

Notes about the 2014 film *The Guide* with Tonga Torcido and E.O. Wilson

--- [James Hayes-Bohanan](#), geographer

(Caveat: these notes are not exactly in sequence, but they do provide further information about many of the ideas raised in this beautiful short film.)

The film is sometimes difficult to locate. As of November 2022, it is [hosted on YouTube](#) by HHMI, for educational purposes. See my Good News from [Gorongosa blog post](#) for some other connections and a map.

Two favorite quotes from the film:

“Farming is good, but not like this.” -- Tonga Torcido

“Nature is the part of the world that does not need us.” -- E.O. Wilson

One favorite image in the film: an egret riding on the back of a hippo. This is a great example of symbiosis. At least one species of egret is called the “cattle egret” because it finds such a particular niche with ruminants.

Portuguese is the official language of Mozambique, but most people speak one or more Bantu languages as well, including Chi-Barué, Chi-Gorongosi, and Chi-Sena. When we here Tonga Torcido speaking in English, he is using what is at least his fifth language. He moves among at least three languages during the film.

One of the first people we meet is a philanthropist who made his fortune in the Boston area -- Greg Carr made his fortune in several telecommunications ventures before turning his attention full time to development work in Africa. His current net worth is about \$200 million. [Greg Carr's Big Gamble](#) is a 2007 *Smithsonian* article that describes his decision to invest \$40 million in watershed protection and ecotourism at Gorongosa. This kind of generosity can be positive or self-serving; the difference, I believe, is in how deeply the donor listens to the community he is attempting to serve.

(Disambiguation: Greg Carr shares his name with [Dr. Greg Carr](#), who is a professor of law and African studies at Howard University, perhaps the most important [HBCU](#) in the United States.)

Remarkably, this is Dr. Wilson's first visit to sub-Saharan Africa (meaning Africa south of the Sahara desert). He marvels at the Great Rift Valley, which has undoubtedly featured in many of his studies over the decades. See the National Geographic online encyclopedia for a discussion of [rift valleys in general and the Great Rift](#) in particular.

During a community meeting, a woman complains about the problem of elephants trampling the crops of families near the parks and complains about the inadequacy of hot peppers as a remedy. Fortunately, [Dr. Lucy King has found a way to use bees as part of a humane strategy to divert elephants.](#)

When E.O. Wilson and Tonga Torcido are looking at a small stinging ant, Wilson gives the Latin name ("in science" he says) and Torcido replies with the "English" name, which is actually Portuguese: *matapela* means to kill the skin.

Wilson mentions the importance of Gorongosa's elevation in harboring rain forests. The ecology of "sky islands" is one of his major contributions to biology. (I became familiar with these when I lived in Tucson, where the basin and range topography creates many such islands; among my favorites was at Chiricahua NP, whose web site includes a [discussion of Sonoran sky islands.](#)) Another is social biology in general and the biology of ants in particular.

Humans have a role in the hydrologic cycle -- deforestation leads to a lack of cloud formation, starving forests of water. This is a pernicious example of positive feedback.

Wilson asserts that the next 50 years are crucial for the survival of the environment. This is not a random number -- he is referring to his own idea of a [demographic bottleneck.](#)

Dr. Wilson has an amazing ability to identify many species during the "bio blitz" in a place he has never visited, even knowing when cannot identify a species only because it had not yet been known to science. I am especially impressed because I cannot do this at all, but my son recently introduced me to a phone app that gives me a chance -- the [Seek app](#) is a collaboration between iNaturalist and National Geographic that gives amateur users the ability to identify all kinds of organisms -- at least to the level of genus and often to the level of species.

The bird Tonga mentions near the end of the film is the emerald-spotted wood dove. See the [eBird page for *Turtur chalcospilos*](#) to learn more about it and hear its call. It is common throughout the Rift Valley region of eastern Africa.

