

The Wilderness Leadership School

BY CHERRYL CURRY

The Wilderness Leadership School (WLS) is a non-profit environmental education organization that spans 50 years. WLS is an exceptional program that has hosted almost 50,000 trailists (hikers in the wilderness) from all over the world.

Fifty Years of WLS

The WLS is the first organization in Africa dedicated to providing a pure wilderness experience for people of all backgrounds, races, and nationalities, steeped in a rich environmental history. The WLS was founded in 1957 by the legendary Ian Player who, together with his friend and mentor Maqgubu Ntombela, recognized the necessity for people to connect with the environment. Long before *ecology* had become a vogue catchword, the WLS foresaw the urgent need for a large body of well-informed, conservation-oriented leaders and public, capable and dedicated to the defense of our planet's irreplaceable natural resources.

The annals of the WLS glitter with the names of past trailists who all bear testament to the fact that a wilderness trail is an experience that changes lives. In the words of Sir Laurens van der Post,

As we have become rational we have lost touch with our primitive nature, and as a result have lost touch with the sense of being known and belonging. This divide has meant a loss of meaning in our hearts and minds. This is where we stand today. This is what wilderness is all about—a crisis of meaning in a modern world.

Each trail is a journey of discovery for all who undertake it. For some it is the spiritual path that broadens the individual's ability to balance the natural experience against an inner recognition of one's primordial past. As Kunderke Kevlin, a psychologist from Britain, has written of her experience in the iMfolozi:

I have only known deep meditation as an equally effective method for releasing self-importance; not only the self-

importance of an individual but also that of the human species itself. All our arrogance, our obsessions with future goals, our fixated emotions and opinions gradually dissolve. All that remains is awareness of a vast process of nature, stars and galaxies, of animals, rivers, mountains and trees and of us humans as but small filaments in this web of life and energy. Humbling, yes ... but also healing and uplifting and peaceful and utterly beautiful. We go back to our lives refreshed, invigorated and transformed, grateful for this glimpse of a vast and ancient natural world which resonates within the deep layers of our unconscious.

For others it is the freedom to experience the natural world in its wildest. Free from the constraints of time and artificially imposed order, the trailist revels in the glimpse of a retreating black rhino, shivers at the throaty utterances of the lion at full roar, experiences the stealthy gaze of the hyena through the smoke of the night-watch fire and gazes humbly at the vast stretch of starlit night—a sight only visible within the vault of a wilderness sky because by definition, the wilderness is "wild land," land unaffected by development; our nearest opportunity to appreciate life as it once was; a world of existence without human influence. Wildflowers entrance and tiny insects ignite the imagination, and overall the trailist exalts in—what is for many living at today's frenetic life pace—the first taste of freedom to enjoy nature's bounty.

Ian Player is globally and generally recognized for his enormous contribution as a ranger with the then Natal Parks Board to Operation White Rhino, the project that saved the white rhino from extinction. He acknowledges that his recognition that Africa "has a soul" led him to explore the concept of the wilderness as a resonant of the human psyche. His fierce beliefs and determination led him into bureaucratic struggle after bureaucratic struggle to have areas of the iMfolozi and St. Lucia Game Reserves set aside as wilderness areas where people could walk in the wild and where no

roads, buildings, and human artifacts would intrude.

In 1957 Ian Player conceived the idea of the WLS. The first group of trailists were boys from Ian's old school, St. Johns College. After a wilderness experience on the Eastern Shores of Lake St. Lucia during which they saw hippos, crocodiles, and pelicans, this group of schoolboys wrote letters in which they reported that this experience of the wild changed their lives. This sentiment would echo down the years, and today similar experiences are recorded by the scores of school groups and adults from all over the world who have sensed the world of the wild that a trail opens up.

A large part of the WLS ethos is to make the trail experience available to youth from disadvantaged rural and urban communities. Funding for this project is derived from donors as well as subsidized by the WLS itself. For many, this is a life-changing experience, and in its 50th year the WLS has been gratified to have facilitated a number of such experiences.

Recent WLS Collaborative Ventures

A South African national HIV prevention program for youth called loveLife was launched in September 1999, by a consortium of leading South African public health organizations in partnership with a coalition of more than 100 community-based organizations, the South African government, major South African media groups, and private foundations. The loveLife program combines a highly visible sustained national multimedia HIV education and awareness campaign with countrywide adolescent-friendly service development in government clinics, and a national network of outreach and support programs for youth providing a comprehensive, evidence-based

approach to youth behavior change. This community-level outreach and support to young people (including 3,500 schools) is led by a national volunteer corps of more than 1,500 18- to 25-year-olds known as loveLife groundBreakers. A trail experience and WLS training component add an environmental dynamic to the exhaustive training given to the groundBreakers.

Another associative project, operated by The Wilderness Foundation, has been the trail experienced by the game-ranger students of the Umzi Wethu program. This social intervention program offers a gateway for vulnerable youth to access support, qualifications, and a self-sustaining job in the ecotourism industry. This training academy—offering both residential and flexible day support for a year—is a nonprofit initiative enabled through scholarships. It is equally an environmental intervention, enabling young people to access the healing qualities of nature and positive adult relationships. Every Umzi learner—regardless of their specialty training—goes “on trail,” spending a part of their training time in a wilderness setting. Both through nature and skills development, the training academy aims to support citizenship—to develop long-term health, life skills, self-esteem, job competency, management potential, and a culture of generosity to others. Every student receives health care, nutrition, counseling, and mentoring, and a nurturing home environment during the year.

WLS Administration

The WLS is currently under the leadership of Alistair Rankin in the seat of executive director. Alistair has remarkable background as a guide in Botswana and in various roles within the ecotourism sector. His last post was as general manager of a five-star safari

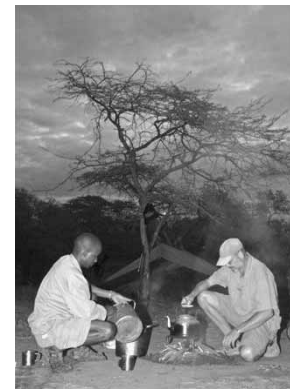


Fig. 1. On the trail in the iMfolozi. Photo by Chris Smal.

operation. After 18 months at the helm of the WLS, Alistair will be the first to tell you that he is well and truly converted to the philosophy of the wilderness in its purest form, and one of his personal goals is a mission to have proclaimed wider tracts of land set aside as wilderness areas throughout Africa. Alistair is assisted by the marketing director, Cheryl Curry, who brings to the WLS a wealth of marketing and business administration experience in the commercial sector.

The WLS guides themselves form the nucleus of this organization. It is a testament to the WLS's rich history that many of today's guides have been with the school for many years, have mentored the younger generations of wilderness guides who have come through the ranks, and today are the benchmark for wilderness guiding in southern Africa.

The WLS is the founding organization of the WILDERNESS Network composed of The Wilderness Foundation SA, The Wilderness Foundation UK, the Magqubu Ntombela Foundation, and WILD USA. All of these organizations were founded by Ian Player. IJW

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