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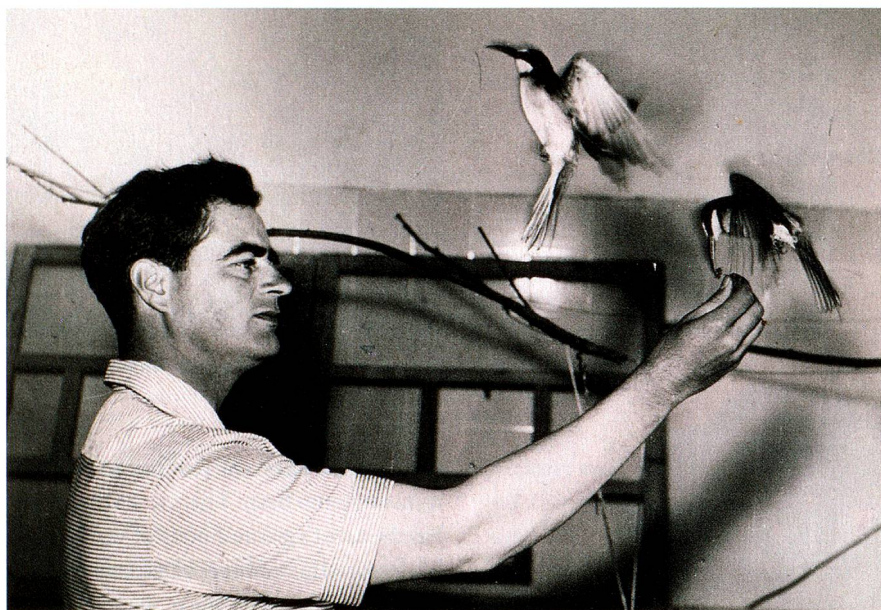
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"Man always wants to take more from the Earth than it is able to give"

As a legendary figure in the world of ecology, Luc Hoffmann has dedicated his entire life to protecting the natural environment. A co-founder of the WWF and pragmatic supporter of wetlands to accommodate the migration of water birds, the ornithologist born in 1923 has sometimes devoted as much as five or ten years to certain projects.

Interview and profile by Alain Wey



Luc Hoffmann feeding bee-eaters in La Tour du Valat in the 1950s

Luc Hoffmann, a utopian? "Most certainly", he replies. He has dedicated his entire life to nature, the Earth and mankind. He is a passionate ornithologist, a scientist on the ground and a negotiator who convinces governments to establish nature reserves and natural parks. He has spent over sixty years in the service of his majesty, which, in his case, is nature. The co-founder of the WWF welcomes us to his home in Montricher, among the hamlets of the canton of Vaud, a few miles from Lake Joux. The ecologist, who began his crusade at the end of the Second World War, is only staying at his Swiss home for several days. "I travel back and forth between here and Camargue", which is the place where the adventure began in 1946, at "La Tour du Valat", a wildlife sanctuary in the south of France. The grandson of the founder of the pharmaceutical company Hoffmann-La Roche has devoted his life to ecology while witnessing the deterioration of the state of the planet. His list of achievements is endless: from protecting wetlands in the migratory paths of birds to safeguarding the Galapagos

Islands and Madagascar. We take a look back at his life's work.

Heir from the Swiss upper classes

Born in Basel on 23 January 1923, Luc was the son of Emanuel Hoffmann, heir to the pharmaceutical giant, and Maja Stehlin, sculptor, painter and patron of the arts. He grew up both in Brussels (1924-1929) and then in Basel with his brother André and his sister Vera. He explains: "My passion for birds goes back to my primary school days and my early childhood. I was also fascinated by plants, flowers and mammals." Tragedy struck the family in 1932. His father was killed in a car accident aged 36 and his elder brother died of leukaemia less than a year later. In 1934, his mother got married again to the famous orchestra conductor Paul Sacher and the family moved to the Basel countryside. During that period, Luc Hoffmann would bring injured animals home that he found on his walks. He recalls: "That did not always go down well at home. My mother encouraged me but my stepfa-

ther did not." He even domesticated a crow that he saved at the age of 16. "I gathered him from a nest. At that time, the farmers looked for nests, tied up the offspring and fed them up to later eat them." He gradually took an interest in ornithology with another enthusiast, going on trips to Alsace. The heir to the Hoffmann-La Roche empire began to diverge from the path set out for him. To keep up appearances, the young man first studied chemistry before focusing on biology when he came of age. "I initially had a sentimental and aesthetic relationship with nature which then became more intellectual and scientific", he reflects. He undertook his compulsory military service between 1943 and 1946 before making his first trip to Camargue.

The avant-gardist enterprise

He remarks: "I had read and heard much about Camargue but I was in the Swiss army and was unable to leave the country. I went to visit it as soon as I could go abroad. I was fascinated by what I saw – a natural environment developing according to its own laws and outside of the constant constraints of man." There were multitudes of birds, horses and bulls. One thing led to another and he purchased the "La Tour du Valat" site (over 10,000,000 m² of land and fens) from a Swiss hunter in 1948 and set up a bird banding station there while studying for his doctorate at the University of Basel. Aged 29 and having obtained his qualifications, he decided to move to the site, where he had a laboratory built. He was supported by a small team of ornithologists and his wife Daria Razumovsky, an Austrian countess whom he married in 1953. He officially opened the "La Tour du Valat" biology station in the following year, an event attended by leading figures from the world of science, such as François Bourlière, a pioneering French ecologist. Luc Hoff-

mann recalls that he was initially considered an enlightened dreamer. His children Vera, Maja, André and Daschenka grew up at “La Tour du Valat” where the number of staff had increased and now included a teacher for the station’s school. He actively collaborates with the “Société nationale de Protection de la Nature” and the “Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)”. In 1958, he launched the MAR project with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), of which Luc Hoffmann became Vice-President from 1966 to 1969. This organisation was established in 1948 and today brings together over 1,000 NGOs and 80 states. The aim of the project was to step up efforts on the census of water birds and inventories of wetlands throughout the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe. This long-term project resulted in the International Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar) in 1971. The ornithologist also became the Director of the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB), which became Wetlands International, in 1962.

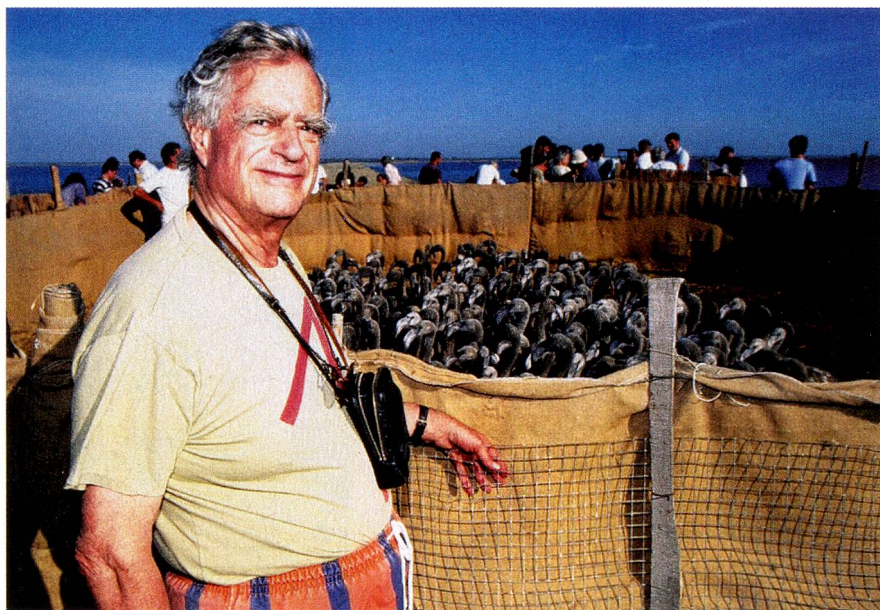
The WWF and safeguarding Mediterranean wetlands

The origins of the foundation of the WWF lie in the journey to East Africa undertaken by the British biologist Julian Huxley, co-founder of IUCN and the first Director General of UNESCO. He alerted the public and the scientific community to the threat of extinction facing wildlife due to intensive hunting. The idea of creating an international body that was sufficiently powerful to preserve nature was put forward. The team he recruited included ornithologists Max Nicholson, Guy Mountfort and Peter Scott (Vice-President of IUCN), who made a direct appeal to Luc Hoffmann, who was then campaigning to raise funds to create a natural park in the Coto de Doñana region of Andalusia with his friend and colleague José Valverde. Luc Hoffmann says: “We really needed some political influence and to find the funds to achieve this. It was at that time that I met the British men who were wanting to establish a non-governmental organisation to protect natural environments of global importance.” He therefore became involved in the creation of the WWF (World Wildlife Fund, which became the World Wide

Fund for Nature) in 1961 in Morges, canton of Vaud. It was the fund-raising carried out by Luc Hoffmann that allowed the organisation to undertake its initial steps. Only later did he reluctantly admit to providing substantial financial support. He explains: “The Coto Doñana became one of the WWF’s first great projects.” But it was not until 1969, after a decade of negotiations, that General Franco officially announced the establishment of the national

Targeting the Mediterranean basin and Africa

Since setting up the station in “La Tour du Valat”, Luc Hoffmann has developed an extensive network of scientific and political relationships. As Vice-President of WWF International (1962-1988) and as head of various national and international organisations and foundations, he has addressed the protection of the natural environment worldwide. The ornithologist has neverthe-



Hoffmann helping to band flamingos in 2002

park, which was the largest in Europe at the time. The first great achievements of the emergent WWF also include the funding of the Charles Darwin Foundation to protect the Galapagos Islands and the IUCN projects, including the extension of the Amboseli park in East Africa. As for the organisation’s famous panda logo: “Peter Scott created it as we know it. The image of the panda helped the growth of the WWF enormously in the early years.” Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who was one of the first members of the WWF before becoming its President (1981-1996), describes Luc Hoffmann in these words: “Behind his composure and modesty lies a will of iron and tremendous determination. It is difficult to properly estimate his contribution to the development and growth of the WWF, both in terms of advice and financial support, especially since he goes about his business so discretely. His outstanding qualities include his charm and unflinching ability to get along with everyone he meets.”

less never forgotten his major work – the preservation of wild wetlands on the migratory paths of water birds under constant threat of destruction from sewage projects and intensive agriculture. His crusade resulted in the Ramsar convention ratified by 18 nations in 1971. It now has 163 signatory countries with 2,064 sites covering a total area of 1,970,303,208,000 m². Countless anecdotes exist about Luc Hoffmann’s achievements. On the Austrian-Hungarian border, he contributed to the creation of the steppe national park of Neusiedlersee, Seewinkel and Hanság in the 1980s. In communist Hungary under Janos Kadar, he negotiated the establishment of the Hortobágy national park, the greatest expanse of steppes in Europe, in 1963 together with the person behind the project, Antal Festetics. In 1971, the Camargue natural park was set up thanks to financial support from the

“Luc Hoffmann, l’homme qui s’obstine à préserver la Terre”, interviews by Jil Silberstein, Editions Phébus, 2010.

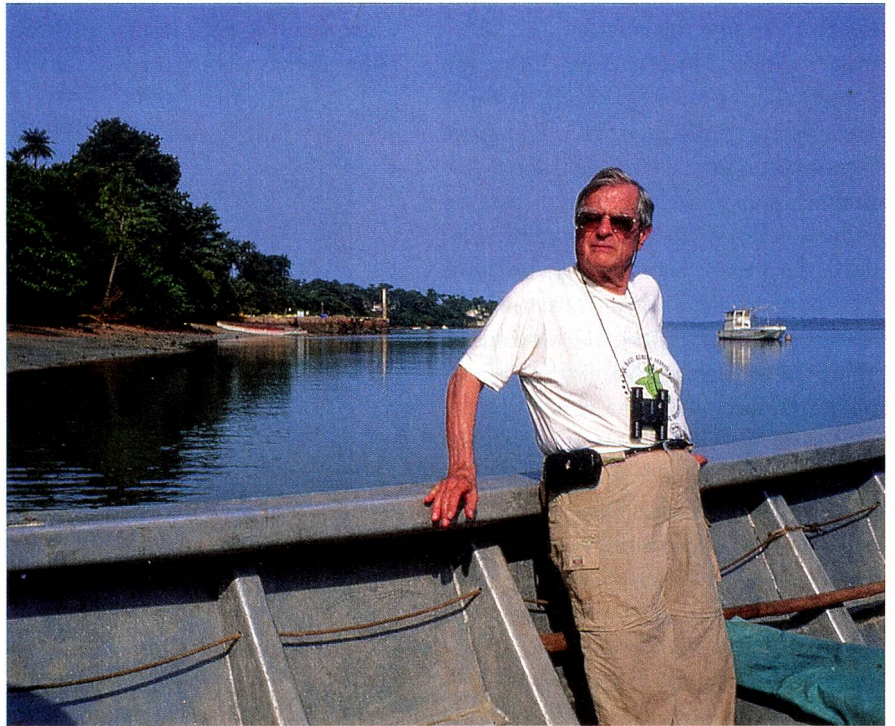
WWF led by Luc Hoffmann, who convinced the French government to allow the purchase of this wilderness under threat from an explosion of human activity. He was also active in Madagascar at the end of the 1960s where he worked with the researcher Jean-Jacques Petter to establish the WWF there and to save the forest and its biodiversity which was rapidly disappearing. In Greece, he contributed to the establishment of the Prespa national park in the 1970s. In the middle of the decade, the naturalist and expert on deserts Théodore Monod was seeking to preserve the biodiversity in the Gulf of Arguin on the coast of Mauritania in West Africa. With the support of the WWF, he succeeded in convincing the Islamist government to set up the Banc d'Arguin national park (12,000 km²) in 1976. However, ten years later, Luc Hoffmann saw the situation in this region deteriorate as a result of overfishing. He then decided to found the Fondation internationale du banc d'Arguin (FIBA) to encourage the government to manage and regulate fishing better and to secure the park's future. The FIBA gave rise to the desire to preserve all the eco-regions on the coast stretching from Mauritania to Sierra Leone, which led to the West African Regional Marine and Coastal Conservation Programme (PRCM) in 2003.

The baton has been passed on but the race continues

The work of Luc Hoffmann is continuing thanks to all his groundwork and the efforts of his children, Maja (aged 56), a patron of contemporary art like her grandmother, Vera Michalski (aged 58), an editor, and André (aged 54), Vice-President of Roche, WWF International and the Tour du Valat Foundation. In 1994, Luc Hoffmann set up the family foundation MAVA (Maja-André-Vera) to support the conservation of nature, through which his children are continuing his work. It is today one of the leading environmental foundations in Europe and a major provider of funding for projects in the alpine region, the Mediterranean basin and the coastal area of West Africa. Head of the organisation since 2010, André Hoffmann is a worthy successor to his father despite the fact that he is an economist rather than a biologist. This is definitely beneficial as far as sustainable development is concerned. "He is extremely committed. He continues to work

based on the same principles that I myself established." Luc Hoffmann's philosophy on ecology: "If you want the world to move in one direction in harmony with nature, you have to engage in dialogue with those who oppose such harmony. The approach that has to be taken to achieve genuine improve-

over nature, he read out his own death sentence. The biosphere can only survive in solidarity. It cannot have a sustainable existence if an animal, such as man, seeks supremacy over all other species. Things cannot continue like that as it will end in disaster." A modest realist, Luc Hoffmann



In the Banc d'Arguin national park on the coast of Mauritania in the 1990s

ment is dialogue and not aggression. I am not a militant but I hope to win people over."

A look at the 21st century

Luc Hoffmann remarks: "I see regression and signals that have not been heeded in every environmental catastrophe." The collective ecological conscience has grown strongly but, despite all the success achieved by environmental protection groups over sixty years, the condition of the Earth continues to deteriorate. New disturbing problems have emerged and for good reason. "The power relationship between man and nature has not evolved much", observes Luc Hoffmann. "There are more people who are aware of nature but often for anodyne rather than significant reasons. Man always wants to take more from the Earth than it is able to give." Without being fatalistic, the ageing ecologist is simply saying that people are beginning to understand but are turning a deaf ear. "When man declared his supremacy

does not believe that everything he has achieved has brought about fundamental change. He nevertheless remains optimistic. "Man will finally come to realise the direction in which he is heading and will change course. However, that is becoming increasingly expensive and difficult to achieve. The financial estimates for renewable energies show that it is still possible to put things back on track and to live comfortably. Solar power is probably the most effective solution for the future." A word of advice? "More opportunities must be found to work with people rather than against them." A more creative approach is required – politicians should take heed.

More information:
www.tourduvalat.org
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