



A LIFE IN RESEARCH

DAVID OBURA

Meet the Kenyan zoologist dedicating his life to studying coral reefs to find sustainable solutions that will not only protect them but also continue to support local livelihoods

David Obura is the middle of three children born to Chris Obura and Anna Needs in 1966. David's parents had met in London, where Chris was studying dentistry, married and returned to Kenya. Anna loved her adopted country, taking her children to game parks and camping all over Kenya.

"We were always outdoors," says David. "During school holidays, we went to Tiwi Beach, south coast, where I spent hours swimming and snorkelling."

After secondary school at Strathmore College in Nairobi, David left for Pearson College, Canada, before proceeding to Harvard University in 1985, to study zoology.

"I enjoyed the sciences and did well, which pleased my father as he hoped I would become a dentist, like him. However, I could not imagine myself confined to the same four walls of a dental surgery. When my father could see that

David's study, conducted between 1992 and 1994, showed that although the reefs were demonstrating stress through coral bleaching, they were also quite robust.

After his PhD, David returned to Kenya in 1997 at a time when El Niño, the first global event clearly attributable to climate change, was having a severe impact. On land, it was experienced as immense rains, while high sea temperatures caused mass bleaching and death of corals. This shifted David's focus of work to climate change, where he explores species of coral most at risk of bleaching and how the reef system might recover.

David also felt a keen need to connect his research on coral reefs to the experience of the local communities. For about seven years, he went out to the coral reefs off Diani with fishermen in their canoes.

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I was serious about the type of science I wanted to do, he became very supportive."

During his third year at Harvard, David enrolled in a marine programme, part of which took him to Jamaica where he began to study coral reefs. For his undergraduate research project, he completed a marine science coral reef project in Kenya. "At the end of my degree, I knew that I wanted to be a coral reef scientist, so I enrolled for a PhD at the University of Miami with the aim of doing research that was relevant in Kenya."

David's PhD field work in Watamu and Malindi explored the concern that sediment from River Sabaki (due to upstream soil erosion) could lead to coral bleaching. When stressed, corals bleach when the algae living within the coral tissue are expelled, exposing the white skeleton beneath. The coral is still alive and can recover, but if the stress is too high or prolonged, the coral dies. It can take decades for new coral to repopulate the reef. However,

"I have a lot of respect for the knowledge of these fishermen. I experienced how hard they worked, yet they were financially always on the edge. I believe that understanding the local context is a pre-requisite to deliver sustainable outcomes that benefit people most."

In 1999, David and Swedish scientist Olof Lindén founded Coastal Oceans Research and Development - Indian Ocean (CORDIO), which David now heads. CORDIO documents what is happening to coral reefs throughout the western Indian Ocean. David has found reporting on coral reef destruction disheartening and has chosen to focus on communicating research that can inform national and international policy change with a focus squarely on sustainability.

"I am not motivated to write an obituary of coral reefs, because that's essentially what the data shows. We can't change what has happened in the past but we can change the future. I want to think towards and create a better future."

