

# Wilderness and the Human Soul

BY IAN PLAYER

*Editor's note: Ian Player, a seminal figure in the wilderness movement worldwide, has just turned 80 years old. Simultaneously, the multiracial Wilderness Leadership School that he began during the apartheid era in South Africa celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Ian generously provided the Soul of the Wilderness piece for the inaugural issue of the IJW in 1994. In honor of this special year for Ian, we publish here the remarkable keynote speech he gave to the 8th World Wilderness Congress (WWC) in Alaska in 2005, a speech that deeply touched the assembled delegates and that will be included in the plenary proceedings of the 8th WWC being published by Fulcrum Publishing and The WILD Foundation.*

## South Africa

A recent flight from South Africa took me over the Drakensberg Mountains, Ukhahlamba of the Zulu people. I looked down and pondered; I saw the red grass glowing luminously in the afternoon sun. These mountains were the last refuge of the San, or Bushmen, people who painted their exquisite art on cave walls and recorded the history of our country, the coming of the Nguni people, the Boers on their horses and English soldiers, and the vast array of wild animals. By 1870 there were no San people left; they were shot and killed without mercy and with them went vast tomes of wisdom and knowledge.

A man named Richard Nelson said: "The abandonment of ethically and spiritually based relationship with nature by our western ancestors was one of the greatest and perilous transformations of the western mind." Today nearly all of modern man's ills spring from this abandonment, and wilderness has become so important because it reconnects us to that ancient world.

We South Africans can be proud that our country was the first in Africa to proclaim a game reserve and the first wilderness area. Imfolozi Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal has that double distinction.

The World Wilderness Congress (WWC), as a concept, has come a long way on a torturous path and had to

overcome what, at times, seemed insurmountable odds. The WWC has now become a critically important forum which provides a platform for many divergent views. I believe that it is important that we look at the history of the WWC. Vance Martin, president of The WILD Foundation,

tells me it has now become the longest-running, public, international environmental forum. The WWC concept was born in South Africa in 1976 in the small wilderness area of Imfolozi Game Reserve in KwaZulu. It was a suggestion of my great friend and mentor Magqubu Ntombela who had led many treks into the wilderness with me. He said that we needed a big Indaba (meeting) to bring together everyone who had trekked so that we could share experiences. He was a man who could neither read nor write, but he was the wisest, most gracious and bravest man I have ever known. The African people have a word for it: *ubuntu*.



Ian Player at the 8th WWC in Alaska.

## World Wilderness Congress

It is fitting too that the WWC began in Africa. It is the cradle of mankind. All of us here have our origin from that mighty continent, as DNA research has proven. C. G. Jung said, "We do not come into the world *tabula rasa*." Three million years of Africa is imprinted on the human psyche. I know this imprint from taking many hundreds of people in small groups from all over the world on foot treks into the wilderness of Imfolozi and Lake St. Lucia. They are gripped by the spirit of Africa, and at night as they sleep on the red earth, they dream their dreams and hear the animals and birds. There is a connection that is evoked from the depths of the collective unconscious: the rasping cough of the leopard, the howl of hyena, and the scream of the elephant. It is an experience that has awakened thousands of people to the value of the African wilderness, to the understanding that this was once their home, and this, in turn, inspires them to protect it. As Shakespeare says in *Othello*, "It is the cause, it is the cause my soul." And so it has become for many of us, worldwide.

In 1977 South Africa was a "pariah" nation, and organizing that first WWC in Johannesburg in October of that year was a nightmare. But, the first WWC was an undeniable success, where for the first time a black field ranger—Magqubu Ntombela, a Bushman of the Kalahari—took his rightful place amongst leading international scientists, politicians, writers, and artists.

The WWC established the importance of wilderness in breaking down racial barriers in South Africa, and the wilderness trails in the Imfolozi Game Reserve were a leading example. Magqubu used to tell the mixed groups as we sat around the fire at night, "If

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we are charged by rhino or lion and blood flows, it will be the same color blood for everyone, even though our skins may be a different color."

The WWCs that followed in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Norway were also beset with political problems because the WWC had originated in South Africa, and because I am a South African. I will always be grateful to those American and international conservationists who stood by us, and ensured that the WWCs became a forum for everything associated with wilderness. Vance Martin knows this because he was at the front from 1983 on.

Today, thanks to Nelson Mandela and the peaceful elections in 1994, South Africa is the brightest light on the continent of Africa and stands poised to be a wilderness and conservation example for all of emerging Africa. But, we in the world wilderness movement are under no illusions about the difficulties that lie ahead. The struggle for political freedom is over in South Africa, but not in all the African states. The new struggle is an environmental movement for all our people to make wise use of the natural resources.

In 2001 the WWC returned to South Africa, to a transformed country, and—thanks to Adrian Gardiner, Andrew Muir, and the Eastern Cape government—it was a phenomenal success. South Africa has proved what can be done.

The same situation is not true for other parts of Africa. I do not want to

enlarge on a litany of woes facing conservation in Africa, but the problems range from the desperate situation of the last remaining northern white rhino in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to some parks where the game scouts do not have boots.

At the recent G8 Economic Summit in Britain, there was a focus on Africa. One can only hope that the environment will receive proper attention, because in previous aid to Africa it did not. The G8 Economic Summit now has a chance to rectify it.

### Wilderness Concept in the United States

Whereas, it is correct that the birth of the WWC was in Africa, the honor for the establishment of national parks and wilderness areas belongs to the United States of America. It was Americans who articulated the wilderness concept and set aside wilderness areas against what, at times, seemed overwhelming odds. The spirit of one of the greatest American presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, was always with them. It was not for nothing that he said, "The greatest sport the world affords is aggressive fighting for the right." Yet, we must remember that Frederick Courtney Selous, the great Nimrod, was his guide in Uganda, and the African wilderness made a deep impression on Theodore Roosevelt, and it affected his thinking.

In my library is a book with the prosaic title of *S.1176 Hearings before the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs of the United States Senate*. The

pages are worn thin and underlined everywhere. The cover is tattered from constant use. It has been in my possession since 1958. A most treasured book sent to me by Howard Zahniser, then secretary of The Wilderness Society. In it I have written, "This has been the bible of the wilderness movement in South Africa." The Americans showed us the way. It is a phenomenal story of the past, the present, and the future.

One of the witnesses quoted in the S.1176 hearings was Sigurd Olson. He said:

In days to come, the wilderness concept must be clear and shining enough to capture imaginations. It must take its place as a cultural force with all expressions of man's deepest yearnings and his noblest achievements in the realm of the mind. It must be powerful enough to withstand everywhere in the world, the coming and enormous pressures of industry and population.

Talk about intimations of the future: this is it.

In the S.1176 hearings is the gripping story of the blood and guts fight for the conservation soul of America. You realize too, that what it is expressing is the depth of the impact that the Native Americans made on the psyche of Anglo-America. Constantly there are echoes, and one senses their spirit in the extraordinarily eloquent pleas from some of the most eminent Americans of their day.

I first came to America in 1964 as a guest of Metro Goldwyn Mayer and

through Ira Gabrielson. I met Stuart Udall, secretary of the interior, and a man proud of his Native American blood; he became a speaker at the first WWC. Ten minutes in his company gave me a deep and emotionally moving insight into the soul of American conservation. He reiterated that America had to be an example to the world.

The men and women who testified for wilderness in the S.1176 hearings were heroic people, many times going against the grain and knowing that they were up against it. They warned against roads, lodges, hotels, restaurants in the national parks. They knew they were setting an example for the world and it had to be the right one. They were unafraid to talk. I was determined that the Wilderness Leadership School I initiated in 1957 would emphasize that the wilderness experience was a spiritual journey. Another witness, Edwin Way Teale, said that wilderness areas are "storehouses of wildness, and wildness will become an ever-increasing spiritual need in the crowded tomorrow."

We are now in the crowded tomorrow, with a vengeance. Try a Los Angeles freeway on what they call a "quiet" day.

I love America. It has always been good and inspirational for me. But, I have to tell you that an article in the *New York Times* of August the 29th, 2005, has caused me much stress; it is entitled "Destroying the National Parks." It refers to a document that calls for the rewriting of

national park rules by one of the assistant secretaries, which has been met with profound dismay in professional national park circles. This must be stopped.

Many millions of people regard national parks, forestry, and wilderness areas as sacrosanct. What difference is government to nature, and how do human desires fit in accordingly? The United States started the national park movement, and became a leader in ethics, policy, and action. It must remain so.

### **Wilderness Inspirations**

The wilderness work America articulated, and the rest of the world has followed, is practical, political, philosophical, psychological, and scientific. But, at the deepest levels, there are still too few people who understand it is the work of the soul. The lines of the psalm say it best: "Be still and know that I am God." And it is in the wilderness that the stillness can be found.

We have to face the fact that rampant materialism is creating havoc in our world and wilderness areas are under threat everywhere. This has not been helped by Judeo-Christianity; Edward Whitmont puts it succinctly: "For several centuries traditional theology has tended to create an absolute gulf between man and nature." Yet, the world seems to continue as though there were no tomorrow. We have forgotten those wonderful images in the gospels that describe John the Baptist coming out of the wilderness "clothed with camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey".

For too long there has been a cataclysmic clash between Western and indigenous cultures, with the latter being the bigger loser. Sense of place and spirit of place have been destroyed.

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There is a terrible potential for destruction to birds, landscapes, and silence in the Highlands of Scotland and other wild country in Britain with the proposed wind farms. The Wilderness Foundation United Kingdom is vigorously fighting this danger. As C. G. Jung said, "We have lost a world that once breathed with our breath and pulsed with our blood. Did the wind use to cry and the hills shout forth praise?" There is a cry of helplessness from indigenous people as a once-known world is swept away.

Marie-Louise von Franz, a psychologist of great depth, said: "Western civilisation is in danger of building a wall of rationality in its society, which feeling cannot penetrate. Everything has to be rational and emotion is frowned upon."

Poets are critically important to our cause. Wilfred Owen, a First World War poet, said that all a poet can do is to warn, and that is why true poets must be truthful. Poets warn us and they inspire us. Think of W. H. Auden's words as a reflection of ecological doomsday:

The stars are not wanted now, put  
out every one.  
Pack up the moon and dismantle  
the sun.  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up  
the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to  
any good.

Compare this to the inspiration of Herman Hesse:

Sometimes, when a bird cries out,  
Or when the wind sweeps through  
a tree  
Or a dog howls in a far off farm  
I hold still and listen a long time.  
My soul turns and goes back to the  
place  
Where, a thousand forgotten years  
ago,  
The bird and the blowing wind  
Were like me, and were my  
brothers.

Fraser Darling, the great Scottish biologist, said: "To deprive the world of physical wilderness, would be to inflict a grievous wound on our own kind."

My great friend, the late John Aspinall, the most famous gambler in Britain who became a conservationist and who, even when devastated by cancer of the jaw, continued to campaign and poured millions into the saving of the gorilla and other conservation causes, said:

I believe that wilderness is the earth's greatest treasure. Wilderness is the bank on which all cheques are drawn. I believe our debt to nature is total. I believe that unless we recognise this debt and re-negotiate it—we write our own epitaph. I

believe that there is an outside chance to save the earth—and most of its tenants. This outside chance must be grasped with gamblers' hands. I believe that terrible risks must be taken and terrible passions roused before these ends can be accomplished.

We are all engaged in a momentous struggle, and we owe it to the early wilderness pioneers to honor their vision and their achievements.

This is our task in the 21st century. We need something that will stir our psychic depths and touch the images of the soul. It has to surpass creeds and instantly be recognized. We must learn a new language to convey the feelings of beauty, hope, inspiration, and sacredness for humanity and all other life. We need to remember the first principle of ecology: that "everything is connected to everything else," and the wilderness experience is the spiritual spark that ignites the understanding.

**IJW**

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### Continued from EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES, page 3

Wind River Indian tribes and their work to protect some roadless areas on the reservation. A study of wilderness day use and use patterns and their impacts on management are

examined by J. Daniel Abbe and Robert Manning. Professor Gary Green and four colleagues provide some important insights into what constrains wilderness visitation and

what ethnic/racial groups are most affected. **IJW**

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