

Richard Leakey

(1944 – 2022)

Palaeontologist of human origins, conservationist and politician who changed views of human evolution and championed Kenyan wildlife



Richard Leakey and Marta Mirazon Lahr, at TBI, 2015. Photo by Lawrence Martin

Richard Leakey was a remarkable person. He lived many lives in one, and approached death many times too. Some think it was the latter that made him so hungry for life, but I think it was his imagination of what could exist, and was not afraid to try to make it happen.

Despite not having formal academic qualifications, Leakey directed a national museum at the age of 25, and made scientific discoveries of long-lasting significance. He re-organised the wildlife services of Kenya, and brought the tragedy of animal poaching to the world's attention. He entered politics by creating an opposition party, then headed Kenya's civil service, and finally took the role of corruption watchdog. In science, he liked the excitement of exploration and 'big picture' problems, but not the minutiae of analysis. He made huge strides in conservation through a mixture of empowering institutions and shock tactics, and his interest in politics was about changing governance, not a politician's career. Beyond the discoveries and changes he made, Leakey built institutions, structures and mentored the careers of

those in whom he saw potential, particularly young Kenyan scholars, conservationists and artists, leaving an extraordinary legacy. Leakey died at home in the Ngong Hills, Kenya, on 2 January 2022.

Richard Leakey was born in Nairobi, in 19 December 1944. His parents, Louis and Mary, were pioneers in African palaeontology and archaeology, and with his brothers Jonathan and Philip, Leakey grew up amidst fossils, excavations, remote places, and museum collections. His independent and confident personality did not mesh well with conventional schooling, which he abandoned at the age of 16 to open an animal trapping/safari business, earning enough to pay for flying lessons and his own small plane. A mix of true interest in his parents' palaeo-world, and a wish to prove himself to them, lured him back into the study of the past. In 1963, he identified interesting exposures flying over Lake Natron, Tanzania. With a small team, Leakey explored the site, made his first major hominin discovery in 1964, and met Margaret Cropper, whom he married in 1965.

Leakey's life took a major turn in 1967. His father had organised a Kenyan-French-American expedition to the Omo Valley of southern Ethiopia. Because of ill health, he asked Richard to go instead. That chance event had a profound effect on both Leakey's career and human evolutionary studies. At the site of Kibish in the Omo, Leakey found fossils of *Homo sapiens*, which he famously recalled his parents being totally unimpressed but which we now know to be 230,000 years old. These are the earliest fossils that have the two unique features of all modern humans in the world (a chin and a globular cranium), and one of the evidentiary pillars of our species' African origins. While flying over the eastern edge of Lake Turkana, he saw the Koobi Fora exposures and recognised their potential. Koobi Fora proved to be one of the richest hominin fossil localities in the world, and the discovery of at least 3 different contemporaneous hominin species between 2 million and 1.5 million years ago (*Paranthropus boisei*, *Homo habilis*, *Homo rudolfensis* and *Homo erectus*) was critical in ending anagenetic, progressive views of how hominins evolved.

Leakey's private life also changed then. In 1968, he became director of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and that same year, was diagnosed with serious renal disease, the first inkling of what would be a life-long battle with ill health. In 1969, his daughter Anna was born. His first marriage ended, and he met a young British zoologist, Meave Epps, who was to become his life-long personal and scientific partner. They had two daughters, Louise and Samira, and three granddaughters (Seiyia, Alexia and Kika).

The following twenty years were Leakey's main scientific phase – a time when he obtained funds to build teams, labs and collections at NMK, creating a hub of thriving research. He also changed the laws on the export of antiquities, resulting in a major rift with his father but a major step towards protecting

African heritage. His and Meave's work in Turkana, with the fabulous assistance of the "Hominid Gang" led by Kamoya Kimeu, transformed the palaeo-anthropological record of East Africa, with dozens of new hominin fossils, including a new genus and three new species (*Australopithecus anamensis* and *Kenyanthropus platyops*, as well as *Homo rudolfensis*<sup>1</sup>), and a 1.6 million-year-old skeleton of an adolescent *H. erectus* from Nariokotome which offered unique insights into the evolution of human life-history. Leakey had strong views; some were right, others not. He was involved in seriously acrimonious scientific arguments, particularly with colleagues making new discoveries in Ethiopia in the late 1970s, which gave an antagonistic tone to human origins research as a whole. Eventually, Leakey's interests shifted. His health deteriorated, he had his first kidney transplant (donated by his brother Philip) in 1980, and he grew increasingly concerned with climate change and the plight of wildlife.

In 1989, Kenya's president, Daniel arap Moi, asked Leakey to run the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). Leakey declared war on poachers, burnt all the confiscated stockpile of Kenyan ivory, and massively reduced elephant deaths. Leakey was a visionary leader, of extraordinary integrity. However, his tactics were controversial and ruthless, and his actions touched onto a web of corrupt practices, resulting in serious enemies. In 1993, the plane he was flying malfunctioned and crashed, as the result of which both his legs were amputated below the knee. Rumours of sabotage were never disproven.

The relationship with Moi became increasingly hostile, and in 1995 Leakey left KWS to create an opposition political party, Safina, becoming an MP in 1998. His time in opposition was tense, protests were forcefully suppressed by the authorities, he was beaten-up more than once, and received life-threats. But Kenya needed large investments, and major international banks demanded assurances. In 1998, Moi asked Leakey, his biggest adversary, to direct KWS again, and in 1999 to become Head of the Civil Service. Leakey accepted, and for three years he devoted all his extraordinary energy to the task, raising hundreds of millions of dollars for Kenya and fighting corruption. Leakey challenged how things are done, could be obstinate and ruthless in the pursuit

of what he thought was right, and fearlessly demolished obstacles to his goals.

Science, conservation and politics all played a part in the last twenty years of Leakey's life. In 2002, he accepted a position at Stony Brook University that allowed him to live in Kenya and have an institutional base to build a research institute in Turkana. He founded the Turkana Basin Institute (TBI) in 2005, and remained its Chairman until his death. TBI fostered a new burst of discoveries - Miocene primates, hominins, the oldest stone tools in the world, evidence of prehistoric warfare, and insights into the earliest monumental architecture in sub-Saharan Africa. In parallel, Leakey founded the conservation NGO WildlifeDirect, serving on its board for 10 years. In 2007, he became Chair of Transparency International-Kenya, continuing his indefatigable battle against corruption.

By this time, Leakey was fighting against severe skin cancer, the long-term consequences of the loss of his legs, and renewed renal disease; he underwent a second kidney transplant in 2006 (donated by Meave), and a liver transplant in 2013. Yet, he remained purposeful, optimistic and tirelessly engaged. In 2015, he accepted president Kenyatta's request to return to KWS as Chairman, a role he performed until 2018, and for the last six years, Leakey was working towards the creation of a new Kenyan museum, called Ngaren, to celebrate rationality, science, evolution and humanity's African origins.

Leakey received many prizes and awards, 15 honorary doctorates, and was elected Fellow of the Royal Society, of the African Academy of Science, and a Foreign Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He published 9 books (including *Origins*, *The Sixth Extinction*, and *Wildlife Wars*), 81 scientific articles, gave nearly 800 public lectures across the world, and participated in many documentaries.

But this list does not describe the man. Richard Leakey was special – fun, insightful, generous, with a sharp sense of humour, a fabulous cook and sommelier. Most of all, he was a visionary leader who (fearlessly) demolished obstacles and achieved things against the odds. He embraced life – good and bad, and imbued those around him with the sheer excitement of

what could be done, discovered, resolved and enjoyed.

I am one of those people whose lives Richard Leakey touched. He asked me would I come to work in Turkana; I said I was working in Libya, where we already spent one month of fieldwork every year - he said years had 12 months. I said most people believed the Turkana Basin did not have substantial sediments from the last million years (the period I've been interested in) – he said all I had to do was to find them. I said I had no experience fossil hunting in Africa – he said he had the answer, and asked Kamoya Kimeu to join our first expedition. Most of all, he took the time, and in his case, made the physical effort, to come up to Turkana every time we were there for the last 15 years to see what we'd found, to cheer us along, to discuss what things might be, even once driving in his old Range Rover for several hours to our camp bringing some fresh vegetables for lunch (to the astonishment of our students!). I am one of many.

Marta Mirazón Lahr is Professor of Human Evolutionary Biology and Prehistory at the University of Cambridge. Leakey was a friend, colleague and supporter of her work in Turkana, where she directs research in human origins. [mbml1@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mbml1@cam.ac.uk)

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<sup>1</sup>Since I wrote this, and Richard Leakey's obituary was published in *Nature*, Eric Delson noted that, in fact, the species *aethiopicus* already existed, having been named as *Paraustralopithecus aethiopicus* by Arambourg & Coppens for an edentulous mandible which approximates the morphology of the 'Black Skull', KNM-WT 17000, discovered by Leakey and his team.

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This is an expanded version of an Obituary of Richard Leakey published in the journal *Nature* on 28 January 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00211-6>