

The Wilderness Leadership School of South Africa's Imbewu and Opinion Leader Programmes

BY ANDREW MUIR

The Wilderness Leadership School Trust (WLST) was founded as an environmental education trust in 1963 by conservationist Dr. Ian Player and the game guard who inspired him, Magqubu Ntombela. The aim of the WLST is best summed up in its mission statement, which reads: "We strive to restore a balanced relationship between humanity and nature by providing a direct experience of wilderness especially for the leaders who shape society."

The Wilderness Leadership School of South Africa (WLS) takes small groups of up to eight participants at a time on five-day wilderness trails throughout South Africa. Since 1963 more than 35,000 people have participated on these courses. As outlined in our mission statement, leaders who shape society are our primary target market, including youth (potential leaders) and current leaders.

Legal wilderness protection in South Africa has gained momentum over the past two decades, and there are now designated wilderness areas within many protected areas, notably the Kruger National Park, Drakensberg, Zululand, and Cape reserves.

But a great sadness is that far more western tourists have been stirred by these wilderness areas and wild lands than local black South Africans. The reason for this is that under the previous white nationalist government black people were excluded and denied access to public nature reserves, picnic areas, and hiking trails. For many black people our protected areas and reserves are often reminders of past discrimination and, in some quarters, are hated symbols of painful forced relocations.

Even in the new South Africa, experiences in nature reserves are beyond the economic reach of most South

Africans. Yet the development of an environmental awareness is largely dependent on the exposure young people have to first-hand experiences in natural environments. It is therefore imperative for the future protection and well-being of our few remaining wilderness and wild lands that young people are exposed to these areas to gain an understanding of their importance. It is with this as a background that the WLS launched its Imbewu and Opinion Leader programmes.



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Imbewu-The Seed

Imbewu is an African initiative and literally translated means "seed." Imbewu is a four-day, entry-point wilderness experience operated as a joint venture between the South African National Parks Board (SANPB) and the WLS. Imbewu enables South African youth, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, to reclaim their birthright to a quality experience of their game reserves. The centerpiece of South African wildlife reserves-the 2-million-acre Kruger National Park-was selected to host the pilot Imbewu programme.

One of the unique aspects of Imbewu is that retired black game guards are selected and trained as the Imbewu reachers. These former employees of the SANPB have an average

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of 30 years' experience working mainly on foot in game reserves and thus have much outdoor wisdom and knowledge to offer as teachers and guides for this programme. These retired game guards have become cornerstones of the Imbewu programme. Many of these men cannot read or write, but they have traditional knowledge that they share with the youth in home-tongue languages, using the African art of storytelling. Traditional knowledge links our wild lands, trees, animals, and birds to the hearts of our people. The Insights of these black conservationists, born to South Africa, have for too long remained unshared.

The primitive Imbewu camps have been designed by the Imbewu teachers using principles of minimum-impact camping, with a focal point being the campfire. Over four days these "wise men" mesmerize 16 young people, drawn mainly from communities surrounding the parks and from urban townships, with stories around the night fire. During the day the youth are taken into the wilderness areas on daylong interpretative walks. In many ways Imbewu is a rite of passage, a cultural experience for young South Africans struggling to find their heritage and their rightful place in society.

More than a thousand youth completed the Imbewu pilot programme in its first 14 months during 1997 and 1998, and it is obvious that Imbewu impacted them at a deep emotional level. Our observations suggest that the wilderness experience is irreplaceable and inspirational to their human spirit. Imbewu features environmental educa-

tion as an empowerment process based on our need to root conservation in an African context. We plan on expanding this programme to as many other parks as possible, eventually enabling thousands of young people to experience their heritage in this way.

Opinion Leader Wilderness Programme

The Opinion Leader Wilderness programme (OLW), initiated by the WLS and funded by the European Union, brings together Members of Parliament (MP) and other key community and environmental leaders on four-day wilderness trails (treks). This is a quality, natural experience that facilitates a cross-pollination of ideas, discussion of issues, and networking amongst elected and grassroots opinion leaders. It is an important catalyst for the emergence of environmental consciousness and environmental initiatives.

The WLS has now taken more than twenty OLW programmes into wilderness areas throughout South Africa. More than 130 community and political leaders have already participated through mid-1998, 50 of them national and regional Members of Parliament (MPs). We believe this program is unique to South Africa, but we hope that it is copied by other nations.

Participants in the OLW programme have consistently commented on how being in a natural environment "on the trail" created a time period for much-needed debate in an appropriate environment. In her trail report Judy Chalmers, an MP in the National

Assembly, stated that "The debate was made more real, more urgent, more relevant because we sat in surroundings we could not ignore." Senator Lubidla, another MP, stated in his trail report that "We never actually appreciated the environment, and now that we have experienced it we have learned how vital it is."

Many of the participants, including the MPs, had never experienced a nature reserve or protected natural area prior to participating on these trails. Some of the participants initially expressed a negative attitude toward formal conservation. They saw "brown environmental issues," such as waste, water, and air pollution, as separate and unrelated concepts. Our observations support the belief that, after participating in the OLW programme, many of these negative perceptions had become positive perceptions. For example, as a direct result of the OLW trail programme the National Parliament Environmental Committee chairs formed the Environmental Consultation Forum, which is a training workshop for parliamentarians around South Africa who sit on one of the 11 committees having an environmental portfolio among their duties. At their request the WLS coordinates and organizes each workshop. The forum is designed to increase the environmental knowledge and understanding of its MP participants. Training topics have included parks and people, environmental impact assessments, and the role of parliamentarians in environmental issues. To date, three-day workshops have taken place in the Houses of Parliament in January 1998 and at the South African Wildlife College outside of Hoedspruit in May 1998. Forty-five regional and national parliamentarians participated in each workshop, thereby providing environmental education to leaders

whose decisions will impact the environment.

Conclusion

Over the past 300 years, through policies of colonization and apartheid, many South Africans have experienced a spiritual alienation from their land. Experiential education in wilderness provides the opportunity to rekindle

a bond with the land. The Imbewu and OLW programmes incorporate spiritual, educational, cultural, and ritual experiences into an environmental education experience on the land-on a wilderness trail. These programmes demonstrate the real value, benefits, and importance of wilderness areas in a developing country. IJW

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EXTRA

News from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute Wildlife and Wilderness

For many people, watching and searching for signs of wildlife contributes to the value of their wilderness experience. Hiking a wilderness trail imagining that a grizzly bear awaits at every turn, hearing the first birds sing in the spring, and searching the forest understory for snakes and salamanders are heart-filling experiences for many wilderness visitors. Wildlife species contribute to the functioning of wilderness ecosystems through actions such as seed dispersal, germination, and fertilization. In addition, the presence of wildlife is often used as a barometer of wildness contained by individual wilderness areas. Many wildlife species could not persist in the face of human development without broad expanses of wilderness, and if wilderness areas are too small, species such as the wolf, grizzly, and wolverine disappear from the landscape.

Wildlife management in wilderness is one of the more complex and controversial aspects of overall wilderness administration for a variety of reasons: Wildlife species often are hard to see, their requirements for survival are complex, they can be disturbed by recreational activities, they move across wilderness boundaries, and they are still only one aspect of wilderness management. Ecologists at the Leopold Institute investigate a variety of wildlife-related questions, including what constitutes "natural" wildlife habitat, how wildlife species are affected by recreation, and how managers can monitor the effects of human

actions on wildlife populations. Peter Landres also has been investigating sources of cooperation and conflict between federal wilderness managers and state wildlife managers in Arizona and California, USA.

To address the adequacy of wilderness for wildlife conservation, Vita Wright chaired a session on this topic at The Wildlife Society Northwest Section Meeting, March 12, 1999 in Bozeman, Montana, USA. Presentations addressed the types of habitats currently not represented by wilderness, threats to wildlife within wilderness, boundary issues, and differing governmental policies related to managing wildlife **and** wilderness. Abstracts from this session can be viewed on the Leopold Institute's webpage: <http://www.wilderness.net/leopold>, on the Announcements and Conferences page.

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