

FEDERATION

• SPAIN

otf.

THE REAL UNICORN

The story of an extraordinary woman and her battle to protect the okapi, 'the unicorn of Africa'



ONCE UPON A TIME IN 1871...

The explorer Henry Morton Stanley discovered that the Mbuti people of the Congo rainforests knew about the existence of an animal similar to a horse but with horns, that everybody called O'api.

The mystery fed the dreams of explorers and settlers alike to find what many called the unicorn of Africa.

In 1901 Harry Johnson, governor of Uganda, identified a creature with ears like a donkey, the body of a horse, coat of a zebra and horns of a giraffe: the okapi.

It was the last discovery of a large mammal on the African continent.

150 YEARS LATER...

A woman transforms the okapi's destiny.



INTRO

The Real Unicorn is **the first feature documentary** to bring to the world's attention the secret life of the okapi through the personal story of **Rosmarie Ruf** - a Swiss conservationist who has dedicated 32 years of her life to pioneering the protection of this mysterious animal in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

With a professional career **replete with adventures, driven by love and struck by tragedy**, Rosmarie faces a latest big challenge that will change the future of okapi conservation.





THE STORY

A never-before-filmed conservation milestone.

It was purely by chance that on the 24th June, 2012, Rosmarie Ruf was not at the Epulu offices (Headquarters of the Okapi Conservation Project). Otherwise she would be dead.

That day the guerrilla group Mai Mai Simba, who are involved in the illegal ivory trade and illegal gold-mining, attacked the conservation centre's facilities. During the attack six of Rosmarie's companions lost their lives, 28 women were kidnapped, and the 14 ambassador okapis of the conservation programme were slaughtered. All done in revenge against the DRC government's forestry authorities. 10 years later, **Rosmarie Ruf will bring together an experienced team of rangers, Mbuti and veterinarians in order to capture three okapis with which to resurrect the conservation project. A conservation mission, never filmed before.**

Main milestones of the story:

- For the very first time in the history, the complete process of capturing the okapis for the conservation project will be filmed. A wildlife conservation challenge that takes 2 months of efforts and cooperation between the conservation crew and the Mbuti Pygmies of the Ituri rainforest. A journey to the past for preserving the future of the African Unicorn.
- Along the 6 months shooting, the crew will set up several high resolution cameras with the latest technology of remote video recording systems for filming the first high-quality narrative scene of an okapi in the wild. Until today no filmmaker has achieved the challenge of filming an okapi in the wild from a hide in Ituri forest. All the footages of okapis that you can find have been shot in captivity or by low quality camera traps managed by the Okapi Conservation Project.



THE CAPTURE

an adventure never before filmed

STEPS TO CATCH AN OKAPI:

1. Establish the security zone

The Okapi Conservation Project team works hard for establishing a security zone of more than 50 hectares around the headquarters of Epulu Station. For two weeks all of them will train on the technics of capture the okapi.

2. Trap cameras and the search for tracks

Rangers and Mbuti trappers go deep into the forest searching for clues that will lead them to the trails the okapis frequent. With the help of trap cameras, identification of tracks and excrement, they'll decide where to lay the traps.

3. Building the traps

Based on the clues found and images obtained, rangers and Mbuti build the necessary number of traps. With huge effort they spend days digging holes three metres long by two metres high with an upper opening camouflaged with branches and leaves. Once the human tracks have been eliminated from the surrounding area, the traps will go unnoticed by the okapis. All that is left then is to wait.





4. The long wait

For the next two months the team checks each trap twice a day, so the okapi spends the least possible time in it. In this way, once trapped inside the hole, the animal is protected against possible attacks by leopards or opportunist poachers.

5. Trap cameras and the search for tracks

Once caught, the first step is to prevent the animal from getting stressed. The Mbuti team are responsible for gathering the okapi's favourite leaves and placing them in the trap. Next they cover the hole back up with branches and leaves, leaving the animal in darkness. In this way the okapi doesn't maintain visual contact with the capture team and has enough food till the next stage.

6. Clearing the firebreak

The rangers clear a firebreak from the trap to the nearest path, a task that can go on for days. Meanwhile the Mbuti protect the okapi and build a ramp with earth on one of the sides of the hole where the animal is located.

7. Getting the okapi into a lorry

The rangers bring a lorry and trailer in through the firebreak till they reach the trap. The Mbuti line the inside of the trailer with leaves to keep it dark and this also provides the animal with food. The trailer is placed next to the trap and the okapi, seeking out the darkness, goes up the ramp into the lorry.

8. Return to the Epulu conservation centre

The okapi is transported to the Epulu premises on a journey that takes several hours. There it will become the new ambassador for the conservation programme.



THE ADAPTATION PROCESS

"There's a moment when you feel you've bonded with it and it has accepted you."

The okapi is a gentle, kind and sociable animal that accepts human company. For the first few months the okapi and its personal carer develop a very tight bond. This process is based on patience, daily observation and full-time care of the animal. They spend their lives at the Epulu conservation centre's facilities inside the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. This huge area belongs to the Ituri rainforest, where all the essential food they need is available. In turn, the team of Mbuti integrated into the conservation project provide the animal with its favourite leaves and fruit. A highly qualified veterinary team continually looks after the animal's health till its final days. This care ensures an average life expectancy of around 30 years. This is the maximum possible for this species.



THE SURPRISE

the final twist

As part of the rebirth of the conservation project with the capture of the new okapis ambassadors, the Okapi Conservation Project team plans to bring back from United Arab Emirates to the Epulu station an okapi that was born in captivity.

This stallion's arrival will provide strong support for the adaptation of the newly captured ones and provide genetic diversity for the group. Later, he will be reintroduce in the wild environment. The closing of the conservation cycle.

WHY CAPTURE AN OKAPI?

After the 2012 terrorist attack Epulu hasn't had any more okapi ambassadors at the conservation project.

An ambassador okapi:

Is a key element in order to **protect, raise awareness of and successfully publicise** an animal that the majority of people in the world have never heard of.

Its breeding within the conservation project is an opportunity to **renew the DNA of the okapi populations living in captivity at international zoos alliance**. During the last two decades the species in the wild has experienced a worrying decrease in population and now has a serious inbreeding problem. For this reason, increasing the genetic diversity is one of the key factors for succeeding to repopulate the okapis in their natural habitat.

Has an **educational role and connects the species with the local populations**. If we can show the community's families how beautiful and magnificent the okapi are, we can get them to respect and value them as they deserve.

It's a symbol of the conservation centre that attracts official authorities, institutions and public figures interested in **supporting the conservation project** from anywhere in the world.

Provides a unique **opportunity to observe the okapi's behaviour** in its original ecosystem. This is an experience of special importance to all those studying zoology, biology and conservation who need to study this mysterious animal. There still remains a lot to discover about the species.

It's a chance to **revive Epulu and the Okapi Wildlife Reserve** as a great destination for conservation tourism and nature outreach. A place considered a **Unesco World Heritage Site** that used to receive up to 400 tourists a day in the 1990s.

ROSMARIE RUF

a life dedicated to protecting the okapi

To mention Rosmarie Ruf is to talk of compromise, perseverance, courage and an unconditional love of nature.

In 1987 Rosmarie and her husband Karl decided to leave their jobs in Switzerland, to embark on an adventure that would change their lives: directing the Okapi Conservation Project in Zaire, known today as the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

For 15 years Rosmarie was supervisor and carer to the ambassador okapis of Epulu while Karl worked as project director. Together they overcame numerous challenges. They dealt with the Ituri rebel groups, to be able to develop the programme's work peacefully; they involved the Mbuti people in okapi conservation and trained more than 100 people, who today make up the programme's team. In the meantime they witnessed heartbreaking realities, such as the arrival of thousands of Rwandan refugees during the 1994 genocide or the outbreak of the Second Congolese War in 1998, that forced them to leave the country for months.

During those years Rosmarie, Karl and John Lukas discovered the hidden secrets of the okapi. They deciphered their infrasound language, documented their mating process and the behaviour of the young during the first months of their lives. Their contribution to the world of zoology is incalculable.

"The okapi saved my life. It took my mind off my daily pain."





However, in 2002 a tragic event changed Rosemarie's life forever: her husband Karl died in a road traffic accident. Rosmarie found in the okapis the best therapy for her pain and sadness, and in less than a year she became director of the conservation project.

"IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD ME 20 YEARS AGO I WAS GOING TO BE DIRECTOR OF EPULU, I'D HAVE SAID I COULDN'T DO IT. BUT I RECALLED KARL ONCE SAID TO ME: "YOU COULD DO IT, YOU HAVE THE POTENTIAL." AND THEN I REALISED I HAD TO SHOW LEADERSHIP."

Thanks to the unconditional support of the Congolese team and faithful company of Ikenge, her favourite okapi, Rosmarie found the necessary strength to take hold of the programme reins. It was a very risky challenge, considering that for the next nine years illegal mining, ivory trafficking and rebel groups proliferated in the area. The ranger operations against poachers and rebel groups became increasingly stronger and the Mai Mai Simba guerrilla group targeted the conservation centre and Rosemarie.

Among the six team members and 14 okapis murdered in the attack on 24th June 2012, was Ikenge. The okapi that followed her everywhere and whose company helped her overcome her grief after Karl's death.

"WE HAD A VERY SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP. HE WAS THE FIRST OKAPI I WAS ABLE TO TOUCH. HE LOVED TO BE STROKED AND WE FORMED A BOND."

Since then, the Okapi Conservation Project hasn't had any more ambassador okapis. Nevertheless, Rosmarie and her team have continued to work hard at conservation tasks and to empower the communities living in the reserve. Neither the threat of rebel groups, nor Ebola outbreaks, nor the latest assassination of five rangers perpetrated by the Mai Mai Simba in 2017 have crushed Rosmarie's resolve.

Rosmarie's colleagues



John Lukas

He's the president of the Okapi Conservation Project, our protagonist's right hand man and the only person who knows as much about the okapi as Rosmarie.



Michelline Kahindo

At 38, Michelline is part of the first intake (2015) of female rangers at the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. The daughter of a survivor of the attack carried out by the guerrilla group in 2012, she'll be one of those responsible for protecting the lives of the conservation team members during the capture campaign.



Baya

He's one of Rosmarie's most trusted men and the most experienced okapi carer in Epulu. Once the okapis have been caught, he'll have a crucial role in supervising the animals' condition, both in the trap and during the transportation process to the conservation centre.

Rosmarie's colleagues



Jean Joseph Mapilanga

Jean Joseph is the director of the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Together with Rosmarie, he'll organise logistics and the teams of rangers and Mbuti taking part in the capture.



The Mbuti People

Known as the people of the forest, this indigenous community represents the highest expression of union between nature and human beings in the rainforests of Equatorial Africa. Without their knowledge and ability to go into the most inhospitable areas of Ituri, the capture would not be possible. They'll play a crucial role throughout the campaign: tracking, setting up traps, protecting the animals once they're caught and gathering the okapis' favourite foods.

MAIN LOCATION

The rainforest of Ituri

In the far northeast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a mantle of mist dances over the tree tops of an immense tropical rainforest. Making its way through the shadows of a vegetation that reaches 40 metres in height, the sun's rays lightly scratch the surface of the fallen leaves on the forest floor. We find ourselves in the Ituri forest, more specifically, the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, a UNESCO World heritage site and home to the okapi and the Mbuti people.

A paradise under serious threat by the greed of illegal mining, ivory traffickers, rebel groups and logging. Home of more than a thousand species of birds, more than four hundred classes of mammals and more than fifteen hundred types of plant reside. Within its dense vegetation dwell the world's largest populations of forest elephants, chimpanzees and leopards. Its forest mass stores up to 125 billion tons of carbon. All of us living on the Earth will have breathed in part of the oxygen the trees in this reserve give off at some point.



SECONDARY LOCATIONS

Switzerland - Basel

This small Swiss city is where our protagonist Rosmarie Ruf is from. This location will allow us to explore her past. Basel is the place she grew up in with her family, where she worked in the zoo with her husband and from where they both decided to leave their European life to work on the African continent.

United Arab Emirates

We will follow the process of translocating the okapi that will be sent from this country to the Epulu Station.

United States - Florida

Jacksonville zoo is located in this USA state. From here John Lukas discharges his duties as founder and director of the Okapi Conservation Project. From its facilities he'll stay in touch with Rosmarie Ruf over the capture preparations before travelling to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to participate in it. Not far from there is the White Oak Conservation Center, a centre dedicated to rearing and preserving species at risk of extinction. It's where Romakari, the world's oldest okapi lives, and the place from where John Lukas began the current Okapi Conservation Project in the 1980s. Also here we will shoot the scenes of the DNA renewal project.

KEY TALENT



Isabella Rosselini

The acclaimed Italian actress for movies like: Blue Velvet, Wyatt Earp, Wild Heart, Death Becomes Her or Enemy, has been supporting the Okapi Conservation Project for a long time. She has a very powerful commitment with the conservation of wildlife and is an old friend of John Lukas, one of the founders of the Okapi Conservation Project. She will narrate the beginning and ending of the story and is open to help lead the impact campaign of the documentary. We are exploring the possibility of her appearing in one scene during the story.

CREW



Aner Etxebarria Moral
Director / Director of Photography

Aner Etxebarria is a director and producer of anthropology and conservation documentaries, who has worked in various countries including Iceland, Mozambique, Bolivia, Mongolia and Brazil. He has directed and produced a number of awarded documentaries, such as “Baskavigin: The Slaughter of the Basque Whalers”, “Bayandalai, Lord of the Taiga” and “Voices of Earth”, which was nominated as best documentary series in the Jackson Wild Media 2021.



Toni Espadas
Production Manager

Toni Espadas is a veteran explorer with wide experience in production management on the African continent. Toni has photographed and documented the ways of life of innumerable ethnic groups and founded the Rift Valley Expeditions Agency to provide photographers, journalists and documentary filmmakers the chance to access these cultures. Toni is a reference for people whose film shoots take place in remote and complex areas.



Ruben Crespo
Director of Photography

Ruben Crespo is a DoP and camera unit specialized in wildlife, diving and extreme sports. He has been working from the coldest mountains to the hottest deserts, from the driest forests to the rainiest jungles and from the calmest seas to the stormiest. His projects have been awarded at several international wildlife and mountain festivals. His last feature was “From the Fire to the Ice” about fireman Pedro Cifuentes’ attempt to solo climb the Fitz Roy mountain in Patagonia.



Maitane Carballo
Head of Sound

Maitane Carballo has done sound for and edited numerous projects in the world of fiction and documentary. Some of these have brought her to live with and get to know some of the remotest cultures on the planet. For the past two years, Maitane has been part of the team on the series Voices of the Earth, which reveals some of the most amazing stories still to be found between humans and wildlife on our planet.



SPAIN

FEDERATION

Federation Spain is a subsidiary company of Federation Studios, formed by producers Juan Sola, Nacho Manubens, Toni Sevilla, Laura Oliva and Mark Albela. Five producers with vast experience in film and television both nationally and internationally, whose work has been recognized with numerous prizes including Emmy and Goya awards. The company focuses on the creation and production of quality audiovisual projects (series, feature films and documentaries) and works with established creators as well as new talent it wants to help in building their career. The key aspects of its editorial line are to develop and carry out productions with artistic value, human values and commercial potential.

To date, Federation Spain has produced Jota Linares's third film, "Las Niñas de Cristal," which was launched worldwide thanks to the Netflix platform and became one of the most-watched films internationally during the week of its premiere. In the spring of 2022, the production company completed the filming of "Awareness," a high-budget science fiction film directed by Daniel Benmayor, which is scheduled to be released in early 2023 on the Prime Video platform.

In addition to its audiovisual work, as a company one of Federation Spain's distinguishing features is its commitment to the environment. It implements innovative actions in its projects, which allow sustainability to be achieved throughout the life cycle of an audiovisual production, with the goal of obtaining the Green Seal from the Spanish Film Academy.



off the fence.



ACADEMY AWARD



BAFTA



EMMY



ROYAL TELEVISION



GREEN SCREEN



GOLD PANDA



JACKSON HOLE



GRIERSON

Off the Fence Productions is an award-winning producer of factual television and theatrical documentaries.

We have created more than 500 hours of television content for a wide range of international broadcasters including History Channel, MTV, BBC, Channel 4, Discovery, MSNBC, PBS, Netflix, National Geographic, A&E, Smithsonian Channel, The Weather Channel, ZDF, Arte, and France Televisions.

The creative team have been recognised by more than 80 awards, including Royal Television Society, Emmy, Golden Panda and Grand Teton. Our Netflix film 'My Octopus Teacher' recently won an Academy Award and a BAFTA for Best Documentary.