

Strengthening Wilderness in South Africa

Strategy and Programs of the Wilderness Foundation S.A.

BY ANDREW MUIR

Over the past two decades wilderness as a protected-area category has continued to gain visibility and momentum worldwide. Encouraging this progress has been the influence of global nongovernment organizations such as The WILD Foundation, Conservation International, recently the Sierra Club foundation, and international organizations like The World Conservation Union (IUCN). The future of wilderness—like that of sustainable development—is critically dependent on the efforts of all such organizations, and the building of broad

coalitions of partners among them. Only together can we successfully address issues such as how to integrate the needs for development with conservation of the environment, and to bring into full play the value of wilderness as benchmark and control areas for judging the effects of human development on natural systems.

South Africa (SA) has been a leader in wilderness conservation on the African continent and is earning respect among developing nations with wilderness. This is in large part due to our wilderness pioneers such as Dr. Ian Player (Player 1995, 1998, Martin 2001), Bill Bainbridge (2001a, 2001b), and others. South Africa is the only African country to make provision for the protected area category “Wilderness Area” (WA) in its legislation. The first areas were protected in the present-day KwaZulu region of Natal Province, being the Umfolozi and St. Lucia wilderness areas established by administrative means nearly fifty years ago (Player 1998). Then countrywide provision was made in the Forest Act to set aside national wilderness areas in the early 1970s. The first areas set aside as wilderness under the Forest Act were the Drakensberg and the Cedarberg Wilderness Areas in 1973.

South Africa is proud of these wilderness accomplishments, coming some twenty years before the IUCN Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas included wilderness as one of the international protected area categories in 1994 (Bainbridge 2001a and b). Related to these wilderness accomplishments has been South Africa’s hosting of the first and seventh World Wilderness Congresses in 1977 and 2001, respectively (Player 1978; Martin and Muir 2002).



Andrew Muir, (left) executive director of the Wilderness Foundation, SA, and Vance Martin, president of the WILD Foundation, USA, co-leaders of the 7th World Wilderness Congress. The Wilderness Foundation and WILD are frequent partners in African wilderness initiatives.

Greater Equality in Wilderness Appreciation

Although South Africa has led the way in Africa in terms of wilderness conservation, a great sadness is that far more western tourists have been stirred by these wilderness areas and related wild lands than have local black South Africans. The reason for this is that under the previous white nationalist (apartheid) 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 not only reminders of discrimination but, in some quarters, hated symbols of painful forced relocations.

Even today, after nearly eight years under the new South African government, experiences in nature reserves are beyond the economic reach of most South Africans. Alarming, a South African National Park report confirms that only 4% of the country's black population has experienced protected areas. Because the development of environmental awareness and appreciation for wilderness and nature is largely dependent on personal exposure, it is no wonder that wilderness and nature protection lack the broad public support we would like to have. It is imperative for the future protection and well-being of wilderness and wild lands that a broader spectrum of our citizens, young people, and leaders who shape our society are somehow exposed to these areas and their importance.

The IUCN, the World Conservation Union, recognizes that all protected area-categories, including WA, have a number of common functions globally. These functions include scientific research; protection of species and genetic diversity (biodiversity conservation); protection of specific natural or cultural features; tourism and/or recreation; education; sustain-

able use of resources from natural ecosystems (e.g., water supplies from mountain catchments); maintenance of cultural/traditional values; and spiritual values. Each country, particularly in the developing world, needs to define its own system of values derived from its own wilderness areas. For example, in South Africa we have too often depended on U.S. literature and debate in this regard and, as a result, are often accused of supporting a North American and eurocentric approach to wilderness and wild land conservation.

Emphasizing African Wilderness Values

Although not advocating reinventing the wheel, I believe that for the wilderness concept to take root in Africa it is important that Africans help define and create the unique values and benefits these areas can have for the continent. Wilderness with unique African values will add strength to the global wilderness movement. Though all of these functions of wilderness are of critical importance for South Africa, four of these benefits are expanded on here to illustrate how we



Figure 1—Baviaanskloof Wilderness Area has been a story of cooperation between private and public organizations, and local community and government. Photo by Vance G. Martin.

can derive added value from wilderness areas in South Africa.

1. *A Focus on cultural and traditional values of wilderness.* As the birthplace of mankind South Africa and Africa have a rich cultural and human history, with much evidence of this found in wilderness and related wild lands. Wilderness and wild lands give people the opportunity to visit cultural sites (such as bushman paintings and caves) in natural settings and allow these sites to remain intact. Some of these sites are also sacred to local tribes. Tribespeople often have special and traditional relationships with these wild places and, if enlisted sensitively by managers, can



Figure 2—The Baviaanskloof Wilderness is the major water catchment area for the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Photo by Vance G. Martin.



Figure 3—Retired African Game Guards—referred to as “wise men”—are the teachers in the Imbewu program, instilling cultural and environmental values. Photo by Margot Morrison.

add immeasurably to their interpretation and conservation.

2. Conservation of ecological services.

South Africa is a water-scarce country. Protection of high altitude catchments, the headwaters of all the principal rivers of the country, is probably one of the most important of the ecological services provided by the SA wilderness system. For example, the Baviaanskloof Wilderness Complex in the Eastern Cape provides 90% of the drinking water for the Nelson Mandela Metro Area (the vicinity of Port Elizabeth), SA's fourth largest population center.

relate to their historic past, and for therapy and healing purposes. For example, specific programs in SA provide wilderness-based intervention and therapy for traumatized youth and young offenders, many of whom are victims of apartheid and an AIDS-era society.

4. Tourism. Over the past four years tourism has emerged as the second biggest industry in South Africa, and the biggest job generator. Our challenge is to centrally position wilderness as a resource within this industry. In our favor is the fact that the fastest growth in our tourism sec-

3. Spiritual and healing values. Wilderness is the only protected-area category that specifically promotes and requires an experience of nature on its own terms, without intervening technology, and emphasizing a basic enjoyment of freedom, solitude, and spiritual, aesthetic, and mystical dimensions of the natural environment. It also provides opportunities for people to

tor is in the nature-based category. We need a strategy and plan to cooperate with government and private landowners to protect the core wilderness and wild land resources and values, because this is what many tourists want to visit. For example, Kruger National Park wilderness trails (guided wilderness experiences) are booked out 12 months in advance. And these wilderness trails do not interfere with the opportunity for peripheral development, and community co-ownership adjacent to the Park boundary.

The lesson and objective in SA wilderness conservation is clear. We need to develop partnerships with Africans that support indigenous African conservation programs, recognize and build upon local traditions and culture, promote co-management of protected areas on communal land, and build the capacity of the land and resource managers. This process has already begun in South Africa, and some exciting models exist, but we still need to create greater awareness for this work and encourage synergy and partnerships between like-minded organizations and institutions.



Figure 4—The Imbewu Program will take 10,000 black youths from urban townships into the South African wilderness. Photo by Margot Morrison.

Wilderness Foundation Strategy and Programs

The Wilderness Foundation SA is committed to the just mentioned strategy. Our mission is to achieve wider understanding and recognition for the concept of wilderness in SA, in particular, and transfer of our models and programs to other African countries as opportunities arise. To achieve this mission, we have developed programs in six key focus areas: (1) public awareness and information; (2) experiential programs in wilderness; (3) wilderness conservation; (4) manager training and research initiatives; (5) wilderness advocacy; and (6) private sector wilderness. The following includes

a description of one of our projects in each of these six focus areas.

1. Public Awareness and Information

Wilderness Support Groups—the aim of this project, funded by the Sierra Club Foundation (USA), is to create (where required), support, and assist various “friends groups” formed around different wilderness areas across South Africa. The Wilderness Foundation will assist these independent local groups in their role to official management organizations as citizen auxiliaries for their adopted areas. Local knowledge and appreciation for the area is best voiced by these groups, who support and critique the management agencies, and assist in local awareness campaigns.

2. Experiential Programs in Wilderness

Imbewu—this African initiative literally translated means “seed” and is a fully funded, four-day “entry level” wilderness experience (Muir 1999). It is a joint venture between the South African National Parks Board and The Wilderness Foundation. Imbewu enables South African youth, particularly those from previous disadvantaged communities, to reclaim the birthright of a quality experience in their game reserves. One of the unique aspects of Imbewu is that retired black game guards are selected and trained as the Imbewu teachers, many of who cannot read or write, but whom have traditional knowledge of the area that they share with the youth in local languages using the African art of story telling.

Traditional knowledge links wild lands, trees, animals, and birds to the heart of the people (Ramphele 1996). The insight and knowledge of black conservationists, who live and work for a lifetime in the African wilderness, have for too long remained unshared.



Figure 5—Adrian Gardiner (right) officially signs over the servitude to the Wilderness Foundation (SA) for the first privately declared and managed wilderness in Africa. Photo courtesy of the 7th WWC/WILD.

Over 3,000 youth have been through this pilot program in the past 30 months, and we can now see that the Imbewu experience affects the participants at a deep emotional level. The youth experience and begin to appreciate wilderness as irreplaceable and inspirational to the human spirit. Imbewu is environmental education conducted as an empowerment process, instilling personal confidence and identity while rooting nature conservation in an African context. We will expand this program to as many other parks as possible, eventually enabling many thousands of young people to experience their heritage in this way.

3. Wilderness Conservation

The Greater Baviaanskloof Complex is one of South Africa’s most important and diverse protected areas. The Wilderness Foundation is working actively with the regional implementing agency (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism), in coordinating all the Baviaanskloof stakeholders. This partnership will raise funding and co-manage the project to develop and implement the necessary conservation, local participation, land consolidation, and development planning for this area.

4. Manager Training and Research Initiatives

Wilderness Management Training for wilderness area managers is critical for the protection and sustainability of these areas. The Wilderness Foundation has been involved in sponsoring and facilitating wilderness management training for several years, cooperating with our colleagues in SA’s Wilderness Action Group, University of Natal and U.S. wilderness agencies, universities, and the WILD Foundation to ensure that African managers are trained in concepts, theory, and field skills of wilderness management (Weingart 1998; Draper and Watson 2002; Martin and Muir 2002).

A research needs analysis for SA wilderness is currently under way, funded, and managed by The WILD Foundation and the Wilderness Foundation SA, carried out in a partnership with The Aldo Leopold Institute (USA) and University of Natal (SA). Initially the team will analyze 7th World Wilderness Congress papers for wilderness state-of-knowledge relevant to SA; meet with the Wilderness Action Group and others to further identify issues; and with this background will prepare a draft wilderness research needs assessment report for review by peers,



Figure 6—South African wilderness areas are the most secure reserves in all of Africa for the highly endangered rhino and other threatened wildlife. Photo by Salli Randel.

management officials, and others, prior to submission to potential funding sources.

5. Wilderness Advocacy

The Opinion Leaders Trails (OLT), funded by the Green Trust, brings together parliamentarians and key community and environmental leaders on four-day wilderness trail trips. This is a quality experience in the natural environment, facilitating networking among formal and grassroots opinion leaders, and catalyzes an environmental awareness among these policy makers. Over the past seven years more than 200 opinion leaders, including many South African parliamentarians, have participated. It is no small feat to get them to dedicate four days to sleeping on the ground, walking in the bush, and with no cell phones!

Participants on the OLT program consistently comment on how the experience in wilderness created a unique time for much needed debate in an appropriate environment. Judy Chalmers, MP National Assembly, reinforces this in her statement, “The debate was made more real, more urgent, more relevant because we sat in surroundings we could not ignore.” Senator Lubidla, MP, commented “We never actually appreciated the environment, and now that

we have experienced it we have learnt how vital it is.” Many of the participants, including the parliamentarians, had never previously experienced a nature reserve or protected area prior to participating on these trail trips. Some of the participants initially expressed a negative attitude toward formal conservation and saw “brown” environmental issues, such as waste and water and air pollution, as separate and

unrelated concepts. After participating on the OLT program, we believe that many of these perceptions changed in a positive way.

6. Private Sector Wilderness

The role of private landowners in conservation in Africa cannot be understated. Only 5.5% of the country falls under the national protected system (and the wilderness component of this comprises only 2.8% of the designated areas), but private landowners account for at least another 6% of the land mass of the country under some form of conservation management. It was announced at the 7th World Wilderness Congress in Port Elizabeth that Shamwari Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa has created Africa’s first privately owned, legal wilderness area of 3500 hectares (see *IJW* Vol. 8, No. 1, April 2002). The mechanism for this protection is through a “legal servitude” to The Wilderness Foundation (SA) that amounts to a conservation easement. We are now implementing a program to teach interested private landowners throughout Africa how to apply this model to their protected lands. We believe this can be another effective way to expand wilderness on the continent.

The Wilderness Foundation and its associates, including the WILD Foundation (USA), have been working around the world for 28 years, and in southern Africa for 40 years. We hope our efforts in this region will be a model for Africa and the world to enhance appreciation for the important link between wilderness, wildlife, and people. ♻️

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ANDREW MUIR is executive director of The Wilderness Foundation of South Africa, and former executive director of the South African Wilderness Leadership School. He was executive director of the 7th World Wilderness Congress in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, November, 2001.