

## Bob Kunzinger

### How to Die in the Congo

I stood near the Congo River on the west side of Kolwezi, Zaire, and my body shook uncontrollably as I stared at the river for the first time. I watched the water flow across rocks and probably bones toward the equator carrying no apparent proof of death of my friend, adventurer Joseph Kohn, despite the unlikelihood of any other outcome. But “missing” is unacceptable, and as is often the case, the lack of information concerning what happened to him pulled me like a powerful current into that dark distance.

As in any narrative about wilderness and adventure, the spirit of place takes over, and I finally understood why he continued past here, despite his intestinal illness, his resulting weakness, and his indefinite sense of what to expect next. The Congo is enticing; it teases you into believing it is safe and protecting and eternal, that nothing could possibly die in such a beautiful river. Stanley and Livingstone and Speake and Akeley and Burton and others, they’re all out there somewhere. I know these men; for more than a year, Joe and I brought them to life in the soft shade of a narrow river in western New York, and standing here now looking west I could sense them not far away, and Joe with them, talking about the changes, talking about the rain.

I needed a canoe or a raft, supplies, that’s all, and I could follow the bends and turns I knew so well from the maps we studied beneath lamps in a library six thousand miles away. I could follow Joe as Stanley had followed Livingstone, and as I was warned would happen in the mystical grip of the Congo, reason evaporated into the green hills of what was then called Zaire.

Surely, this earth of ours was patient with Joe, I thought, despite its obvious unpredictable temperament. But this was the wilds of Zaire, present day Democratic Republic of Congo, noted by all authorities as one of the most dangerous regions in the world. Still, in the 1980s when this narrative plays out, such danger, when there was any, was more predictable and, therefore, avoidable. Joe and I prepared for a year for his solo trip on the Congo from origin to the Atlantic.

I looked west, and half of me felt lighter, energetic, brought to life by some African adrenaline Joe had warned me about, and whose source lay out before me. I would gather the supplies offered to me by a local Peace Corps worker a day earlier to make the trip. Of course, nothing else made sense. I was as ready as Joe was, obviously. We trained together; we learned the astronomy and dangers, the medical concerns, the rivers turn, the villagers’ anger and ease, together. The only burden I still carried was in the psychological weight of his disappearance: *He lived here for three years prior to the journey, I did not, and I can’t find him anywhere.*

I wondered more than a few times how one carries the concept of missing. Death at the very least is concrete. It keeps our attention because of what we call an “ending.” We despise death for its finality, but we don’t avoid it for the sheer concrete truthfulness it carries. There is weight in death, and clarity. Closure. In a paradoxical way, it is the ultimate security. It is too real to dismiss. One can’t be “kind-of” dead. It’s conclusive.

But when missing enters the mix, the direction of the narrative remains muddled among the infinite number of inconclusive outcomes. *Lost in the jungles; living in a village; Ebola; malaria; dysentery; the Crocodile Men of the Congo.*

The variables are exhausting. A croc can kill, but a hippopotamus won’t even chew. Large, snapping bites and the limbs sink to the river bottom for other animals to devour.

Villagers kill Joe because he is a mercenary. Rebels kill him because he is not. The sun bakes. The night chills. The river bends and turns then twists into a thousand branches lit by nothing but moonlight, when there is a moon. Some tributaries travel thousands of miles and turn back on themselves, a labyrinth circling toward death. The river is the large intestines, twisting and spinning toward an evacuation that no one will discover. He could be anywhere, which is to say, essentially, he is nowhere to be found.

I stared a long time toward the west, then waded in, slowly at first then with more confidence. The water tugged at my sneakers. Joe wore sandals made from tire treads. I wondered where they were now. When I waded in just knee deep, I stopped and wondered how far he got. The trees bent toward the water and men fished and spread nets. To the east was the city of Kolwezi with its seeming safety and buildings and market. To the west was wilderness and the mystique of my imagination. About me were men who must have worked these waters most of their lives. Did they watch Joe paddle by? Did they wave? Maybe he traveled for weeks before some wide tributary teased him off course. Perhaps after just a few days he became too weak to continue. It might not have mattered to him whether he was sick or in danger. It wouldn’t have mattered to me. The water ran up my thighs as a small canoe moved behind me. I wanted to turn and see him standing on the shore, laughing, shocked, wondering what the hell I was doing in Africa. I wanted that so bad. Two teenagers stared at me from the shore. When this all started, I was their age.

For a year before he left, we “trained” on the college campus where I was a freshman and from where he had graduated five years earlier. I would quiz him on his medical knowledge and treatment procedures. In most of the industrial world, death often comes with warnings; that is, prediction is common. EEGs. MRIs. CT Scans. Even cancer patients go through treatment. But in Africa, like many parts of this vast planet with still so much uncharted territory, death broadsides its victim. Death lies beneath the surface, only its eyes revealed, camouflaged by our confidence that we’re well prepared. Death waits, searches for the vulnerable spot. It comes in large forms, like three-ton

hippos, eighteen-feet-long crocs, rebels on the move.

It comes, too, in microscopic armies. Consider the parasites. During our research, these lilliputian terrorists remained part of our daily dissection of “modes of death.” Schistosomiasis wins as the worst, of course. Water-borne flatworms carry the disease. In labs, they’re called schistosome. In the jungle, a person doubles over while worms too small for the human eye to see devour his insides. I thought of Saint-Exupéry: “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” So is what’s lethal.

These schistosome insurgents enter the body from a river’s surface. Because of them, the World Health Organization warns against paddling in fresh water. In the long term, exposure to them increases reports of bladder cancer by thirty-two times the rate in America. In the short term, however, acute infection causes temporary paralysis of the legs. Schistosomiasis itself is unlikely to kill. It’s the animals, dehydration, reptiles, dysentery, hostile strangers, and other fatal combinations that transform a sick adventurer into vulnerable prey. Even if paralysis doesn’t set in, the lethargy and weakness can compromise safety.

We knew this.

We knew malaria posed itself as a problem since Joe contracted it before, rendering him more susceptible. His little orange pills ran out once and he had all the symptoms and problems associated with it, like fevers, shivering, pain in the joints, headaches, and vomiting. But treatment was readily available to him at the time. However, without treatment, death is common. Malaria is the anopheline mosquitoes’ fault. They hang out near stagnant water and kill one child in the world every thirty seconds. In Africa today, the death rate for malaria far exceeds that of AIDS. The convulsions alone can kill since a child’s body can shake so violently that the organs simply stop functioning. More than ninety percent of malaria cases are in sub-Saharan Africa, and deaths top about one million each year. Without medical attention, those otherwise treatable symptoms evolve into convulsions and coma. But carrying pills is easy so concern of malaria remained on our back burner.

Still, as a freshman at college my introduction to earth science, astronomy, biology, foreign languages, and geography came not from fifteen credit hours a semester; no, my exposure to the ways of this earth came after class in the library with Joe, at the river, at a local reservoir.

We would be prepared; it was that easy. Joe received the yellow fever vaccination followed by many others. He knew to cook his meat and fish well, but somewhere between Lumbumbashi and Kolwezi, when he lost everything, including matches, going over falls, he ate fish dried in the sun on rocks. We prepared for this, too. We caught bass in the Allegheny River, dried it on rocks in the sun and ate it. We studied the fish of the Congo regions and learned that boiling most species avoids possible diseases.

Our vocabulary didn’t include HIV and AIDS in 1981. No, we had another new entry in the entomological soup: Ebola. It remains one of the most

virulent diseases known to humanity and causes death in about ninety percent of its victims. The symptoms include a sudden onset of fever, muscle pain, headaches and sore throat. One might seem to simply have the flu until the rash spreads and the kidneys shut down. Then the liver stops cleansing the blood, which by now courses through the bowels and urinary track. At this point, the internal organs literally liquify, and death is welcome. It is, luckily, a predominantly north Zairean problem, but people in remote African jungles do not readily report incidents of disease. When the west is aware of twenty new cases of Ebola breaking out in Uganda and the DRC, more remote cases along desolate regions of river tributaries remain unreported. Usually, one contracts Ebola by contact with the blood or semen of an infected person. However, transmission also occurs by handling dead chimpanzees, like those west of Kolwezi. Recent studies show that some bats carry the disease without dying, like the bats prevalent in central Africa.

Ebola kills, but so can a slight fever, even a common cold. What knocks a person onto a couch in suburban Buffalo can kill in rural Africa. It isn't the disability that poses the problem: hepatitis B, malaria, and others, while dangerous, can be cured. But in remote regions, the symptoms themselves can expedite death. Lethargy leaves one exposed to the elements. Tiredness, diarrhea and general sleepiness and weakness, while inconvenient at home, become critical when attempting to avoid animals that snap humans in two, reptiles that kill by a mere scratch, or hostile humans defending themselves against some unknown intruder.

Hell, just sleeping allows animals like the hippopotamus time to terrorize. Joe talked of their gentleness. Upon further study it seems their nonchalance is borne from confidence. Their lack of interest in humans results from having no fear at all. Hippos maintain a mostly vegetarian diet, consisting of grasses. But bulls grow to about eight thousand pounds and still remain graceful in the water. They sink to the bottom and run along, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups of up to thirty. During the mating season, territorial males use their long canines as weapons, snapping the enemy, including human, in two. Experts consider these animals among the most dangerous in Africa. Hippos don't sweat blood, as rumored in decades past, but they do spill plenty. Someone resting because of some ailment, or simply sleeping in the reeds of a riverbed during mating season, might cause a disturbance and not move fast enough to escape this graceful swimmer twice the weight of a Jeep Cherokee. Hippos can climb steep embankments fast, and snap in half or trample to death anything between them and their destination.

Research revealed comical dangers as well, particularly the "Crocodile Men from the Congo." What should be a title for some B movie is a reality check to those traveling to the south of Kinshasa. Villagers and police considered six tribal chiefs in possession of a mystical ability to turn themselves into crocodiles. They were arrested for killing thirty-three people. One confessed to eating five people during the previous fifteen years. Some

Buma region fisherman left his village because he claimed he could identify the crocodile men and he feared them. He described them as monsters with human legs, crocodile faces and other features.

Real crocodiles devour. They hide in mud, in water, in grass, and chase, snap and swallow prey. The locking jaws of these eighteen-foot-long Jurassic remnants might snap a weak human too close to the river. They grip the body, crushing the spine, the neck, the skull, popping it and dragging it under a rock or riverbank to tenderize for later consumption. Crocs are a problem all along the Congo. Fishing has depleted their food supply. Drought has forced more people to the river, and once there, those people kill animals normally eaten by the crocs. And this food-supply depletion doesn't consider that conservationists who fight to protect the carnivores are leaving humans more susceptible to their hunt.

Reptiles, too, pose a threat. Dozens of snake species live along the riverbanks and in the water. Some cause no harm. Others debilitate a victim enough to leave that person susceptible to other dangers. Some snakes bite to paralyze and then kill within seconds, minutes at most. A person eating dried fish, weak from dehydration, might be bitten and then suffocate from muscle contraction. Other prey would devour him in time like the African rock pythons prevalent in the region and which can grow to a reported thirty feet. These coiling monsters eat goats, crocs, and humans. In 1958 in what was then Rhodesia, elephant tracker K. Krofft killed a rock python and found a six-foot croc inside. The Congo tributaries are their home. It's common practice that when a child is caught in this coil, the villagers nearly always allow the snake to crush the screaming child to death rather than jump in to help and certainly die as well.

People are more dangerous. Rwandan rebels wouldn't gather and wreak havoc with their sick, animal-like behavior from the border to Bukavu until the nineties, but just before Joe returned to Africa on "our" trip in the early eighties, rebel forces had emerged twice from Angola. Belgian paratroopers quickly ousted these Katangan insurgents, but some rebels continued to invade when Joe reentered the Shaba Province.

My God, the terrain alone kills. This earth of ours is not designed for human manipulation. The river is dangerous the entire 2,720 miles, but most hazardous after the meeting of the Lualaba and the Luvua rivers. From there water flows a thousand miles to Stanley Falls, north of the equator. But thousands of islands, some spanning ten miles, run along this long stretch, which under excellent conditions might take months to traverse. Several stretches of the river are altogether unnavigable. Waterfalls, as well, can surprise a solo traveler. One such falls, the Kiobo, on the Lufira tributary, pours down from almost thirteen hundred feet. West of Kolwezi, the river moves into a sort of lake-region where poor navigation can lead to an endless maze through jungles and smaller rivers, most of which humans have never mapped. This is the "dark" part of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

But the planning, the anticipation, ignited a spark in me which refused to be doused by worry of what might happen. He was twenty-seven; I was not yet twenty, and we were alive to the core. What a time it was, cutting up sun-dried fish we caught in the Allegheny River, laughing about the previous night's antics; conversations at Antonio's Italian Restaurant across from campus when faculty associated me with adventure and daring, and students counted me among the few that didn't belong there. The entire restaurant was always engaged when Joe and I showed up and he talked about his adventures in Africa, or stories of when he rode a bike from Buffalo to Brazil.

One night, Joe flipped over a soiled place mat and used tomato sauce and blue cheese dressing to draw a map of the Congo River. He looked up at me and said, quite seriously, "I have an idea, and I need your help."

And now, here, alone on the river, those placemat maps and the real maps the State Department sent him, and the books about this place, the stories he told of this place once nearly fantastical, are all real. After more than enough time of secondary tales, I finally stood in the midst of the primary source, stared upriver knowing, somewhere not far away were answers.

I stood waist deep and my mind ricocheted between the innocence of western New York and the visceral reality of the Congo River. How simple it was, back then, back there. How dreadfully and beautifully simple when I still thought this world of ours was all-welcoming and navigable. I was just nineteen and trying to navigate myself into adulthood, and who should take the helm but a world-class adventurer. Still, before he left, Joe said, "Maybe I am trying to find myself." Indeed. Perhaps the possibility of dying in Africa didn't scare Joe half as much as ending up missing in civilization, drowned in the dysentery of ordinary life, a fear I carried with me from then on. I understood Joe's passion.

The Congo River moves through the trees like blood in the veins, and the hills pulsate, the sky covers it all in a blue light, and the river runs brown but not dirty. It all blends into some organic aspect of existence, womb-like, and it feels comfortable, as if nothing could possibly hurt anyone here. The reality of Joe's disappearance suddenly didn't bother me here, nor his incomplete journey, if that is even possible, nor my own. Later, others asked why I went since I knew I wouldn't find out anything new. But that's not true. In fact, I discovered something very ancient, as primeval as Africa herself, and it is probably what called Conrad, and Stanley, Livingstone and Kohn. Like the first explorers a millennium earlier, I carried the brand new, yet ancient concept that despite our hopes and expectations, all journeys are, in fact, incomplete.

The skies turned grey, and it started to rain. My face was wet, and I waded back to shore thinking about the overshadowed distances. We bury our dead. We have a wake, a funeral, and we bury them. When time passes, we

remember them. Sometimes we visit their grave, and sometimes we bring flowers. But what do we do when someone disappears? Part of us never moves beyond the last moments with that person. There are no last rites. We simply wait.



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