



**Reinventing African Chieftaincy  
in the Age of AIDS, Gender,  
Governance, and Development**

Edited by Donald I. Ray, Tim Quinlan,  
Keshav Sharma, and Tacita A.O. Clarke

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# **21 Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary: Contributions of Ghana's Traditional Leaders to Partnership Success with the Calgary Zoo, Canada**

Brian Keating

## **I. AN EXAMPLE OF THE CHIEFTAINCY LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP**

The Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary is a classic example of the positive influence a locally intact traditional government can have. The partnership they forged with Ghana's Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) and Canada's Calgary Zoo presents an enviable position for the Wechiau people that is presently being viewed as an example of a positive economic model. With ever-increasing human populations creating a situation of compromised remaining wilderness areas, cooperative beneficial conservation efforts that preserve both biodiversity and cultural integrity and at the same time spin out an economic base of possibilities are an excellent

solution. Traditional national park policies seldom take into consideration the local inhabitants who often live in a subsistence manner at the parks perimeter. Those who perceive no benefit to the parks preservation and protection may soon become a detriment to the very existence of the park in changing times. The incredible insights of the traditional chiefs of the Wechiau area are a tribute to their organizational power and to the field of modern conservation thought.

The fruitfulness of this partnership was made all the more evident by the visits to Calgary of the Ghanaian Wechiau chiefs in January 2003 and July 2006 and my own trips to Ghana in 2001 and 2003. This chapter is organized around the 2001–2003 trips. An appendix to provide more context has been added.

## II. THE FIRST VISIT TO THE HIPPO SANCTUARY IN WECHIAU, UPPER WEST REGION GHANA: BRIAN'S JOURNAL, 2001

At the conclusion of a July 2001 ZooFari safari expedition into the best of Botswana and Zimbabwe, my wife, Dee, and I ventured north for a return visit to Ghana, a country that we had worked in eight years earlier; hence the Calgary Zoo's connection to this part of Africa.

A full day's rugged journey north put us into the heart of Lobi country where the dominant architecture of the local people consists of a fascinating assortment of square, flat-roofed mud homes in the midst of their cultivated land. We were introduced to the chiefs of the region who sat us in the shade to observe our welcoming ceremony. The ceremony's high-energy dancing accompanied by some intense drumming set the tone for the next week of exploration.

Soon after we arrived, we were paddling downstream on the very muddy Black Volta River, swollen to within a metre of its maximum level. The quiet current carried us silently with two paddlers guiding the narrow craft through the reserve. Thick green tropical forest towered along the river's edge, sometimes nearly closing in the sky above. A loud snort and grunt alerted us to our first sighting of two small hippo pods within the first thirty minutes. We saw their typical heads peering at us from some distance and caught sight of a youngster among the three that we counted.

That night we slept in a tree platform erected for tourists, in the forest beside the Volta River. As the daytime sounds of birds diminished at sunset, the forest began its nocturnal serenade of frogs that continued throughout the night. During the night, fruit bats came and went in the canopy surrounding us, feeding on ripe figs, and, below, we occasionally heard the slosh of the hippo coming and going to their hippo meadows at the edge of the forest. The dawn chorus of birds was some of the best I have heard in any of the tropics, with the rich river forest providing an excellent habitat for a variety of bird life. Investing in projects like this, I believe, adds such depth and meaning to our work at the zoo.

### III. THE REMARKABLE VISIT OF THE WECHIAU CHIEFS TO CALGARY ZOO, 2003

From the moment the chiefs walked through the Canadian customs door at the Calgary International Airport, I knew it was the right decision to bring the Wechiau-Naa (a paramount chief), the Tokali-Naa and the Gorungu-Naa (each divisional chiefs) over for the official opening of the Calgary Zoo's new Destination Africa exhibits on 10 January 2003. They appeared to float through those doors, walking with such dignity and grace that only African royalty can do. From that point onward, the momentum continued to grow throughout their eleven-day visit, forever cementing a long-term relationship with the Calgary Zoo and their new Hippo Sanctuary in Northern Ghana, West Africa.

This relationship officially began in 1999 with the first of several grants from the Calgary Zoo Conservation Fund to the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC), a non-government organization that raises funds and manages appropriate ecological projects in Ghana. Progressive zoos around the world have been steadily increasing their investments in conservation outreach projects as they move towards an evolving zoological park philosophy, that of conservation support for the worlds diminishing wild places. As part of a plan to solidify a long-term relationship between the NCRC, Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary and the Calgary Zoo, the Calgary Zoo invited the chiefs to Canada to officially open the "Destination Africa" exhibits, the largest exhibit development in the history of the

zoo with C\$36 million invested, featuring amongst others, a hippo exhibit complete with underwater viewing. A follow-up to their visit culminated eight months later in September 2003 and included the “enskinment” of the zoo’s former president and CEO, Alex Graham, as an honorary divisional chief of the twenty-two villages that surround the sanctuary, and the author’s “enskinment” as a chief of one of those villages.

The chief’s January 2003 visit was a unique opportunity to conduct public education and fundraising amongst Calgarians, thereby creating personal links between the people of Calgary and the people of the hippo sanctuary in northern Ghana public. The chiefs’ visit began with a private hour-long meeting with Calgary Mayor David Bronconnier that included a long-standing Calgary tradition of the “White Hatter” ceremony. The mayor himself gave the white cowboy hats to the chiefs. At the opening ceremony of the zoo’s Destination Africa a day later, the Tokali-Naa gave a particularly moving speech, followed by the Gorungu-Naa performing a remarkable ceremony uniting the spirits of the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary and the spirits of the Calgary Zoo in front of some four hundred guests, and a variety of both print and television media. This traditional Ghanaian ceremony was conducted in English so all could understand. In the days that followed, the chiefs spoke to children at three Calgary schools. They attended a private wine and cheese gathering with sixty guests as well as a sold-out banquet of 260 people. The chiefs attended fund-raising functions held at six private homes in Calgary and Banff. The chiefs took part in evening dance celebrating Africa and the northern Ghana hippo sanctuary. The dance, organized by Calgary’s African community, took place at the zoo’s new “Safari Lodge Canada” banquet facility. Some 200 people attended. Another fund-raising and public education tactic was to have the chiefs take part in five souvenir poster signing sessions, thus allowing the public access to the chiefs at the Calgary Zoo’s hippo exhibit. In addition to the busy schedule that the chiefs followed, we arranged time to tour our mountain landscapes in Banff National Park. I will never forget the look on their faces when they dismounted the snowmobiles at the top of one of the ski ridges at Sunshine Village Ski Resort, followed by a high-speed quad chair lift to the top of a mountain. The sun was shining with warmth under a cobalt blue Rocky Mountain sky, and there was a panoramic view from the top that dreams are made from, complete with two Royal Canadian Mounted Police in their red uniforms. The chiefs

explained at the time that “there will be endless stories” upon their return home. And indeed, there will be endless stories in Calgary too, with the legacy they have left behind from their remarkable visit.

#### IV. GHANA’S WECHIAU HIPPO SANCTUARY CHIEFS CREATE TWO NEW “DEVELOPMENT CHIEFS” FROM THE CALGARY ZOO, 2003: BRIAN’S JOURNAL

September 19: We were up at 4 a.m. to get to Nairobi Airport in time for our 7:30 a.m. flight to Accra, Ghana. The five and a half hour flight across Africa travelled through three time zones from Nairobi, Kenya, arriving under cloudy skies in Accra, Ghana. The Accra Airport has had some serious improvements since our last visit some twenty-seven months ago. Customs reception and booths were now air-conditioned. An airport rep was there to greet us with a hand-made Calgary Zoo sign, and she escorted us through to meeting up with John Mason, the founding executive director of the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) just outside the main terminal.

We drove in two vehicles first to Alex and Heather Graham’s hotel, the Capital Court, located a two-minute walk from John and Martina Mason’s home and office. Soon we were having lunch with Martina, sharing stories with good energy.

After a wonderful reunion with the Tokali Naa of hugging, handshakes, and a volume of high-energy greetings, we first drove to the Ministry of Tourism, and met the deputy minister, Boniface Sadique. We drove together in a convoy to the “Castle,” or main government building complex, which two hundred years ago, was a slave-trade castle. The meeting with Ghana’s vice-president, His Excellency Ali Mahama, came off extremely well, with a dramatic entry into his office, complete with television cameras rolling, newspaper reporters, and radio. Speeches were given by Ghana’s vice-president and Alex, making for some good sound bites for the press. His office was nicely appointed, cool and quiet, a perfect quiet place for the media to gather, film, and record.

The next visit was with the minister of tourism, Jake Obsetisibi-Lamprey, which was a much more relaxed visit. Sometime after 6 p.m., the meetings finished, and we all headed to a Chinese restaurant to have dinner with the NCRC board of directors. We enjoyed some moving and meaningful speeches made by the Calgary Zoo's president (Alex), John Mason, and several members of the board.

September 20: We were up again at 4 a.m. to try for a 5 a.m. departure for our fourteen-hour drive to the northern part of Ghana. Sadly, one of our drivers was an hour late. While this gave us further chance to visit with Martina and to see her children, it didn't help our day's agenda.

We drove north to Kumasi and continued to Mole National Park, stopping only briefly along the way for breakfast and for gas and some snacks. Dinner was enjoyed pool-side at the Mole National Park, where we saw a number of Kob, Defassa waterbuck, bushbuck, and baboons. The landscape was rich and green with water everywhere. On the way in, much of the road was covered in mud, making for some very muddy driving. At times the windshield washers were hardly able to keep up with sheets of red mud that covered the truck.

We finally arrived into the village of Wechiau in the dark at about 9:00 p.m. There was a large, enthusiastic crowd outside the paramount chiefs palace waiting to welcome us. Amongst the crowd quickly emerged the friendly, smiling face of the Gorungu Naa, complete with a repeat of the kind of welcome we had had with the Tokali Naa two years earlier. There were many others with extended hands and greetings, and we were quickly shuffled inside the Wechiau Naa's palace to a waiting row of brand new split bamboo reclining chairs, obviously made for this occasion. The palace itself was completely repainted both inside and out, making an impressive first sight under the dim, low-wattage solar-powered lights.

The room was full of dignitaries whom we greeted according to custom with handshakes, although I suspect protocol was breached when the Wechiau Naa hugged each of us, giggling all the while. After the greetings and pouring of libations, the Gorungu Naa began the offerings first of water, then a "pito" beer, finishing with their own homemade cane spirit, "akpateshi." This final drink needed to be immediately swallowed to try to avoid the gag reflex. The beer was a traditional beer, very green and weak, brewed from millet. We each had a mug of this. John led our delegation with his usual finesse, introducing "according to custom"

the reason for our visit. He introduced all of us in succession, with each introduction interpreted by the Gorungu Naa for the Wechiau Naa and the others in the room. The occasional goat ran through the palace doors transecting the room to the courtyard, almost stepping on our feet as they beetled through. The Wechiau Naa took in the events with smiles and enthusiasm, sitting on his new wooden equivalent of a Lazy Boy chair.

Finally, less than forty-five minutes after we had arrived, John asked for permission to be excused so that we could rest up for the events to follow over the next two days. About twenty minutes drive down the dirt road, we came into the clearing where the mud huts of the “Mark Donahue” sanctuary lodge stood. We were shown to our rooms by the Tokali Naa, with him proudly showing us the new Wechiau T-shirts and other gifts lying on the third mud bed in each of our two rooms. There were new mosquito nets nicely hanging over our single beds, and the place was appropriately lit with the small oil lamps. Needless to say, after fourteen hours of rough travel, we were very pleased to get horizontal for a good night’s sleep.

September 21: A beautiful sunrise greeted us, illuminating a thick fog that hung heavily over the river valley. By the time we walked to the Black Volta River for our water safari, the fog had burned off, and the day was heating up. Our boats were emptied of the water they fill them with (to prevent wood-eating bugs from prematurely eating the boat), and soon we were off into the swollen river waters of the Volta. John said he had never seen the water this high. Indeed, an incredible amount of water has flowed over the river banks, flooding some way into the surrounding forest and further into the grassy hippo-grazing fields. The hippo hide, where we were to spend the night sleeping, was surrounded by water, rendering it a difficult place to get to and to sleep on, so the idea was floated and accepted to put off that idea until our next visit here. Apparently the blind had been rebuilt to accommodate four people for an overnight!

We soon paddled out of the flooded forest edge and were happily canoeing at speed down-river in the main channel. The rains having been so good this year have greened up the environment in a most impressive way. Many of the trees were obviously fruiting, with grey plantain eaters and bearded barbets being among the first birds we saw. Our boats had hardly any freeboard, but the boatmen handled them expertly, manoeuvring our homemade crafts in and out of the flooded forest with ease. At

one point, we attempted to get a glimpse of some monkeys in a thickly vegetated tree, passing under tangled branches in an attempt to see the hidden primates. We crossed the river to Burkina-Faso and headed up stream in the quiet waters amongst the riverine forest we found there. Some corn grew in the flooded water, frustrating the farmer, I'm sure. I can only imagine how incredibly beautiful the river would be at dawn, shrouded in the usual morning fog, canoeing in and around the quiet waters of the flooded forest. It would be a *National Geographic* moment for sure, with heron, kingfishers, and other river-edge birds at their dawn best. We did not see the hippos, as there simply was not enough time to head down to where there was a possibility of seeing them, but it didn't matter. The experience of the river was plenty powerful enough. A future multi-day trip here would be an outstanding experience.

We were off the river by 10 a.m., heading back to our camp via the homes of several Lobi people. We were introduced to the families of each dwelling and taken inside to see their incredibly effective steel forge utilizing animal-skin bellows on a creatively mud-built blast-furnace system. They make all their farm implements using this device, fashioned from any left-over steel items they can scrounge.

Pigs, chickens, and goats ran around this way and that; we climbed a log ladder onto the roof to peer into the granaries and watched some grain being pulverized into flour with an ancient grinding mill. Its engine was rhythmically pounding out blue smoke, and Alex took delight in explaining how the coarseness of the flour is controlled and how the engine is cooled by an assortment of 50-gallon drums full of water with piping connected. The best use of a Shell 50 gallon drum, however, was for the "still" used for making their "*akpateshi*" from sugar. The oil drum is an obviously effective tool for making the drink.

After lunch we headed back to Tokali for a mini-Durbar, a shadow of what we are to expect tomorrow. The Tokali Naa met us upon arrival and took us into his palace. We entered into a small room with an impressive doorway of thick mud columns, the room filled with members of the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary (WCHS) board, ready and keen to share this part of the celebration with us. We sat in the same chairs that we sat in last night in the Wechiau Naa's palace and once again observed the tradition of greetings with handshakes, pouring of libations, and then drinks, first of water, followed by the *akpateshi*.

Once the formalities were out of the way, we proceeded to the shade of a very large tree, where we were treated to some superb dancing and drumming and xylophone playing. Some speeches were made, but they were kept short, with Alex being instructed to just allude to much more to be said at tomorrow's enskinment. It was wonderful how, the Tokali Naa pointed out that it was an animal, the hippo, that has brought about such a momentous and important occasion bringing together Canadians and Ghanaians.

After, we went back into the Tokali Naa's home and were fed a meal of *fufu* (a huge portion each!), with groundnut soup with boiled and fried goat. These were served by the Tokali Naa's beautiful wife, Misposana. We also met his three-year-old son, Issahaku. It was excellent, but I think most of the Calgary Zoo delegation, including me, had some difficulty eating it in the traditional way with our hands, not to mention the sheer volume of the starchy food. Much laughing, banter, and teasing of us all was followed by some warm words of future partnerships and continuance of our assistance with the Hippo Sanctuary.

Finally, more than a dozen yams and a goat ram were paraded into the cramped confines of the house, the goat being tied up right behind me. These items were soon presented to Alex, who expressed much gratitude. John later said that all these gifts will be accepted and arrangements will be made to take them to Bolgatanga, the site of another NCRC office where John will be able to sell or otherwise utilize them. It would be very wrong to "re-gift" them within the traditional area. Both Alex and I were presented with some fine Lobi "Jinn" carvings, an important icon in their traditional beliefs, and our wives received lovely bracelets.

Once again, John asked to be excused from the Tokali Naa's presence so his guests could enjoy an early evening to rest up for the festivities to follow. When we arrived back home, there was a high-energy party in full swing by the locals, dancing, playing the xylophone, and drumming. We enjoyed their dance for some time, illuminating the performers with our headlamps, which increased their desire to dance even more.

Later, after the band and dancers had left, we went to sleep by the sound of a light rain and some spectacular lightning in the area, complete with some serious-looking clouds looming.

September 22: I was awake from about 3:30 a.m., still feeling tired, but too excited about what was to come to fall back asleep. We arose to

a thick fog completely surrounding the camp and enjoyed a cold bucket shower in the outdoor stalls. Heather stopped into the adjacent stall, completely private but both of us could see each other's heads. I suggested this will be entertaining back in Calgary if the staff hear I had a shower with the zoo director's wife!

The fog quickly burned off, and by 8 a.m. we were heading into Wa to meet a number of northern dignitaries, first making a very short stop at a school in Wechiau to present a very short talk and some pens to some 500 kids! The children were outfitted in yellow uniforms and looked full of life and excitement. They virtually engulfed Alex, Heather, and Dee as we attempted our departure.

Wa, the largest town in the north, is about an hour from the Hippo Sanctuary on rough roads. There we paid courtesy calls to the regional minister, the Hon. William Ayambire, a good friend of the Tokali Naa; the district chief executive, the Hon. Sanuun Mogtali; and the Hon. G.B. Tangu. We enjoyed a filling lunch at the Catholic mission, after visiting some smock shops and the weavers of the strip-cloth that the gowns are made from. We drove back to the main office complex of the government, and to our surprise we ended up being escorted in a white vehicle procession of six cars full of officials with the head of the motorcade blazing with rotating yellow lights! Impressive!

We arrived in Wechiau an hour late at 3:30 p.m. to a crowd of about seven hundred people! As soon as we emerged from the vehicles, we were engulfed by well-wishers and important individuals and were ushered to our seats. Alex looked up at me as he settled into his seat and expressed being completely taken by surprise at the magnitude of the event! He immediately began looking over the short notes for his speech he would be asked to make after his enskinment, getting some help from John in working out which dignitaries to welcome first. I did my best to capture what I could on video but found it incredibly difficult to be a part of the ceremony and record it too! I moved around in the crowd filming under what was now the hottest time of the day! It has to have been at least 40°C.

Libations were performed according to custom, inviting the ancestors of Wechiau to observe and bless the gathering, the words heard by a very effective amplification system that only occasionally squealed. Then a blessing was read. We sat under a shade structure that sported an impressive

banner honouring the Calgary Zoo as a partner. Across the courtyard from where we sat, at least a dozen chiefs were seated, including the Wechiau Naa. A huge parasol was held over the Wechiau Naa, honouring him with shade.

Three microphones were set up, at least two TV cameras were there, and I saw at least one individual recording for radio and several photographers presumably for the print media. A variety of speeches were given, all focusing on the importance of partnerships and further possibilities. Some improved roads were promised by at least one of the politicians, with John noticing the Tokali Naa taking notes on their promises for later follow up. One of the amazing things to see was an official speech translator who madly took notes of the speeches made in English and then repeated the major highlights in the local language after the speaker was done. This process of course dragged out the already very long speech-making the Ghanaians are famous for!

Then came time for the “enskinment,” first of Alex, as then-president of the Calgary Zoo, followed by me. The drums began, and a select crowd of observers and participants crowded around Alex, leading him to a chair that was placed in the middle of the courtyard. The intensity of the experience was heightened with ululating women and drumming, making the event very exciting. Alex sat humbly with a grin as his shoes were removed, replaced by some striking hand-embroidered tall leather boots, and as he sat surrounded by attendants, he was robed with two very heavy but elaborately laced smocks.

Occasionally a woman would appear waving a light silk scarf. As she danced and sang praises, she would momentarily allow the scarf to fall and drape over Alex as he sat. I found out later that this is a sign of deep respect. The actual “skin” part of the enskinment consisted of a Kob skin (a type of antelope found in the area), which was lying on the ground in front of the chair where Alex sat. It was situated in such a way that his feet and stool were on the skin. In the south, the same ceremony would use a stool rather than a skin, hence the Asante concept of “enstoolment” when one is crowned a chief.

The entire event was over in about as long as it took for the five or so people appointed to dress him, making the actual “enskinment” event very short indeed. Later, John explained that a real chief would need to repeat a sworn statement, but this being the first honorary chieftaincy ever

done in this part of Ghana, or ever witnessed or even conducted by anyone of those present, they may have not known what they should really do or how elaborate the actual event should be. The energy in the enskinment, however, was overwhelming, with people clapping, music playing, and so much commotion. With the video I was able to focus on many happy smiling faces amongst the onlookers. All the time, Alex sat, taking in all the activity around him, his now cherry-red face covered in perspiration as his own sauna developed under his layers. A foot stool made of leather appeared, and he was led with much fanfare to his new position with the chiefs, in the shade, very near the Wechiau Naa.

I was next. I handed the video camera to my wife, Dee, and the process began. Like Alex, the Wechiau Naa was the one who adorned me with the second robe, chanting something as he made three symbolic attempts to place it over my head. My shoes were removed, too, my feet then fitted with some very nice boots. Another stool appeared, and I was then led to a seat beside Alex. The scene from my perspective was amazing, with activity bustling all around me as I was dressed. I saw Dee out there in the crowd, amongst so many people, attempting to film the event. It was all so powerful, so overwhelming, and so humbling. This is a position for life, and, as John later said, one is only able to exit it in the end by death!

After I sat, Alex was asked to present his acceptance speech as the newly enskinned and the very first sanctuary chief of the twenty-two villages surrounding the park. His eloquent and sincere style of speaking was very much appreciated by the audience, and during the interpretation of several comments of his, the crowd burst out in applause. He noted that Calgary South Rotary promised a well, which would be matched by the Calgary Zoo's donation for the same. Calgarian Colin Glassco also wished to drill another well, if all goes according to plan with the first wells drilled. The Calgary Zoo's Donna Sheppard would soon be arriving, with her first \$10,000 budget for assisting the development of the sanctuary. There was the hope of good news regarding the provincial funding from Alberta MLA Mark Hlady. He stated that what at that time was a proposed book on Ghana chieftaincy by Professor Don Ray would include a chapter on the Hippo Sanctuary. The video would be used for a million people a year to hear of the sanctuary at the hippo exhibit at the zoo. Finally, he encouraged the government of Ghana to support and respect the incredible dedication and visionary approach of the work

of the NCRC and its founding director, John Mason. His work is being taken very seriously by many other communities as a possible solution to their various conservation needs. The event finished with more gifts being presented to Alex and me, as well as to Heather and Dee. Following a photo session, lots of hand-shaking and congratulations, another goat, and many more yams made another appearance, this time presented to John in recognition of his work and assistance in creating the ultimate link to the Calgary Zoo.

We retired to the school yard where a large outdoor light illuminated a well-organized line-up of children's school desks, where we sat and received beer, soft drinks, and a hearty bowl of rice and chicken. As soon as we politely could, we asked permission of the Gorungu Naa to remove the heavy robes, as we were literally encased in our own sweat-lodge of unbearable heat! Alex said earlier to the Tokali Naa that he felt as if the chiefs had placed him in a furnace, and what kind of return hospitality is this after their nice visit to Calgary earlier this year? To which the Tokali Naa retorted that it was the least they could do, as we had subjected them to a deep freeze in Canada's winter!

Sometime around 9 p.m., we headed back to our compound and the mud lodges and enjoyed one last king-size beer with John in the covered kitchen area, rehashing the incredible events of the day.

My official title is Dompie Naa (named after the small village just south of Talawuna, pronounced "Dom pee yeh," bordering the Hippos Sanctuary). Alex's new title is for the entire sanctuary region, as a divisional chief or Naa, and his official title is Bajaa Naa, pronounced "Bud-ja." The chiefs explained that my job will be that of right-hand man, co-administrator of Alex's chieftaincy.

We turned in soon after the beer and a cold shower under the stars in the outdoor shower to get a good night's rest for the gruelling fourteen-hour drive back to Accra.

September 23: Even though we left very early, before dawn, it was still sometime near 9 p.m. when we at last pulled into Accra. We were very tired, but not half as exhausted as John Mason must have felt, or our driver for that matter. After a delightful dinner with Martina and John, recounting the events of the past few days to her, we enjoyed a deep sleep in our respective beds.

September 24: Up early to enjoy a breakfast with Anna Annor and the rest, then off through Accra's congested streets to the airport. Alex and Heather flew on to Calgary from Nairobi, where Dee and I wished them well and headed to our Nairobi hotel just outside the city for a night on our own before meeting up with our next Calgary Zoo tour group for our next adventure!

## V. CONCLUSION

Utilizing their unique legitimacy and credibility, the Wechiau traditional leaders were able to join in mobilizing their people to partner with Ghanaian and Canadian non-government organizations such as the Calgary Zoo as well as the Ghana government to create the successful community-based Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary.<sup>1</sup>

## VI. APPENDIX: BACKGROUND<sup>2</sup> TO THE CALGARY ZOO WECHIAU HIPPO SANCTUARY'S PARTNERSHIP SUCCESS

The remaining population of hippo *Hippopotamus amphibius* in Ghana can be found in the Black Volta River system of the Brong-Ahafo, Northern and Upper West regions. Hippos occur in two main groups within the river system: a protected population around the Bui National Park (which encloses a section of the Black Volta River) and the population within the Wechiau area. The Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary (WCHS) was formally established in 1999 in order to conserve these previously unprotected hippos.

The Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary is a community initiative by the chiefs and people of the Wechiau Traditional Area with technical assistance from the Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) in Ghana and Ghana Tourist Board. The sanctuary is the first community-owned and managed large mammal sanctuary in Ghana. It was established to conserve the unique flora and fauna on a forty-kilometre-long stretch of the Black Volta River within the Wechiau area of the Upper West Region.

There are twenty-two villages along the fringe of the sanctuary, which are involved in this participatory community initiative.

This project aims among others, to bring benefit to the project communities by providing support for ecotourism development, while ensuring the conservation of natural resources within the sanctuary. The chiefs and people were motivated by the fact that a community-owned sanctuary would maintain their ownership and control of the land and allow direct benefit to their communities while ensuring the conservation of the unique natural resources along the section of the river proposed for the sanctuary.

Following the acceptance of the concept of a community-managed sanctuary, the paramount chief, the Wechiau Naa, and his people formally requested the assistance of NCRC to establish the hippo sanctuary. In a response to the chief's request, NCRC posted a sanctuary development advisor to Wechiau in December 1998 to begin working with the communities to set the foundation for the sanctuary. This collaborative effort of the project communities and NCRC received support from the Wa District Assembly (local government) and the Regional Administration, who assisted the communities in beginning the project.

Shortly after the advisor's arrival, a Tourism Development Committee (TDC) was established at Wechiau. It consisted primarily of members from the landowning tribe – the Wala people. NCRC recommended that all the ethnic groups in the area (including settler tribes with no right to any of the sanctuary land) should be included on the TDC, but the landowners ignored this advice at first.

In early 1999, the late *Na* Bayon Doguah II, the paramount chief of Wechiau, and his elders called all of the leaders of the settler villages around the sanctuary to a meeting. The chief informed them that following all the deliberations it had been decided that all human activities, other than fishing, were prohibited within two kilometres of the river along the length of the sanctuary area. This was followed by a series of educational activities geared towards creating awareness about the sanctuary and educating community members on the rules and regulations of the sanctuary. During the campaign, the settler communities on the fringe of the sanctuary were asked by the landlords (Wala) to submit a list of members from each community to form community conservation

groups. The current chief, Wechia Naa Imoru Gomah II, continues his commitment to the partnership.

In February 2000, NCRC conducted the first ethnographic study of the communities around the sanctuary. The objectives of this study were to document the history of the area, determine how to integrate the settler communities into the management board, and identify how communities could benefit from the sanctuary. Based on the suggestions from this work and comments from the Earthwatch teams, the landowners restructured the SMB in August 2000 to allow members from each of the Lobi communities (settler communities) to be represented on the board.

The WCHS has attracted the attention of international field research scientists since its establishment. In 1999, NCRC sought support from the Earthwatch Institute for a multidisciplinary team to begin an extended ecological survey to generate information for long-term planning of the sanctuary. In March 2000, preparations began towards the arrival of the first Earthwatch team. Two lodges (at Talawona and Tankara) were constructed and furnished for the Earthwatch Research teams. To date there have been eleven Earthwatch research expeditions (a total of twenty-two weeks of fieldwork) in the sanctuary. In mid-2002, NCRC and the SMB, using the data collected by the Earthwatch teams, completed a five-year management plan for the sanctuary that lays out a clear roadmap for the conservation and development of the sanctuary and communities. NCRC negotiated with Earthwatch Institute for an additional three years of expeditions, a total of twenty Earthwatch expeditions worked at Wechiau between 2000 and 2004. This included two hundred volunteer field researchers who travelled from all over the world to assist the research scientists.

The Black Volta River flows southwards entering Ghana from Burkina Faso at the extreme northwest corner of the country. The sanctuary covers a forty-kilometre stretch of the river in the Upper West Region. The river forms the western boundary of the sanctuary, which has a core area consisting of the river, islands in the river, and seventy square kilometres of riverine forest, hippo lawns, and woodland savanna on the eastern bank. The core area is the habitat of the keystone species of the sanctuary – the hippopotamus.

Adjacent to the core area are twenty-two villages – the biggest of which is Wechiau. Wechiau is forty kilometres southwest from Wa, the

regional capital of the Upper West Region, and is located at lat 9°48' N, long 2°38' W. The main Wechiau Township is twenty kilometres from the hippo wallows on the river; however, there are a number of compound settlements (isolated family compound houses) closer to the river. As of 2007, the original settlements have been reduced to seventeen as a result of a negotiated resettlement of five small communities that are located on the banks of the river.

The present project has two major objectives. The first objective is to improve management/protection of the core zone of the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary. The second objective is to provide initial facilities for ecotourism development within the sanctuary.

In February 1990, a team from the Gbele Game Production Reserve of the Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission of Ghana paid a series of visits to some of the area communities, including Talawona, Kpanfa, Tuole, and Dochere. The team conducted a reconnaissance survey of the hippos and investigated persistent complaints from fishermen and farmers about destruction of farms and fishing nets by hippos.

The reconnaissance was followed by two studies (also by a staff member of the Wildlife Division) on the conservation status of hippos in the Black Volta River system (Choribe 1990; 1997), which gave a bleak outlook of the conservation status of the Wechiau hippo population. Choribe's reports stated that the unprotected hippo groups were threatened as a result of conflicts with farmers and fishermen, habitat loss, and hunting. As a remedy, he recommended the establishment of a government-controlled reserve at Wechiau to protect the hippo population. However, key community leaders and landlords of the area did not support this proposal. Among those who opposed the idea of a government reserve on Wechiau land were the late chief Wechiau *Na* Bayon Doguah II, Tokali Naa Danyagriri Walamani, and the earthpriests of Wechiau and Tokali. They feared that a government-owned reserve would alienate them from their land. The apparent lack of support from the local communities defeated the idea of a government reserve at Wechiau.

In August 1997, the Executive Director of NCRC, Mr. John J. Mason, accompanied by Mr. David Kpele, then with the Wildlife Division, and Mr. William Ayambire, the Wa Regional Manager for Ghana Tourist Board, paid a visit to Wechiau. They conducted a fruitful dialogue with the chiefs and opinion leaders about conserving and developing

the ecotourism potential of the threatened hippo population within the Wechiau area. NCRC followed up by sending a second two-member team (Mr. Patrick Adjewodah and Mr. Mark Donahue) to Wechiau, which held a series of meetings and discussions with opinion leaders both at the community and district levels. The team suggested that the communities could benefit from ecotourism with hippos as the prime attraction, with related benefits such as improved roads and water facilities that would serve both tourists and villages. Direct benefit to local communities and the retention of ownership of the land by the original owners were crucial to getting the support of all the chiefs and landlords. The discussions and meetings between the NCRC, Ghana Tourist Board, the late paramount chief of Wechiau, *Na Bayon Doguah II*, and other chiefs and opinion leaders from Wechiau and Tokali produced an agreement to establish a community-managed hippo sanctuary at Wechiau and to develop ecotourism in and around the sanctuary area. Gurungu naa, Naa Bandanaa Chielinaa (a chief and a key opinion leader) played a key role in the discussions leading to the agreement to establish the sanctuary. He was among the first few to recognize the importance of the project and was optimistic about its success. Following the acceptance of the concept of a community-managed sanctuary, the paramount chief and his people formally requested the assistance of NCRC to establish the sanctuary. In a response to the chiefs' request, NCRC posted a sanctuary advisor (Peace Corps Ghana Volunteer Mr. Mark Donahue) to Wechiau in December 1998 to begin working with the communities to set the foundation for the sanctuary.

Since the inception of the WCHS project, the local communities (hereafter referred to as the "project communities") were fully involved in decision-making in keeping with the concept of community ownership and management of the project. NCRC's role (and the role of the other collaborators) from the early stages of the project was limited to technical and advisory support. In early 1999, the Wechiau community (through communal labour and with community funds) renovated an old local government building at Wechiau into a temporary visitor centre for tourists coming to see the hippos. In the same year, a Tourism Development Committee (TDC), consisting of opinion leaders and elders of the Wechiau and Tokali was established to run the project. The involvement of the landless tribes (Lobi, Dagati, etc.) living in the area was limited at

first. These tribes (particularly the Lobi) form many of the communities living close to the core conservation area. Because they are in a position to influence the failure or success of the project, NCRC recommended that all the ethnic groups in the area be included on the TDC. Lobi representatives were added to the management team in 2000.

The project received support from Peace Corps Ghana in early 1999 through the Small Projects Assistance (SPA) funding to build a four-room lodge at Tankara for tourists. The lodge was built using community labour and traditional local architecture. In February 1999, Calgary Zoological Society (CZS) in Canada, through their conservation fund, provided funds for a reconnaissance survey of the sanctuary area. The rapid assessment survey helped demarcate the initial sanctuary boundary and gathered socio-economic and ecological data needed for an initial development plan for the sanctuary. A technical team from NCRC, with the support of the project communities, successfully completed the fieldwork and submitted the Sanctuary Development Plan to the TDC in June 1999.

The Sanctuary Development Plan was endorsed and adopted by the TDC. As recommended in the development plan, the TDC was reconstituted into the Sanctuary Management Board (SMB), which took over management responsibility of the sanctuary. The management board had a broader membership than the TDC, as it included all the minority tribes, fishermen, and representatives of other interest groups. In a bold attempt to regulate activities detrimental to the survival of the hippos and other resources, the SMB and the traditional leadership established a set of rules and regulations for human use of the sanctuary area. Although hippos were effectively protected, these regulations were not fully enforced due to lack of the necessary skills and resources. A series of activities to educate community members on sanctuary regulations were limited in duration, and so the desired impacts were not achieved. In particular, the SMB has not succeeded in stopping destructive fires set by local people annually during the dry season, halting the hunting of mammals other than hippos, or preventing livestock grazing in the sanctuary. Although the harvesting of some plant resources (e.g., shea nuts) is permitted by the SMB, guidelines are needed to prevent over-exploitation of some resources (e.g., building poles).

These challenges have made it necessary to create a more comprehensive management plan, taking into account the successes and failures of

the 1999 development plan. The new management plan also takes advantage of information provided by detailed ecological surveys of the sanctuary that were sponsored by the Earthwatch Institute from 2000 through 2002. These surveys involved the local people as guides and camp managers.

The Wechiau model is now being replicated in six other locations in the country. These include sites that are focused on West African manatee, white-necked rockfowl, western sitatunga, savanna elephant, Geoffrey's pied colobus, and leopard.

The implementation of this management plan will promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the sanctuary area. The project will discourage over-exploitation of resources and will support alternative income-generating activities that are ecologically sustainable. The sanctuary management will encourage value-added processing of produce from the wild, such as shea nut, to enhance income of local families and alleviate poverty. The project will support improved agro-practices to improve income for local families and minimize the negative impact of farming on the environment.

Further development of the ecotourism potential of the sanctuary will enhance the combined benefit of conservation of sensitive ecological areas, with opportunities for local people to find alternate sources of income, and the socio-economic development of the sanctuary communities. Tourism brings employment and increased financial opportunities to an area. The SMB has employed hunters and fishermen from the sanctuary communities as guides and rangers. Because East Africa offers superior opportunities for wildlife viewing, the sanctuary management seeks to promote a combination of ecotourism and cultural tourism and thus offer a unique tourist opportunity.

The sanctuary initiative has been receiving positive attention in Ghana and internationally. In July 2000, the *Independent* newspaper in London, England, ranked the Earthwatch-sponsored research project as the third best conservation holiday in the world. In June and August 2000, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Calgary Herald*, and the *Calgary Sun* all featured the project and its link to the Calgary Zoo. In October 2000, the Ghana Tourist Board honoured the Wechiau SMB with the "National Tourism Award for Community Initiative in Developing Tourism," at a ceremony at State House in Accra. In 2002, Wechiau received the "Tourist Attraction of the

Year” for the Upper West Region and finished in third place in the national competition for the same category.

BBC TV, CBC, and GTV have all filmed short documentaries and news pieces at Wechiau, while the leading international guidebooks on Ghana (Briggs, 2007 and Ham *et al.* 2009) have provided information about the sanctuary in their new editions. During the summers of 2001 and 2005, students of the University of Calgary Biological Field School spent several weeks at Wechiau.

The sanctuary concept has not been widely applied in Ghana. Other countries have experienced successes and failures using this approach, and the planning team has carefully considered these lessons in developing this plan. This approach to natural resource management involves the local communities at the centre of the decision-making and management process and as the primary benefactors of the sanctuary’s resource base.

The central assumption in the community-based management approach is that community involvement and benefits will cause project communities to respect and protect the sanctuary and its natural resources. Successful community management of the sanctuary should result in reduced human/wildlife conflict and the development of local capacity for successful resource management. The hippo sanctuary is the first of its kind in Ghana and should be regarded as a pilot from which lessons can be drawn to support community conservation initiatives in Ghana. The Wechiau approach is also well in line with national policy, as most natural resources policies encourage community involvement in natural resource management in Ghana.

The management plan is the result of four years of concerted effort by NCRC, the SMB, and Earthwatch Research Teams of 2000 and 2001. It is an evolution from the original Sanctuary Development Plan prepared in 1999 with financial support from Calgary Zoological Society. The preparation of the document was largely as a result of the financial support of the Earthwatch Institute and the dedicated work of the research teams involved in eight periods of fieldwork, with each two weeks in duration. The preparation of the management plan involved extensive ecological field work totalling sixteen weeks with sixteen persons on each team, prolonged series of meetings involving the planning team, the SMB, and community

members, conducting a literature review of relevant documents, and the drafting of the management plan.

Earthwatch research teams led by Prof. A. Oteng-Yeboah, Prof. P. Beier and Dr. W. Oduro undertook the fieldwork that included flora and fauna surveys. The three principal investigators, their assistants, Earthwatch volunteers, and local community members collected most of the biological information and data in the management plan. Field methods used include formal and informal transects, observation, informal surveys, and key-informant interviews with fishers and hunters and community elders.

Finally, the finished management plan made use of a wide variety of secondary reports from previous research work in the sanctuary area. Of particular note are the reconnaissance survey of 1999, funded by the Calgary Zoological Society's Conservation Fund (NCRC 1999), Choribe's reports (Choribe 1990; 1997), and anthropological research conducted in 2000 (Assenheim 2000).



CALGARY SCHOOL TALK:  
BRIAN KEATING AND  
BRETT PRINDLE, 2004.  
(PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



HIPPO NEWBORN AND HERD IN GHANA. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



HIPPO IN WATER AT ZOO FIRST DAY.  
(PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



HIPPO MOTHER AND NEWBORN IN  
GHANA. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



HIPPO NEWBORN AND HERD IN GHANA,  
CLOSE-UP. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



HIPPO IN WATER AT ZOO FIRST DAY,  
CLOSE-UP. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



BRIAN KEATING AND GORUNGU NAA.  
(PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



HIPPO AND CHILD AT HIPPO POOL AT OPENING OF THE “DESTINATION AFRICA” EXHIBITS AT THE CALGARY ZOO. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



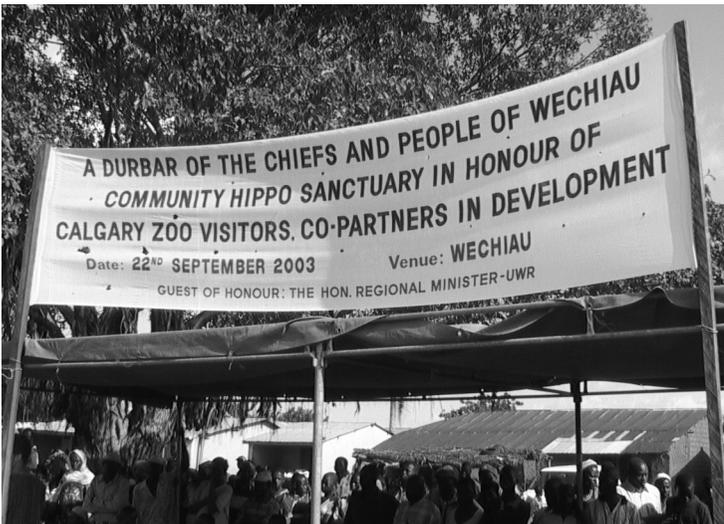
ALEX GRAHAM, FORMER PRESIDENT, CALGARY ZOO (2ND RIGHT); BRIAN KEATING, CALGARY ZOO (1ST RIGHT) AND MEMBERS OF GHANA'S WECHIAU HIPPO SANCTUARY PADDLING ON THE BLACK VOLTA LOOKING FOR THE HIPPOS. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



INSTALLATION OF ALEX GRAHAM AND BRIAN KEATING AS HONORARY CHIEFS OF THE WECHIAU HIPPO SANCTUARY, GHANA. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



NEWLY ENSKINNED CANADIAN DEVELOPMENT CHIEFS OF THE WECHIAU HIPPO SANCTUARY. THE CANADIANS ARE IN THE CENTRE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ALEX GRAHAM, NEWLY CREATED BAJAA NAA, DIVISIONAL CHIEF FOR THE SANCTUARY; BRIAN KEATING, NEWLY CREATED DOMPIE NAA, VILLAGE CHIEF OF DOMPIE. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)



AN IMPRESSIVE BANNER HONoured THE CALGARY ZOO AS A PARTNER. (PHOTO: CALGARY ZOO.)

## NOTES

- 1 (Eds): This chapter shows how the division of legitimacy between traditional leadership and the post-colonial state can be brought together with civil society to create developmental successes.
- 2 The following section has been adapted in part from a Calgary Zoo Project Update and from the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary Management Plan, both produced in 2002 by the NCRC under the direction of John Mason, the founding executive director.

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