



Julian Fennessy

Sticking His Neck Out

Adventure, Environment, Conservation, Science

Giraffe are one of the iconic animals of Africa and seemingly plentiful. Yet, like so many other species on the continent, giraffe are under siege by poaching, war, advancing deserts and exploding human population growth that have destroyed or fragmented their habitats.

Julian Fennessy is the world's authority on the tallest animal on Earth, As Executive Director of the Kenya Land Conservation Trust and a founding Trustee of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, Fennessy has expanded our understanding of these magnificent creatures.

Ten years ago, an estimated 140,000 giraffe (yes, the word is “giraffe” both singular and plural) inhabited Africa. Today, giraffe number less than 100,000. About half live outside game parks in the wild, where they are more difficult to monitor and protect.

There are nine subspecies of giraffe in Africa, each distinguished by geographic location and the color, pattern and shape of their spotted coats. Fennessy has trekked across savannah, forest and the deserts of Africa, collecting genetic samples to unravel the mystery of giraffe and how we can protect the existing populations, some numbering less than 1,000. The West African giraffe in Niger are the most endangered subspecies in Africa.

After receiving his doctorate from the University of Sydney, Australia, Fennessy studied elephants as well as giraffe. His research helps explain many of oddities of these beloved animals. Fennessy can explain how giraffe have heart—actually, a giraffe heart can weigh more than 24 lbs. It also has the highest blood pressure in any mammal and its heart beats 170 times a minute—double the human rate.

Why do giraffe have patches? First and foremost for camouflage. They also act as a thermal window to release body heat. Both male and female giraffe have horns atop their heads covered in skin.

Fennessy can mesmerize his audiences with “tall tales” of travel, investigation and conservation, and his passion for saving one of the world's most beloved creatures.