his trademark khakis when most senior academics used cars. In person, he had a strong handshake. He would look one in the eye and always expect forceful interaction. He insisted on the use of first names, which was at first uncomfortable because culturally, we’re taught to refer to seniors and teachers using appropriate titles. Of course, the elephant in the room was race because Peter was a white professor. In Africa, and in wildlife research, racial identity is historically associated with imbalances in power dynamics in and outside the class. Therefore, we knew our relationship with Peter would shape our learning, thought, and career. Fortunately, Peter’s humour and candour won over to his unusual ways.

Compared to other undergraduate classes marked with frenzied note-taking, Peter’s lectures were weird because he proceeded using a series of thought-provoking questions. We later learned this was called the Socratic method, an effective way of learning and thinking. Our class dialogues were followed by suggested readings, some which he brought from his own collection. He always made a note of who took a book with the pencil tucked above his ear. Such generosity and uncanny ability to create more questions than answers during lectures caused constant student traffic into his office. After all, he had a Shona quotation on his wall saying nanga ayifamberi mwere, which means a doctor does not look for patients, the sick must find the doctor. The proactive attitude to life stirred slowly and diffused into our engagements with him, permeating to other areas of our lives. Through patience, he built a sense of trust, respect, and collegiality.
Peter helped nurture in us a sense of responsibility and humility, something we suspect he taught his own children. Alongside academic excellence, we learned basic life skills such as changing tires, pitching tents, orienteering, and other seemingly menial tasks. For example, we interned at organizations conducting animal research but were expected to show activity beyond office work. We helped to mend fences, water plants, clean animal pens, and draft grocery lists. He always stressed the importance of knowing the work, reminding us that money followed work and passion, a marked departure from graduating with a degree whilst having little practical real-world experience. This mindset does not come naturally and needs to be taught through patience and example, hence the value of Peter’s mentorship.

Lack of opportunity has been cited as a barrier to representation of black people in STEM. We cannot say that Peter had a specific programme to address this, but he did his share by linking us to paid and volunteer opportunities across his extensive network. Through Peter’s efforts, we gained valuable experiences at Birdlife and his biodiversity consultancy work. Several of us went on to study postgraduate degrees at top universities because he personally helped us secure those scholarships. Peter’s generosity extended to many other passionate and curious students across time, and he was active, even near his final days as he battled cancer. A selfless advocate of his students, sometimes we would say children, but to him we were now colleagues as he always looked to the next group.

It appears to us that a revolution to increase the representation of previously marginalized communities in STEM, does not require a gargantuan budget or crafting complicated policies in the ivory towers of universities. Peter, through his passion, sustained effort, and advocacy for black students, showed that the nature of individuals in institutions matters. To him, we were never just numbers, but hope for a better tomorrow. He consistently confronted cultural barriers, senseless bureaucracy to bring the field of African wildlife research to everyone! in Peter Mundy, we have lost a great wildlife researcher, friend, advocate, and father. But his legacy still lives in the many lives he touched.

Abraham Dabengwa\textsuperscript{1} & Mduduzi Ndlovu\textsuperscript{2}
\textsuperscript{1}University of the Witwatersrand
\textsuperscript{2}University of Mpumalanga