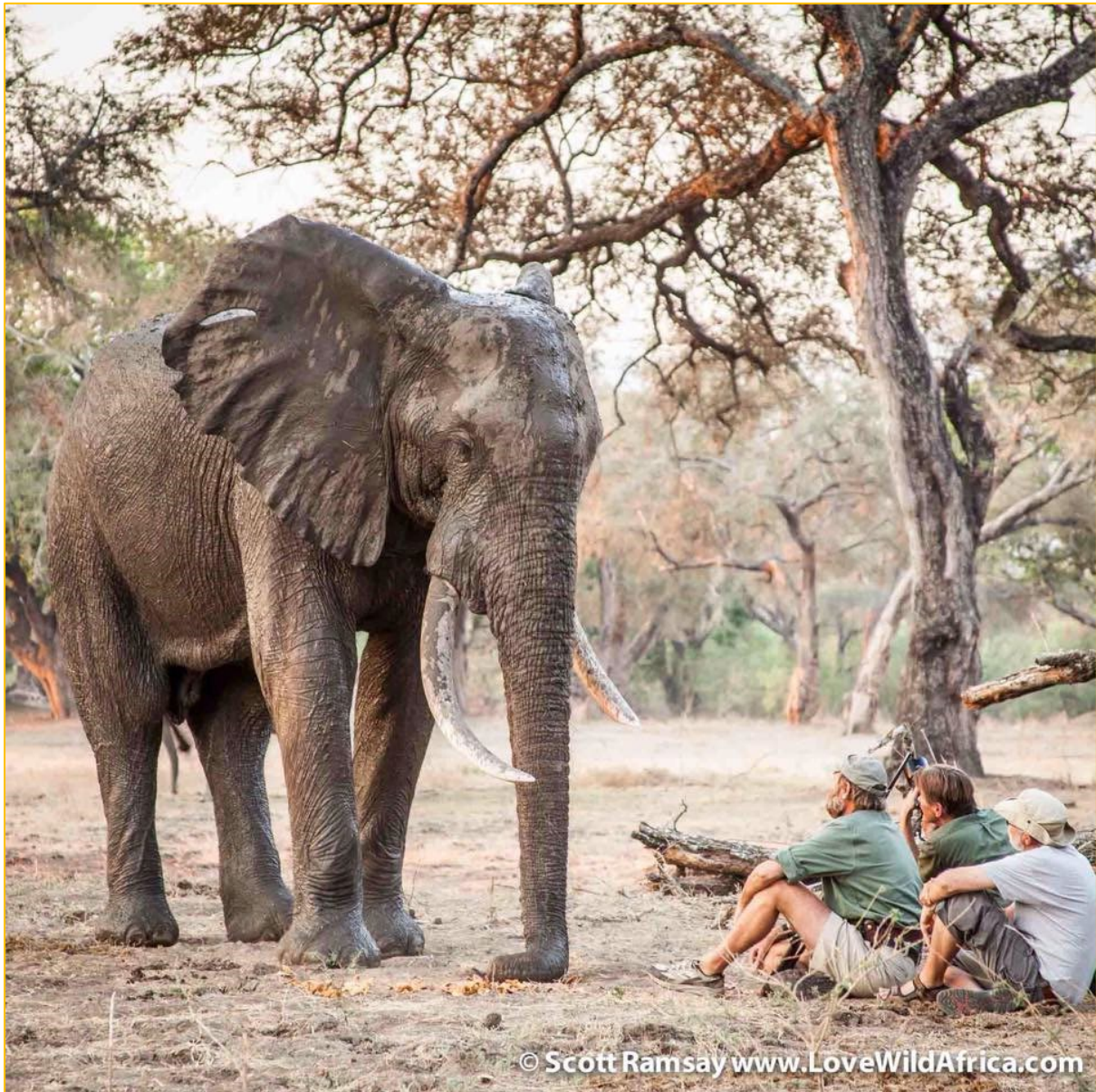


FIELD NEWS

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Strangers in the wild?



Stretch Ferreira and friends, Mana Pools – Scott Ramsay

'Charging elephant shot dead'.

Every year, thousands of wildlife enthusiasts go on wilderness walks in game parks across southern Africa. On any day, around a dozen trails are running in the Kruger National Park alone. Up to a maximum of eight guests, led by two trail guides, have the opportunity to enjoy an intensely intimate encounter with nature in some of the more remote tracts of the Park. Far from the clustering cars, close to the creatures.

The experience can be exceptional; some even describe it as life-altering. Walking the wilds is quite different to driving the roads. All the senses come into play. Here we are, humans, back on the African savanna, in a primal way.

But with the heightened appreciation comes heightened vulnerability. Occasionally, very occasionally, stuff happens. A lioness with cubs is flushed, an elephant bull in musth storms in. Lives are endangered and shots fired in defence. An animal is killed. Sometimes, a trail guide is taken down or a trail-goer injured.

Is it all really worth it? The wild earth belongs to the animals, and we are intruding in their space. We should not be putting ourselves at risk and inviting situations where majestic creatures merely minding their natural ways must be killed. Either steer clear of their wildscapes altogether or watch from your wheeled cage.

That is one perspective. There are others, and a larger context, a longer time-line, as well.

Around many a campfire, trail guides will often assert a standard line: we are indeed strangers in the land of the animals; there by grace and under sufferance. Tread lightly and unobtrusively. Best not seen, heard or smelt by the true locals.

They are right in their pleas, wrong in their assumptions.

There is a good case for mingling, and it is all about origins, meaning and destiny.

Origins: The grasses and grazers co-evolved on the plains of Africa (and elsewhere) during, especially, the Miocene and Pliocene Epochs (23 – 2 ½ mya). Those savanna-creating interactions were the making of us. They gave us the space to get down from the trees, and to stand up.

One of our probable forebears, *Homo erectus*, walked much of Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere throughout much of the next epoch, the Pleistocene. The archaeology shows that they hunted, scavenged and butchered animals with stone age weapons and implements throughout their span, as did their later hominin kith and kin. Across many millennia now, to be an antelope meant to be exposed to predation not only by sabre-toothed cats but by various species of humans.

No African animal over the last several hundred thousand years has enjoyed a hominin-free environment. And quite a few of the carnivores, on the other hand, have enjoyed a hominin.

Homo sapiens, specifically, have been stalking the plains of Africa for at least two hundred thousand years, perhaps three hundred. Since a few million years ago and up until the waning of the last Ice Age some thirteen thousand years ago, most of the then prevalent terrestrial animals and probably all of the marine ones were able to co-survive the guerrilla predations of an assortment of bipedal apes, including us.

Interaction with us was their natural condition. Interaction with them was our natural condition. No one had choices to make.

Only when we mastered technology, multiplied profusely and began to engineer the environment did the evolutionary fight become unfair and the consequences dire for much of the rest of the web of life. Now we have questions to answer.

What are the costs and the benefits of walking in the big game wilds? For animals, and for humans?



Lion Encounter, Olifants Trail, Kruger - *Clive Thompson*

Best to start with the most stark and hard-to-fudge stats: fatalities.

The record shows that from the first official trail walk in Kruger back in July 1978 till around the beginning of 2012, around 70 animals have been shot in self-defence by trail guides. The casualties have been made up of mainly elephant, some 26, split evenly between bulls and cows, then (somewhat surprisingly) white rhino (17, mainly bulls), hippo (11), buffalo (ten, mainly bulls), leopards (three male, one female) and but three lionesses. (More recent figures have not been provided by Kruger.)

The animal fatality rate across the whole of Kruger over the monitored period is in the order of just over two per year; one death per 2,000 trail outings (robustly estimated), with a morning or afternoon walk each counted as an outing. Many, perhaps most trail guides will not experience a shooting incident across their entire trail-guiding careers. About 150,000 guests have walked on a trail since 1978 and up to 2012. Assuming an average of six guests on any trail, about 420 of them in total would have experienced a shooting incident over thirty plus years, about a dozen a year out of 5 000 per year.

Do these 70 large-animal fatalities over more than thirty years represent an ecological tragedy or an intolerable insult to nature? Over just the last decade in Kruger more than six thousand rhino have been poached out, and the onslaught continues. Elephant poaching is now on the up as well, with around two hundred elephants having been deliberately poached and scores others killed through (often inadvertent) snaring in the last decade.

To have an idea of what an ecological assault by humans looks like, consider the case of Tanzania, which lost some seventy thousand elephant – 60 percent of its national herd – between just 2009 and 2014.

Wire is to terrestrial animals what plastic is to marine creatures – a deadly scourge, a pernicious human invention. Fence lines and, especially, snares in Kruger kill or otherwise maim, conservatively, some ten thousand animals per year. The target species – and the casualties – are mainly antelope, but zebra, lions, buffalo, hyena, wild dog, leopard, elephant, giraffe and anything else with legs and necks feature heavily as by-catch.

For those who decry or at minimum look askance at trail-walking because of the possibility of an adverse encounter with animals, consider the road toll: modestly estimated, some fifty large animals, mainly antelope but a range of other species as well, are killed by motor vehicles in Kruger each year. Many more limp away injured. The toll on smaller animals such as snakes, tortoises, hares, mongooses and birds runs into the thousands. Dung beetles, armoured crickets, butterflies and moths have much more to complain about.

Given the sheer amount of traffic on Kruger's roads, the fatality rate in respect of mammals may be no more than that of walking trails, but the absolute number of casualties is far higher. If avoidance of animal casualties in the Park at the hands of humans is the goal, road traffic in Kruger should be banned. Given the objectives of the Park, that assertion cannot stand.

What about the manner of death for animals in a trail encounter situation? There is a reason, Sir David Attenborough tells us, that he cuts away in his documentaries as the lion pride devours from the rear of the still-heaving buffalo bull – it is truly awful to watch, and a horrible way for any sentient victim to go. Death by snare is often equally excruciating and may play out over days or even weeks.

A trail encounter is sudden and close-quartered. If shots are fired, death comes quickly. Suffering is brief, and not in the league of the dying experience even of any one of the millions of farm animals slaughtered in abattoirs across the world every day. By exception, there may be a wounded animal – ten between 1978 and 2012, according to the Kruger stats.

Casualties aside, do walking trails upset the natural order? Do they interfere with normal patterns of daily animal behaviour in ecologically disturbing ways?

Heroically ignoring for the moment the presence of poachers, rangers, motorists, roads, camps and fences, the Kruger bushveld is an unnatural environment precisely because of the absence of humanoids. This is especially true of the designated wilderness areas. One would have to go back at least hundreds of thousands of years, possibly millions, to find such an environment devoid of bipedal apes with predatory intent and impacts.

The Lowveld biosphere of nearly all of the last one hundred thousand years would have seen a fluctuating complement of African savannah animals interacting daily and seasonally with fluctuating numbers of foraging and hunting hominins. Climate change, weather, fire and human cultural eddies would have structured the scale and character of the interplay.

Some serious co-evolution has been at work here. Periodic trophic cascade effects associated with an apex predator would have been part of the mix. There are ancient survival reasons which explain why the plains animals, including the big cats, still today beat

a retreat when they see or smell an upright ape. Over the many millennia, any ungulate approaching a waterhole would have had eyes and ears wide open for the Big Three ambush predators: cats, crocodiles and humans.

The environmental impact of the 21st century wilderness walker is minimal compared to the hunter-gatherer on the same land, and next to nothing compared to the encroaching pastoralist and agriculturalist.

Trail walking is but a discreet hominin engagement with the resident fauna and flora. We feature as natives, not alien interlopers. But, unlike in the past, virtually no animals perish in the encounter. At worst some behaviour patterns may be influenced, perhaps detrimentally. But further bush knowledge, acquired and applied, can curtail even this minor affront to nature.



Guides and youngsters, Makuleke, Greater Kruger - *Luke Fairhead*

If animals are to enjoy their wilderness surrounds in something close to a pristine state, then hominin pedestrians should be there as well. Anything else would be unnatural, even if today's humans striding out are now looking to lose rather than gain calories. Other carnivores and omnivores can manage the off-take.

There are, admittedly, fresh dynamics in play in contemporary times. Animals in trail areas have become partially conditioned to perceiving humans on foot in their habitats. Mainly, the exposure is in respect of intrinsically unthreatening trail walkers. To some degree, this leads to a greater animal tolerance of humans, particularly around well-frequented camps. This conditioning is not without its hazards, because of the familiarity trap. But the other

class of pedestrians that animals are encountering is poachers (and, in certain cases, hunters and farmers in adjacent land-holdings), and this swings the animal response in the other direction: towards fear and hostility. This unhappy juxtaposition introduces extra risks for trail-goers. The animals do not know who they are dealing with, and the trail walkers do not know the biographies of the animals.

What about the human costs of trail-walking? Since July 1978 to date no trail guides or walkers have lost their lives as a result of encounters gone wrong in the Kruger bush. Around 10 people, mainly trail guides, have suffered injuries requiring hospitalisation.

A comparative input: The organisation that pioneered walking trails in Southern Africa, the Wilderness Leadership School, reports that in sixty years no trail-goer has suffered any serious injury in an animal encounter.

The key hazards for the National Park tourist, including the trail walker, is the road to and from the Park, and to a much lesser degree, motor accidents within the Park itself. And then malaria. And then alcohol.

What are the benefits of walking trails? Nearly two million tourists patronise Kruger annually. Around five thousand of these will go walkabout, either on multi-day trails or half-day walks. Their tourist dollar contribution and their local employment boost are, by that ratio, relatively small. Still, trails exploit, both literally and figuratively, an ecological niche that otherwise would go begging. Wilderness areas have been set aside so that, by design, fuming motor vehicles with their concertina traffic jams are excluded. Providing for trails allows these areas to be appreciated ('utilised') as well, and in a unique way.

But the surpassing benefit of wilderness trails is not that they produce a marginal amount of extra revenue or employment. Their prime value is that they give meaning and enjoyment to many, and then they create, cultivate and consolidate a core of eco-champions who are motivated to fight for, amongst other things, the wilderness. In a world of (variously) unknowing, blasé, selfish and outright rapacious people, it takes a deeply committed counter-weight to speak and act for the vestigial patches of the natural world. As the biosphere continues to unravel, the true value of saving those islands and corridors has yet to be realised.

It requires extraordinary people to make the vital social and political difference. Gazing at nature from the tourist bus and the observation deck is wonderful, but takes the experience only so far. To be back on the savannah on foot by day and around an open-camp campfire by night stirs a primordial connection and generates a spiritual, visceral commitment. And it is that intensity of commitment that is required to challenge the tide of environmental destruction:

'I was for most of the way alone in comparatively wild country and it was on this trip that I realised the value of the environment of solitude and the need for modern man to have a period away from the crowd. I was constantly aware of the forces of nature: a storm in a deep valley, lightning flashing on ironstone and thunder reverberating around the hills, made me ponder my own significance. The burning heat of the day was a reminder of the power of solar

energy which maintains life on our planet while the thirst it created was a lesson in our dependence upon water ...

This experience changed my life. The whole environment took on a new meaning and gave me an understanding of wilderness in the religious and conservation sense. I would not, however, been able to describe or verbalise what wilderness was. It was just an understanding. ...

In 1957 I was sent to Lake St Lucia to establish a ranger's post near Charters Creek. I began at once to ensure that a wilderness area would be set aside on the lake and it was here in July 1957 the six schoolboys came from my old school, St Johns College, spent a week with me.

The experience made a profound impression on these young men and when they returned to their homes they wrote to me and each boy said, "this experience changed my life". (Ian Player, Founder, Wilderness Leadership School: *Voices in the Wilderness*)

But the wilderness trail is not only for wildlife devotees. Every human on earth shares a distant African savanna origin, and there is something that resonates with (nearly) everyone fortunate enough to get a taste of their elemental beginnings.

A trail-goer may never become and never want to become a crusader but nonetheless gain an enormous amount of personal well-being through bushveld immersion. Feeling the wind, hearing the birdsong, navigating the byways; being watchful, expectant, receptive and enthralled. Blissful therapy. Being there is its own reward.

And this larger pool of enthusiasts, too, is a social and political force.

If developments had been sequenced differently over the last three hundred years, today's world might have been one of a billion modernists with ancient sensibilities concentrated in high-tech citadels and satellites within a self-sustaining web of natural tracts. Every major biome intact. Instead, we are approaching ten billion consumers sprawled across every defaced land mass except the icy one. The wild areas are isolated, shrinking and besieged. How should those who care about and want to experience them interact with them?

Today's trail is not a hunter-gatherer sortie. Different behaviours grounded in a different ethos are called for. There is no longer the thrill of the hunt, but there is no need for this either. The trail-goers can bring in their sustenance.

The 21st century African big game wilderness experience is about appreciation, respect and support. There is a different mosaic of meaning for different travellers. Each integrates the moments in highly individual ways.

The environmental purist might be looking for a rough and authentic encounter: being self-sufficient, carrying the gear, covering ground, sleeping out, keeping watch, being exposed to the elements and being physically tested. These trails are available to those who want them.

Most, though, are looking not for exertion and deprivation but rather something squarely aesthetic, educational, engaging and therapeutic. For them, sleeping rough and a spare diet are not character-building boons but uncomfortable distractions. Most, then, are after a curated and catered for wilderness experience.

Once in the field, though, nature asserts itself as the great leveller. This is so for hunter-gatherer, purist bush-whacker and new age dream-walker alike: none knows for sure what lies ahead in the long grass. The daily rate and privileges back at the lodge count for nothing. The intrigue and the thrill are shared across time and supersede circumstance.

Ten humans walking in single file through big game wilderness savanna are reliving their past in a riveting present, with both its pleasures and perils. Whether the object is to hunt, digitize or soak in, the challenge of finding and then approaching wild game is essentially similar. The same adrenalin surges across the ages. The same flows of appreciation and tranquility are experienced. The bush knowledge of yore applies, to the same exquisite degree of detail when read by the literate for their audience. And to that can now be added a new stream of scientific learnings.



San (Ju/'hoansi) Master Trackers, Nyalaland Trail, Kruger National Park - *Scott Ramsay*

The great trail is rich in exposure and low in impact. Enduring imprints taken away, fading footprints left behind. The techniques of the stealth hunter suit the changed context. What we feel today is what our African forebears felt then. And that is what makes it so special.

But if the special is to be secured for the future, we cannot be strangers in the wild.

Clive Thompson

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