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BBC HARDtalk interview with Stephen Sackur on Wednesday, 25th August 2021

Stephen Sackur: Welcome to Hardtalk on the BBC World Service with me Stephen Sackur. My guest today is a Kenyan woman who has made her mark in a field, all too often dominated by white men, out of conservation, environmental campaigning and wildlife documentary making. Paula Kahumbu was brought up in Nairobi, the daughter of a British mother and a Kenyan father. In her teens, she was drawn to Kenya's wild places and the extraordinary range of wild animals. Richard Leakey, the world-renowned palaeontologist and conservationist, became a mentor, and she ultimately became the chief of the organization he founded, WildlifeDirect. Her Hands Off Our Elephants campaign attracted worldwide attention, and was instrumental in getting the Kenyan government to beef up its anti-poaching efforts, which has indeed seen the number of elephants killed in Kenya, dramatically reduced. The picture in a number of other African countries is a good deal less positive. The African forest elephant is now listed as critically endangered. And it's not just about poaching, there is an intensifying battle for space and resources across Africa, and all too often, wildlife is losing out to humanity. Paula Kahumbu is doing her best to convince Africans that conservation is not an outside imposition, but a matter of fundamental self-interest. Her wildlife documentaries are watched by millions across the continent, but still, she and other conservationists face enormous pressure from big business and politicians. What hope has she, of making conservation Africa's common cause? Well, Paula joins me now from Nairobi. Welcome to Hardtalk.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Thank you so much, Stephen, I really appreciate being invited to speak here.

Stephen Sackur: It's a pleasure to have you on the show. You of course for decades have been a conservationist and a wildlife advocate. After all of those years, do you think you're winning?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: I think we're winning on some fronts for sure there is some progress, but I would say overall, we are in big trouble and sadly, most people don't even appreciate just how serious it is.

Stephen Sackur: Do Kenyans want to hear your message do you think. I mean, you are a very successful broadcaster and your wildlife shows are actually well-watched right across the continent of Africa, but I wonder whether you after all these years are getting a little cynical about whether Kenyans really want to hear.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: I think it depends on which Kenyans you are talking about. When I started my TV series many years ago, people told me that it was hopeless, that Kenyans didn't care about nature and wildlife and they cared about the food on their plates. Actually, our TV series is one of the most successful in the continent, and in Kenya alone, 51% of people watch our show, so we know that there is broad public interest, and a big part of this is because there isn't that much nature or wildlife content on television, anywhere in the continent and especially content that's made by ourselves, for our own audiences. There is nothing apart from really what we are producing. Is it making a difference? I think so. I believe that there's a massive shift in consciousness here in Kenya. When we organize events and rally people together, 1000s of people participate. More than 50% of Kenyans in the city of Nairobi say they want to volunteer for nature, but I would say the problem, and the challenge we have is not at the level of the mass public, but the challenge is winning the hearts and minds of the political leadership, not just in Kenya, but across the whole continent.

Stephen Sackur: I was very struck, and it relates to something you've just said, very struck by something you said to the New Yorker magazine not too long ago. You said conservation is not seen as something black Kenyans do in this country, it is a white thing. Do you think you've changed that?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Yes, not just me. There are plenty of amazing young African scientists and conservationists, who are singing the same hymn. I think that this is a big part of our colonial legacy, think about it, wildlife and conservation stems from the hunting background and during colonial days, the only people who are allowed to hunt, legally, were the colonial overlords. When things change and hunting was banned, those same people became the conservationists and them and their future generations are some of the most fierce conservationists on the continent. But Africans, back in colonial days were considered poachers and until today, it seems like that is still the picture or the image, or the way people feel about it. And so, telling people that it's okay for Africans to be conservationists, it means really bucking the trend and saying, hang on a second, it's not just white people who do conservation, and doing conservation isn't about going backwards. When I started, I was actually told by colleagues of mine, that they would fight for me, in government, to prevent them from sending me to the bush to do research because they thought that was a very backward thing to do in those days that 'we came from the bush, why would you go back there?', so there is a lot of change that has happened in the last few decades, but we still have quite a bit of work to do.

Stephen Sackur: I just want to get personal for a second, whether that applies to your own family, I mean, your mom is actually white but your dad obviously is a black Kenyan and I wonder whether frankly, either of them thought it was inappropriate for you to forego a sort of shitty career in Nairobi and head to the bush as fast as you possibly could.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Funnily enough, it wasn't my mom, who thought that going to work in the bush would be dangerous, and not something that girls do. It wasn't about the color of my skin, it was girls don't do that. My father was much more easygoing and he thought it was very exciting that I was working in rural areas in the country, in the wild, sometimes for months on end by myself. He thought that was fantastic. The dangers are real, and I think my mother was right to be cautious, but my parents were very encouraging, and my family in general, very encouraging.

Stephen Sackur: You ultimately came through the ranks of different conservation organizations, some governments and some non-governmental in Kenya and you ended up working closely with Richard Leakey in his wildlife organization and you and he launched this campaign Hands Off Our Elephants which caused an enormous stir, going back, but seven years or so in Kenya. Why did you decide to focus so heavily on the elephant?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Both Richard and I have a background in elephants. I did my PhD on elephants. So I had the expertise and the academic basis for this. We have both worked for government trying to fight and prevent the reopening of the ivory trade, so the reemergence of this problem was something that was very close to both of us. I mean, he was the one who launched the first burn of ivory, way back in 1989. So elephants was something that we felt, if we're going to go into campaigning, this was going to be the best species to start with. But also we felt that we needed to really smash this perception that the elephants were fine, that everything was okay, when it wasn't. We knew from people on the ground, that there were big problems. And if elephants are being gunned down across the country, when you can be sure those guns are being used on other species as well, it's just that elephants are the easiest to see because nobody can carry away the whole carcass of an elephant. And so we felt that we had to start with elephants but it was not for the sake of elephants alone, it was to launch a new approach which was campaigning for wildlife in Africa.

Stephen Sackur: Going back with that opening thought about whether you're in a positive trajectory or not and it's tempting to try to find the positives and seeing the elephant story, particularly in Kenya, something very positive. I think from around 18,000 Elephants you're now back to something like 30,000. Government claims victory against the poachers, the number of poachers, they say that they're being prosecuted is way down simply because much less poaching is happening in the country. So would you send a message to the world saying, elephants in Kenya represents what we can achieve when we really work together as conservationists, as politicians, as law enforcers, to get serious about conservation?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Absolutely. It wasn't easy though. I mean, the government initially weren't interested in hearing that there was a problem. And so we had to learn how to communicate and bring on board the different government agencies, stopping the poaching men dealing with the police, the Kenya Wildlife Service, the airport, seaports, roads authorities, all kinds of different partners, including international organizations. I would say that that

challenge fighting poaching and the trafficking of ivory was easy compared to the kind of challenges we're facing now. Our enemies now are very difficult people to wrap your hands around. They are people producing food, how do you call that person an enemy you can't commit such a person to jail. Right? So the challenge is so much more difficult, and that's why it's so important that we actually win hearts and minds about nature, but we also address things from the highest level. The land-use strategy of my country is not aligned to the conservation strategy, and that's why we're seeing megafarms in conservation.

Stephen Sackur: What you are saying is so interesting, because I just wonder if in any way you regret the degree to which you've held out the sort of hand of friendship and alliance to the political leadership in your country. You know, Kenyans more than anybody else will remember you were very friendly with the president's wife as you launched this campaign. You were so pleased when the President undertook that photo opportunity and burned hundreds of tons of ivory in front of the TV cameras. In a sense, you've helped him deliver a message that he and his government are true heirs about conservation, and maybe that isn't quite the truth.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: I have no regrets. And I also don't have any permanent friends or permanent enemies in this business. You know we have to work with what we have. The president of Kenya has gone out publicly, internationally, and stated his commitment for this country. He was at the United Nations General Assembly last year, and he said that Kenya had made some very bad decisions. He said we are developing our country at the cost of the environment, and that is not sustainable. And he made a commitment that Kenya would end the extinction of species within 10 years, by making sure that is not business as usual, but all businesses have to align themselves to sustainability. Now the problem is, when you go down the ranks to all the various agencies whether it's roads and transport, infrastructure, industry, agriculture, we're not seeing that message getting picked up and that's really where I think we have a challenge, and that's a lot to do with our systems, the priority with which environment is listed in our budget, decision making, the fact that the big four which is the President's big development agenda doesn't include environment is a big problem for me.

Stephen Sackur: If I may stop you there that's the very point I'm trying to make, you know, you have a president, and the government in Kenya who are committed to long term growth through industrialization in your country and industrialization as he sees it is prioritizing infrastructure, new roads and rail, new energy supplies, all of these initiatives which are threatening those wild spaces, which you've spent your whole career trying to protect So isn't it time you spoke out long and loud against the priorities and strategy of your own government.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Absolutely. I totally agree with you. We do have to speak out, and we have to speak out with a unified voice. And the message, cannot be, that we don't have development. That is not a message that is going to win any support, anywhere in Africa, frankly. We have to find a solution that serves both the development aspirations of Kenya and African countries, as well as the survival of our countries because when I say we're trying to

save and preserve these wilderness areas, it's not just because I love the beetles and the butterflies and the trees. No, these are the life support systems. This is the source of freshwater, the source of soil pollinators, the water services that all of these ecosystems provide.

Stephen Sackur: I understand that sort of holistic approach, but I would also understand Kenyans who remember that for example you opposed the new rail line that went through, Nairobi National Park and you said was a terrible mistake you opposed a big new hotel development proposed for the National Park which you said was a terrible mistake. You opposed, again a high profile Music Festival in one of the national parks, you said it was a terrible mistake. All of these things are actually jobs generators and economic growth generators and your average Kenyan might be more interested in that, than protecting butterflies.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Well, what I'm saying is, we do need to have all those things we just don't need them inside our protected areas or protected areas of course protected areas because they're meant to be protecting the wildlife and nature inside them. And I think that the government is making very serious mistakes by putting railways, powerlines, pipelines, roads into our national parks and I will continue to shout and scream from the mountaintops about it. The parties and the raves and concerts inside the protected areas are speaking out about that has gotten me into so much trouble I can't tell you I'm actually banned from the National Parks right now because I took the government to court on that issue. And as a result the general public got to know that vultures in Kenya are critically endangered and putting a concert inside this area was going to contribute to that problem.

Stephen Sackur: Are you really banned? I tried to check out whether you're truly actually officially banned and a lot of officials in Kenya seem a little confused by this claim of yours. Are you sure, as one of Kenya's most famous conservationists you're actually barred and banned from going to any national park?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: There was a public game count in Nairobi National Park just last week, and I was listed as one of the volunteers and I got a call at eight o'clock at night and I was told, you will not be allowed into the park if you come, so we advise you not to come because you're going to embarrass the team that you'll be working with. This is the kind of thing that sadly happens in my country is they won't put it in writing, they won't make it public, they will humiliate you they will, in a way, send a message to anyone else who also dares to challenge the system, you know, the idea of building hotels in tide this same national park that we're doing the game counting is contrary, and they know it, and they don't want me to see what's happening. The structures are already being built inside the national park...

Stephen Sackur: Sorry to interrupt. Isn't the problem here that you know you want wildlife to roam free and to pursue their migration routes around Kenya and neighboring countries as if

no borders existed as if transport infrastructure wasn't necessary. But the truth is, you know, without fences, and without barriers, it's impossible to see how you can have a completely peaceful and happy coexistence between humans and wild animals across Kenya and indeed, large parts of Africa.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: It's very simple, just fence the people in. I mean it is really very sad.

Stephen Sackur: Is that what your people in Kenya you really want to hear that they should be fenced in and the animals allowed to roam free across millions of hectares,

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: You would be amazed at how many people have put their land aside for conservation. 160 landowners have created conservation areas, doubling the real estate for conservation in the last 10 years. Stephen, this is not small, this is significant areas of land that are now set aside by people who are not rich. Why are they doing it? Because they have a strong traditional cultural connection to the land and the animals on it, and they want to maintain their lifestyle of pastoralism. This is something that the government should be grabbing with both hands because by securing this land you're securing carbon, you're securing water sources and watersheds, you are securing biodiversity. That is, the asset, and the opportunity that we need to grab with both hands. Yes, we do need all the development but development doesn't have to destroy the protected areas.

Stephen Sackur: Let me just tell you a story from my Hardtalk on the road visit to Zimbabwe, a couple of years ago. I went to Hwange National Park which is one of the most successful elephant conservation areas in all of Africa. There are now, I think up to almost 40,000 Elephants. There are too many elephants and when they suffered terrible drought there the elephants, of course, roamed far and wide beyond the national park. They went into villages. They ate people's crops. They in fact trampled to death several villagers, and I heard from those local people that they couldn't tolerate this invasion of the elephants and that, you know, particularly the time for example when climate change is challenging, so much of Africa's farming is going to be a very long term challenge.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Absolutely, and these challenges are not without their solutions. Yes, We will have problems I mean we have malaria, we have so many other challenges, and we're not going to solve any of them overnight. But if you go to Central Kenya go to Laikipia county, you will see the amazing initiatives where landowners are taking down the fences, between each other to allow the animals to return to their traditional migratory route. I think that is really hopeful and wonderful that that is happening in the country, and the wildlife numbers in that county are increasing. In other areas where you have human habitation, right up against conservation, you will have a problem so you have to have buffer zones, and you have to have corridors. Up in central Kenya what they've done is created a very simple system of fences that are designed to funnel the elephants so that they can cross the road safely and move between

two great mountains the Aberdares and Mount Kenya, without going into anybody's farms. You know, it's just simple and logical, if you understand the animals, you can work with them on what they want to do. I really don't think it's rocket science. I just think it takes a little bit of commitment, some money and some good people, good ideas.

Stephen Sackur: We talked a little earlier about your attitude to the powers that be in politics. What about business as well? You know I'm very mindful that in the last months and indeed over the last several years, a number of very active conservationists in Kenya have been threatened, intimidated and in several cases, murdered, and the police have never found the culprits, but it seems very credible they were murdered for their activism and their determination to try to halt development in virgin natural areas. Do you feel yourself to be at risk?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: Yes, I do. I think many of us are at risk. It's dangerous to speak out in a country where your work, although it's aligned to national priorities, it's not really protected by the police service. So yes, I do think my life could be at risk. I won't say that I've been threatened. Recently I have in the past.

Stephen Sackur: Well, I'm guessing that what happened in July gave you pause when Joanna Stutchbury, who again was a long term conservationist, she was determined to try and halt development in a wetland area in Kiambu Forest National Park. She was murdered. And as far as I'm aware, the police investigation has uncovered, no suspects, no culprit there certainly been nobody held to account. Do you think there is a law enforcement problem here, a commitment problem from those in power?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: I tried to find out what the status of the investigation is. I'm ashamed to say that there is nothing to show for the investigation. I think, like so many of these things, if they're not investigated very quickly and if actions aren't taken straight away, you know the old leads get cold and it will be such a shame if Joanna died in vain. And so there is a group of us who are working very hard to maintain her name and her legacy by securing that forest and creating a memorial to her. That all children, there will even be a book for children to help them understand this. We don't want people to be silenced by the fear that somebody could come and gun you down in broad daylight, and there'll be no repercussions. We want people to be bold and courageous, and to fight for what's right. That, I think is the only way that we're going to see, you know what's, what's left of this incredible biodiversity that Kenya has.

Stephen Sackur: The pessimists would say, the fight is over and it's too late, and you've lost. Your great mentor in your early days, Richard Leakey, says he doesn't see much prospect of Kenyan wildlife surviving beyond 2050. What a depressing and bleak prospect? Do you share it?

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: No I don't share that view I think, Richard has his reasons for his beliefs, but don't forget he has also believed in the past that things were beyond repair.

Stephen Sackur: Perhaps his reasons are the ones we've already touched upon. That the government is committed to an industrialization growth first strategy, that the population of Kenya currently over 50 million is projected to reach more than 90 million by 2050. I mean these are just very basic facts which might mean there is no room for the wildlife that you've spent your life trying to defend and conserve.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu: I actually don't believe that. I think that the protected areas are secure, we have to obviously defend them, and we're going to have to work at that. The success will be in how we prevent them from becoming islands. That we actually ensure that every protected area has a buffer zone has a community of people who are working to support it and who are benefiting from that support and that these protected areas are connected because our wildlife is migratory, we've seen amazing changes and we've seen history like, turn, back the elephant story is such a good example. Why not gazelles, giraffes, lions cheetahs? They can come back. All of them can come back, so long as we maintain and secure the real estate that they need, and maintain those habitats. And to me, the problem is so simple that it's so frustrating that people can't see it and won't invest in it. We're not talking about a heritage that is just Kenyan. This is a global heritage, can you have more antelope species than any other country in the world. You know, it shouldn't just be Kenyan struggling on our own. We need help.

Stephen Sackur: With your passion and your positivity, we're going to end the interview right there. I thank you very much indeed for joining me on Hardtalk. Thank you.

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