

First Contact: Wilderness Greenshoots



The Discovery Wilderness Trust is working alongside RETURNAfrica¹ and EcoTraining² to give our wildlife champions of the future a gripping introduction to the wilderness.

What do you remember about that first time, way back then, when a wild area greeted you? A wild African area, with its pulsing mosaic of animals, birds and landscapes? When you hear that call again, after all these years, does it all come flooding back? Did the initial encounter change how you think and feel about life on earth, about your life on earth?

Some may well have been turned off or perhaps just left indifferent, but this piece is about finding people to switch on. Those with pretty much their whole lives ahead of them: young people. Early imprints are powerful; they inform, they shape, they influence choices, they influence outcomes. Riveting encounters at a formative age have long lifespans. That's the plan. Wild places need champions if their horizons are to remain intact well into and beyond a twenty first century.

Whom to enlist? In 1957, conservationist Ian Player took a group of teenagers from his old school, St John's, into the estuarine wilds of Lake St Lucia. A path-breaking event for first-worlders, and the germ for what would become his Wilderness Leadership School:

¹ www.returnafrica.com

² www.ecotraining.co.za

‘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”.’



From the Kalahari to the Lowveld – a youngster from the First People

Pioneering stuff, but for the sub-continent’s First People, the San, no more than the re-discovery of the ancient ways. Their own youngsters would have been doing the equivalent with their elders over the millennia since they were knee-high, with both appreciation and survival in mind.

For over a decade Discovery Trails (the forerunner to the Discovery Wilderness Trust) has been reaching out to the youngest cohort allowed by Kruger Park to walk its wilds: eleven- to thirteen-year olds, typically in their last year of primary school. The first sorties were parent and child combinations. That still happens, but now select youngsters also come under their own steam. They have all been hand-picked by their schools and vouched for by their parents on the strength of their developing interest in nature, their independence, their self-discipline and their potential to succeed and give back in years to come.

The trails are fully sponsored. Ian Player’s original pool has been expanded: girls and boys, a younger bracket, a range of backgrounds: urban, regional and rural; private

schools, public schools. Finances and organisational limitations mean the numbers involved have been modest, but quality bests the quantity constraints.

What happens on trail? The group and their guides, bolstered by support staff, enjoy the intimacy of an open trails camp alongside the Luvuvhu River, and forage out from there.



Limbering up at Makuleke

This is no boot camp. Environmental immersion, appreciation and understanding make up the five-day agenda. Simply being in the unfenced camp is a running ecological encounter in its own right. Giant Fig and Mahogany trees provide a shade canopy and cater for a free-ranging menagerie of birds, primates, reptiles, insects and assorted others. Creatures that don't live there come and go at their pleasure, generally keeping a respectful distance. The camp's background audio track of the seen and unseen is always on, and always diverse, especially at night: owls, hyenas, nightjars, jackals, baboons, leopards, elephants, lions, hippos, frogs and bushbabies.

Still, the idea is to get out. Most of the education occurs on the hoof. The idea is to explore and observe; the best sightings are those that leave the animals undisturbed and unaware. When there is some interaction, it mainly takes the form of animals moving off when they sense the presence or approach of their long-time bipedal predator. And then, exceptionally, some evasive action may be called for. Encounters with big game are part of what happens.

And getting some exercise and a bit tired are also part of the learning experience.

The object is not to build a catalogue of individual sights and sounds; rather, to uncover the web of ecological connections and to revel in the sheer pleasure of being in an unspoilt corner of the original Africa. A good trail is a cognitive and emotional double. As it turns out, the feelings will outlive the facts.

The learning takes place amidst extravagant landscapes, the best that Kruger has to offer. Lanner Gorge must be one of the finest vistas in the whole of Africa. The fever tree forests fringing the Limpopo and Luvuvhu project spell-binding splashes of yellow and green seen nowhere else. The Baobabs of the hills and valleys loom larger and march more fantastically than Tolkien's Ents.



Lanner Gorge



Lanner Gorge exit

Walking in the big game wilds is quite different to driving through the same terrain. The eyes have it in a vehicle. On foot, all the senses must work in combination: eyes, ears, nose, tongue and touch. Separate cues build the composite picture. Signs in the sand speak. You can choose to head in any direction, seek out any features, but the space is curved by its wild occupants and so the right contours must be followed. The wind direction counts. Cover counts. Escape routes matter. You must stay alert even as you get hot and tired. The last three hundred metres back to camp deserves as much vigilance as the morning's first intriguing steps. That is the chastening reality of walking in magic land, for adults and kids alike.

The chronology of the day becomes more significant when walking. First, awakening to a dawn chorus of birds, including booming Ground Hornbills. Then moving out in the morning chill and rising sun to read the morning newspaper in the pathways. Destination chosen, a mini-voyage of unknown elements begins. Sometimes it will be a meander of birds, trees and grasses. At other times, the animals will parade or even impose. The trail-goers must respect and yield even as they drink in.

There is something worth noting and talking about all the way. It may be a strange little furrow, made by ants, or it may be a broad line, made by a python. Time to work out the direction of travel.



There are bigger themes to talk about, too. The geology, the weather and the rivers explain most of the specifics of Makuleke. There is only so much the land can do with 450 mm of rain a year. The beautiful Clarens sandstones don't supply too many nutrients, but the basalts do. The Limpopo flood plains and pans – Ramsar Wetlands – are productive through-out the year. Pafuri is one of the richest bird areas in the country, but the migrant birds' inter-continental flyways are increasingly hijacked by hunting and netting across the middle-east and north Africa.

Never mind; just for the moment, we can put aside the threats that lurk over far horizons. Right now we are in paradise, where we can absorb and chat without regard to madding crowds.

Towards midday, the temperature builds, and so it makes sense to find the sheltering shade back at camp. Unlike us, the yellow-billed hornbills don't seem mind the midday sun. Their oscillating calls will stick in the memory, associated forever with the layered afternoon heat.

An angled sun is the cue for another foray. Softer light gives the land more texture, so the same valley becomes a quite different place. The plains which were quite empty this morning are filled with elephant caravans making their way down to the sustaining Luvuvhu. A herd of buffalo appears just as suddenly. The vultures have disappeared from the sky. No pickings for them in this district today.

The trail group makes its way to a west-facing ridge. There's not much that can beat a well-chosen sunset panorama. Another thinking moment.



Drive time

Back in the vehicle for the trip home, the night drive produces a new array of creatures: civets, genets, jackal, nightjars; perhaps even an aardvark or a leopard. Not every time, of course. Luck plays its own game, and that is part of any adventure. And if the animals don't oblige, there is always a blazing Milky Way to look up to.

There is something extraordinary about being around a campfire anywhere, but no more so in an African wilderness. The flames push back the dark and provide a circle of protection and comfort against the mysterious noises of the night. The fire hypnotises, but also elicits a flow of stories and ideas. Elders to youngsters, youngsters to elders. Person to person, without generational distinction.

Then someone calls for a hush. The sudden, expectant silence is broken by the reverberations of a lion somewhere in the distance. There are wide-eyed, slightly apprehensive back and forth glances, and intakes of breath. Is it our side of the river? Is it coming our way? The tents are secure – when we get there. Right now, we must trust the fire and camaraderie to fend off the fears. The firesiders don't know it, but in any event the local leopard is at this very moment calmly striding by, just beyond the ring. Tomorrow morning's tracks will prove as much.



Nighttime camp visitor, camera-trapped

There are some special measures in place. The standard trail runs with eight trail-goers and two trail guides, who walk up front. The youngsters' trails come with three trail guides, one of whom walks at the back. To date, a field guide who is also a clinical psychologist has participated in all the trails.

It turns out that the youngsters are more disciplined than their adult counterparts. They actually stay in line, are fit, keep quiet and follow instructions. They drink water as opposed to other things and retire before bush midnight (10 pm). On the other hand, they are not so retiring come light time: the adult-fancied notion of a midday siesta is alien to twelve-year olds.





Solitaire, above Hutwini Plains

Solitude is part of the wilderness experience. Safely positioned on an elevated ridge, trail-goers spend an hour alone. Time to look and listen, time to think. Later, they will have time to talk.

On occasion, it helps to shut out the eyes and sharpen the ears. A blind-fold session changes the input signals, and give a new source of awareness.

These quiet and focussed times clearly make an impact. It is the class of engagement with nature that the youngsters speak most about when reflecting back at the trail's end.

It helps that they are (temporarily) liberated from a world of internet electronics. Look up, look around, listen out. The environment – the natural environment – is the input.

Everyday language reasserts itself as a great mode of communication.

What is it like to run trails where the participants are all sparkling-eyed youngsters, free from the shackles and tribulations of the world left behind and of their future lives? The young senses are untutored but impressively keen; they spot different things and they interrogate differently. Sometimes naively, often imaginatively.

From a guide's perspective, the most refreshing thing about these ventures is that they are an antidote to adult cynicism and world-weariness. It's hard to stay hard-bitten in the face of exuberance, excitement, trepidation, fascination and revelation. It's easy to be uplifted watching the next wave soak in the connected grandeur of everything a pristine African environment has to offer. We might just get this life-on-earth project together again after all.



Discussion circle, Luvuvhu River

Guides can't get too carried away about really delights their young students – what they revel in most of all – as they go bush in a wilderness area. Profound messages have their limits. As much as the youngsters are enthralled by the sight of an elephant at forty paces, as much as they appreciate the wondrous story of the termite mound, nothing quite matches the simple outdoor joy of climbing an enchanted tree or splashing about in the sweeping, not-so-green-and-greasy Limpopo.



Boy meets baobab

The minimum test for trail success is a safe and enjoyable time. But the big goal is something more ambitious than this – future champions. Given the calibre of the youngsters coming on trail, the prospects are good.

Some may build on their precocious trail experience straight away. For others, it might be decades ahead before a flame re-ignites. Some trees can wait.

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Reflections



"I will never look at sand in the same way again. I now see it as a book."

"Every now and then on a hike we would sit down for five to ten minutes and just listen to the bush without moving or speaking. Doing this taught me what a precious gift nature is and how we as the people of the future should do everything in our power to preserve it."

"I think that by coming here we learned so much about nature and the wild, and everyone has learned more about the wilderness as a whole. I think this has inspired us to conserve this amazing place so that future generations can see and learn about this beautiful and magical place and see what we have seen on this trip. I think that this experience has showed us what our future could be like and paved the way to the future of this amazing place. I, for one, think that I would be proud to say that my legacy has created a better tomorrow for everyone and every living thing."

"I loved the whole trip! I am certain that I will remember all the awesome and beautiful landscapes, and all the wonderful people I met on this trail. Seeing all these animals on foot was magical, I have never experienced such magic and thrills ever before. I miss the sounds of the bush, it makes me feel like I have to go back."

"I think that this was a great experience. I think that this trail has paved a path in my future. This trail really was amazing, and I now want to learn more about nature as a whole, the animals, the plants, the signs and the stories about this great place. The trail

has meant so much to me, I tell everyone I meet about this adventure, and why it was so important to not only me, but every living thing on this planet.”

“On our last evening we went on a short twenty-minute hike up a mountain where at the top you had a complete breathtaking view of the valley around us. At the top there was a cliff that went straight down to the river below. We were then told to find a place to sit and we were given blindfolds and we were told to just listen. It was beautiful. We could hear the Guinea fowl and Wood Hoopoes all around along with all the other sounds of the bush. I loved it.”



Limpopo therapy



Luvuvhu therapy