

Olaf Wessberg, the Founder of the Cabo Blanco National Park

When Olof Wessberg from Ulricehamn and his wife Karen left Sweden with a banana boat a spring day in 1954 they would never see their homeland again. The couple settled in Costa Rica, where Olle founded Central America's first two national parks: Cabo Blanco and Corcovado.

20 years after his arrival in Costa Rica he was murdered for his fight for nature and was buried near the Cabo Blanco National Park.

In 1999 the Danish film "Et hjörne av paradiset" (English: "A taste of Paradise") depicts Samuel Fröler as the blond Swedish officer Olof who found his paradise with his beloved wife Karen in a Central American rainforest. In reality Olof was Nils Olof Wessberg from Ulricehamn, Sweden. No one was particularly surprised when he and Karen left Sweden to search for paradise. As a young man, already, Olof was an environmental fighter whose views at that time were rather radical.

Karen and Olof - or Olle as he was mostly called, eventually found their paradise on a beach in Costa Rica where they built a small plantation and lived on what nature gave. But their lives became also a fight against environmental degradation and deforestation, which eventually Olle paid with his life.

A dramatic life

- Olle's and Karen's life's was much more dramatic than what the movie showed, said Eva Tellow, whose mother Hilde was the sister of Olof Wessberg.

Eva visited Karen in Costa Rica in 1990 - four years before the brave little Danish died in her small simple house near the beach where she and Olle built their first home of palm leaves.

Eva had been corresponding with Karen for many years, and her long and difficult journey to Olle's rainforest was an unforgettable experience. On her trip, she was accompanied by her two children, Karolina and Peter, and two of her friends and their children.

- We took out by air, then by minivan, barge and cattle truck, she says. It was an incredibly intense experience to see her. I had heard about her and uncle Olle ever since I was little but I had never imagined how simple her life was.



- She lived near the small village of Montezuma on the border to Cabo Blanco National Park, the first park that Olle had founded.

We lived in their simple house which he had built on a clearing in the dense rain forest, and late into the night I sat with Karen on the porch and she talked about her and Olle's love story.

Olle was born in Germany in 1919, but the family moved shortly thereafter to Skara in Sweden. In 1940 his father, Hugo Wessberg, who was educated in Germany as a forester, brought the property Ekholmen in Ulricehamn and moved there with his family.

He worked as a forest valuer and consultant, and Olle spent much time in nature together with his father, and his interest for animals and nature was deepened more and more, even when he started a military career and became a lieutenant in the armored forces of Skövde.

- He was a very big animal lover, remembers Annika Tellow, a sister-in-law to Olle who knew him since childhood.
- I remember we had problems in the city with a lot of wild cats who were suffering, and Olle undertook to shoot them. One time I helped him to bring out an old mangy cat in our yard, but I thought it was nasty when he shot it.
- He was polite and pleasant, but we thought that in time he got weird views. It was a shame for Uncle Hugo when Olle went off. He had no other children since his daughter Hilde had died.

Olle's mother had died in 1947 of brain cancer and he suspected that there was a link between cancer and the environment, so he became very interested in environmental issues. When his sister Hilde died in 1951 of the same disease as his mother he put it in relation to their diet, and he became an almost fanatical vegan.

- Yes, we did think that he was a bit odd, said Sten and Meje Josefsson, who were familiar with the family Wessberg and remember the slightly sulky Olle. He was happy to discuss how to live, and we teased him sometimes. We did not really share his views. At that time one didn't care much about environmental issues and vegans seemed a bit peculiar.

Instant Love

When Åke Rydberg bought Olle's childhood home Ekholmen from his father, Hugo Wessberg, she could see from Olle's remaining libraries that he was very well-read when it came to nature and the environment. He had an incredible amount of books in these subjects, and apparently he was particularly interested in South America and Africa.

- There were also many books about health education, says Åke. Olle was a fanatical vegan and lived strictly according to the theories of health prophet Are Vaerlands.



Gradually, his interest in the environment took over, and in the beginning of the 50's he dropped out of the military and bought a small apple orchard, Speleby, in Spethult in Skaraborg to invest in ideas of reclamation, trying to live solely on what the earth gave.

Then he met Karen, and his life changed drastically. They met on the "raw food guest house" Humlegården in Denmark, and it was love at first sight.

- I saw him standing in the sunbeams, his white hair shining in the light, and I knew immediately that this was the man I wanted to share my life with, said Karen. At the subsequent dinner, they had eyes only for each other, and in 1952 they married and settled in Speleby.

In search of paradise

Many things united them - the interest in biology, environmental and health education, and both were also very interested in other countries and cultures. In the evenings they sat and read in those books that were left on Ekholmen when Åke Rydberg moved in, and increasingly they began to reflect on another life in another part of the world.

When they left Sweden in the spring of 1954 with a banana boat destination South America they both knew within themselves that they would never see their relatives again, but they said nothing about this to anyone.

Olles' father Hugo however had no hope of seeing his son again.

- He said "Olle lived like a monkey in the trees" and that "he probably would never come back", says Åke Rydberg. He also said that Karen was pregnant when they lived in Speleby but she had an accident when riding on a bicycle. She had a miscarriage and could then get no more children.

For a year Karen and Olle traveled around and searched for their paradise. They didn't find it in Mexico, not in Ecuador. But a dream that Karen had one night brought them to Costa Rica.

- I dreamed that I was there, she told Eva. I found that I stood on a peninsula looking out over the Pacific. Then I went towards the land, and there were huge trees with brilliant flowers. They saw the dream as a sign and went to Costa Rica.

One day when they traveled by boat along the west coast of Costa Rica Karen knew she was at home. This was the place she had dreamed about!

And there they went ashore - at the southernmost tip of the Nicoya Peninsula. On the beach they hung up a tarp between some trees. It was their first home in paradise.

Parcels from Ulricehamn



The nearest neighbors were one and a half miles away in the small village of Montezuma. Soon they bought a piece of land and planted 32 different kinds of fruit trees.

They had decided to live just on fruits and vegetables. But before their crops yielded fruit they had to feed on things that grew wild. Mainly, they were content with leaves that they saw that the animals ate.

But the one-sided diet made them very sick. They were malnourished and had trouble with infections and insect bites. Then they wrote to Olles father Hugo in Ulricehamn and asked for help.

- They asked him to send medicines and vitamins, and I remember he bought them at the pharmacy and sent a package every now and then, says Eva. As they became more familiar with the locals, who had knowledge of survival, they changed their dietary habits. Later, when their crops got ripe, they also got a bee-hive and they remained healthy.

- But Karen also continued to make drinks of the leaves that she saw that the monkeys ate, says Eva. She thought they gave her a better eye sight and hearing and that she needed less sleep than before. When I visited her she still mixed together some drinks of it each day.

- They lived very isolated but still felt not alone. Karen told me they had plenty of friends among the wild animals in the rainforest. They tamed a coati, which followed them like a dog, and the monkeys were completely unafraid of them. Olle and Karen were not afraid either of any animal, not even of the dreaded pumas.

"Horse killer"

The strange blonde pair aroused both curiosity and skepticism among the neighbors, and they called Olle a "horse slayer". Since he could not stand to see how badly people treated their domestic animals, he bought the sick and emaciated horses and gave them one last pleasant time in life before he shot them. In time he got the neighbor's respect, but they never understood why he cared so much about brute beasts.

Over time Karen and Olle needed better housing than the simple palm leaf hut. Building materials were abundant, but they had no tools. The problem was solved by father Hugo in Ulricehamn. Olle wrote in a letter to him what they needed, and that the supplies were to be purchased at Anell's hardware store on Main Street in Ulricehamn. Karl-Erik Anell still remembers the orders and the problems of packing the goods.

- There could pass many months before the sendings arrived in Montezuma, he says. To prevent the tools from rust, we vacuum packed them. I do not think that Olle paid anything for the tools. It was probably for his father to do.

First National Park



After a dozen years in the rainforest Olle discovered that much of the forest on the headland of Cabo Blanco had been cut down. He then had the idea to create a national park of the part that was still pristine, and organized a petition to conservation organizations in the United States and England.

His fight for the endangered rainforest was very successful, and money flowed in from different organizations so land could be purchased. The authorities in Costa Rica, however, were skeptical of the idea of a national park, and Olle made 23 trips to the capital, San Jose, before he finally got the government with him.

In 1963 Olle's dream came true, and Central America's first national park, the Absolute Nature Reserve Cabo Blanco, was founded.

Even today the main trail in the National Park is called the "Swede's path" and in Mal Pais, a secret cove at the border of Cabo Blanco has the name "The Swede's Beach" (Playa Suecos).

Hard work

Olle and Karen worked hard to protect their newly established park, and there were often long periods when they didn't meet other people. But it didn't matter. They lived in symbiosis with each other and nature, and their marriage was very harmonious.

But luck did not last forever. Olle felt that another big rain forest, Corcovado on Osa Peninsula, should be protected and he was supported by U.S. conservation organizations.

In July 1975, he went to the Osa Peninsula to write a report, but he promised to be back on Karen's birthday on August 4.

Karen told Eva that when he was gone she was dreaming about him for several nights. He stood in front of her, wrapped in his old military cloak, and when she asked how he was, he said: "It's so cold here, Karen." She also dreamed that the phone rang, even though she had not seen any phone since she had left Sweden.

- I picked up the phone and knew it was him. I told him how much I loved him, said the words that you might not say so often when you have been married a long time, she said.

When Olof did not return to Karen's birthday, she realized that something terrible had happened. She rented a scrap ready aircraft with a pilot and went to Corcovado to look for him. She was told that he had stayed one night with a family who lived in a hut on the beach and then turned to the rain forest with a young man as a guide. The young man had soon returned and went to San Jose, but no one had seen Olof since.

Together with some local farmers Karen went out to search for him. After only a few hours, she saw his knife stuck in a tree trunk. Next to it, she found the remains of the man who was her great love.

- There were only bones left of him, she said. During the two weeks that had passed the wild beasts had devoured his corpse. But I realized that it was him, for his compass and a shoulder bag lay beside him. Many times the couple had talked about death, and Olof always said that he did not want to be buried, but just be left in the forest. He had got what he wanted, become one with nature.

But Karen wanted to bring his remains to their loved Cabo Blanco. She gathered what was left of him in a sack and took it on the airplane to Montezuma.

- She did not tell anyone where she buried him, Eva said. But I think it was on a hill behind their house. She often went there alone and sat there for a while, and I knew it was something special about that place.

Honorable Mention

Pretty soon it became clear that the young pathfinder had murdered Olof on behalf of the residents of Corcovado. They did not want that their land would become a national park. Instead, they wanted to clear-cut the forest to plant banana and to dig for gold.

The pathfinder was sentenced to prison and murdered after a short time in jail by a fellow prisoner.

After the murder of Olof had become known the President of Costa Rica held a speech on television. "The Swede has given his life to protect our rainforests," he said. "Now it is Costa Rica's duty to realize his dream of a national park in Corcovado!"

Thus, Costa Rica's second national park was created in Olof Wessberg's name. Today the Corcovado National Park on Osa Peninsula is one of Costa Rica's biggest attractions, drawing scientists, photographers and nature lovers from all over the world as it represents one of the world's richest and most diverse ecosystems.

Approximately ten years after his death, Olof got a posthumous honorable mention as the founder of the national park system in Costa Rica.



Karen stayed on her small plantation near Montezuma and lived alone the rest of her life. She lived on a modest pension from Sweden and made it last longer by opening a small homely boarding in Montezuma village, called "Cabinas Karen" where travelers could have a clean bed and shelter for a few dollars.

In 1994 she passed away, 68 years old, from cancer - the disease Olle that had loathed so much and had tried to spare them by living simply on what nature gave them. And she had her grave in the rainforest where she arrived 39 years earlier with her beloved Olof.

In 1990 a club was formed in Sweden: "Cabo Blanco - the Swedish rainforest", to further preserve Olof's rainforest. It is politically independent, and the association's members made several trips to Costa Rica. There is now a road to Montezuma, albeit poor, but still an opportunity to visit Olle and Karen's paradise.

If you want to support Olof Wessberg life's work, you can join the club. The annual fee is SEK 100, and the money can be deposited in the Swedish postal giro 634 80 85-9. For more information, contact Tommy Åsberg, phone +46 8 6287195.

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Agneta Tjäder, reporter *Ulricehamns Tidning*.

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