

PROJECT COORDINATOR'S REPORT ON "IFA LETHU" 2018 PROJECT.

NOTE: A detailed report by PRO, Nicky Kidgell, of all the activities experienced by the pupils, from 7th to 13th August 2018, will be available soon.

This report is to provide an overview of the background, the concept, its objectives, achievements, short-comings and to thank the wonderful team who, with the JLMT, made it possible

BACKGROUND

I was drawn into the awareness of the plight of our wilderness heritage in SA by my privileged inclusion in a group of concerned experts who undoubtedly represent the "Brains Trust" of African and International Professional Conservationists. My inclusion was as a result of my long term association with an internationally revered Wildlife Conservationist. He persuaded me to coordinate an attempt to urgently make key roll-players aware of the serious nature of the present situation threatening our heritage ("Ifa Lethu").

The "Brains Trust" referred to are a vanishing generation who hold the knowledge, experience and determination to rectify 40 years of: Failed practices in Bio-Diversity Management. Indifference to Legal Sustainable Trade in Wildlife Products; resulting in an annual loss of 2 Billion Rand to Illegal Trade. Ignoring the plight of rural communities in proximity to our Parks. This group of experts are holding out a baton of hope to future generations and **unless our youth in SA are made aware of the status quo** the baton will be dropped and we WILL lose our precious heritage sooner rather than later. Visit a National park and see for yourself – you must know what to look for.

In order to achieve this idea it was necessary to find a way of identifying young people with the appropriate characteristics. This led me to follow up on an informal discussion that I had my life time friend Jenny Lowe, whose late husband Jonny was a great friend of mine and also had a passion for the environment. So I was fortunate to establish a relationship with the Jonny Lowe Memorial

Trust, who have provided the guidance, administration and pupil selection facilities without which this project could not have started. Many thanks to the Jenny, Chairman Keith Olivier, Mike Ellis and all the members of the JLMT.

OBJECTIVES

So you can see why it is so important to get young people to understand what it is that they should be aware of and to get involved in fixing it before it is too late: **THEY MUST GRAB THE BATON**. You can make a difference by getting involved **NOW** – if you are passionate enough people will listen – you have an urgent message to deliver – this is an investment in you.

I therefore sought the involvement of this “Brains Trust” and other experts to provide the information necessary:

- Mr Alex Searle. Agricultural Research Officer. Experienced speaker and advisor on agriculture.
- Mrs Pat Jennings. Environmental Control Officer. RBM rehabilitation of dunes expert.
- Dr Peter Ardington. Vet and Sugar Cane and cattle farmer. Bio Diversity Scientist – soil care.
- Mrs Ailsa Walley. Marine Biologist. Expert on Lake St Lucia bio-diversity.
- Mr Bugs van Heerden. Dedicated Conservationist. Chairman of The Conservation Imperative. Late Dr Ian Player was founder and patron
- Mr John Forrest. Umfolozi / Hluhluwe Parks manager. Expert on Reserve Management. Worked with Dr Ian Player.
- Dr David Cooper. Wildlife Vet and world authority on rhino poaching/forensic intelligence and game capture.
- Ezimvelo Management Officials : Law Enforcement. Rural Community Relations. The Wilderness Spiritual Factor.
- I doubt that we could have gathered a more experienced group of Conservation Authorities who have a passion for youth education. The quality of the lectures, fire side discussions and informal Q & A sessions that our pupils experienced was evidence of this.

We wanted the pupils to fully understand the problems facing the ISimangaliso Wetland Complex and its threatened World Heritage status. They needed to understand the interaction with Sugar cane Farming, Forestry, catchment soil erosion and Community Encroachment. We were privileged to have the first 4 of the above speakers provide wonderful addresses on their subjects providing the pupils with the information they would need to understand when they saw the evidence of these subjects from the air.

The Futululu Park was a very suitable accommodation venue. An afternoon snare removal drive and Bugs van Heerden was able to give the pupils an inspiring lecture and short film on the sustainable use of wild life products. He presented the various points of view and engaged pupils in the debate. It was gratifying to see how the pupils, left to make their own conclusions, grasped the logical answers to the problems facing the very survival of our heritage: Pupils even deciding after returning home that they were going to start campaigns in support of the legalisation of the sale of rhino horn.

In order to provide some activity to replace the postponed flights, we arranged a Cruise of the St Lucia Estuary. In spite of the cold and rainy conditions this was an educational and pleasant experience and some of the images from the lectures were witnessed.

I realised that it would give a special flavour to the project if we could fly the pupils over the area. In discussion with Chris Rattray he mentioned that the Bateleurs might be willing to provide aircraft and pilots for the mission. He put me in touch with Steve McCurrach, a board member of this wonderful organisation. Steve and his secretary Zelda de Keijzer were very supportive and successfully sought approval from the Board.

Chris helped to make this exciting experience possible by organising flight authorities, providing fuel (sponsored By the Bateleurs), finding pilots, changing all plans due to unstable weather conditions, rescheduling, finding last minute replacement for weather-bound aircraft in Johannesburg. We are seriously indebted

to Chris, the Monzi Airstrip Authority and Tessa Haines for arranging the Monzi Country Club catering and looking after the pilots and the group at the airstrip.

It was a pleasure to witness the excitement and enjoyment expressed by the pupils (most of them !!) who experienced the wonderful flight over this spectacular lake system and the negative impressions created by the adjacent activities.

The Ezimvelo experience that followed at the Sontuli Education Centre was highlighted by the discussions lead by Dr Peter Ardington, John Forrest, Bugs van Heerden and Dr David Cooper. It was enhanced by the inclusion of 5 pupils from Grade 11 at the local school. We requested that Snothi Gama (Ezimvelo PRO) arrange this as a gesture of goodwill to the local community and to give the pupils a platform to air their views. It was gratifying to notice the reserved interaction at first but the inclusive attitude of the PMB/DBN pupils soon permitted a more relaxed state of affairs.

A major point made by the local pupils was the absence of any meaningful education on the Ezimvelo Park, although they had visited the park, they were not aware of any details relating to management, bio-diversity, law enforcement etc. They also suggested that their teachers be subjected to the same “Ifa Lethu” experience, so that the school might be more informed and thus the community might be more supportive. At present, with lions going freely through badly maintained fences and killing cattle, this was not a reality.

The visit to the Umfolozi Animal Capture Centre and the very inspiring talk given by Dr David Cooper was another highlight that resulted in valuable interaction with the pupils. It was interesting to note how the pupils, by listening to and questioning a world authority, soon became aware of the absolute necessity to legalise the trade in rhino horn in order to save the animal from extinction.

The talk that followed at the Centenary Centre, delivered by the Deputy Law Enforcement Officer, again endorsed the hopelessness

of the situation with diminishing resources, the danger and horror of poaching activities (75 in the first half of 2018) and the enormous incentive to kill rhino driven by well-funded criminals.

Around the camp fire after a night game drive the pupils heard of the lack of bio diversity management from John Forrest whose job it was for 30 years to control the game population in the parks. The problem of the excess number of elephants was aired. It was not difficult to understand how in a restricted area it was critical to control population levels in order to maintain the delicate nature of bio-diversity. The students understood the unfortunate, but not practiced, necessity to cull numbers if relocation was not an option. Relocation of elephants and lions (almost twice as many as there should be) was not possible as nobody wanted them. The pupils soon grasped the fact that, if it is a sad reality that these iconic animals must be culled, it was stupid not to derive some revenue from the culling.

The purpose of exposing the students to the harsh reality of the state of Africa's wildlife conservation management and regulation is that, if the present status quo is allowed to continue, species will face extinction and the richly diverse nature of our Parks will continue to degrade as it has done in Kenya, where 80% of wildlife has disappeared in 40 years. If local rural communities are not provided with reasons to support the Parks the pressure to occupy will increase. Allowing legally monitored trade in wild life and the revenue potential thus provided, will, through controlled partnership, provide this incentive.

I want to thank Richard Pennsawers, Snothile Gama and all the staff at Hluhluwe/Umfolozzi Park for their generous assistance in making this excursion possible. I am sure that the Sontuli Education Centre will become a permanent part of future projects and that we can form a solid partnership in providing interaction with the local community and our KZN pupils.

We must also thank the schools and pupils for their participation and enthusiasm and we need to challenge them to "grab the baton

and go like hell” !! We will be following up in due course to discuss the road ahead. Thanks particularly to Hillcrest High for so generously providing a bus with a wonderful driver, Lauren Davison. We are also indebted to Hillcrest for Nicky Kidgell’s valuable contribution. We also must thank the schools for the provision of the ever alert chaperones Charmaine Drury (Glenwood) and Sean Anthony (Carter) whose presence and cheerful interaction was greatly appreciated.

FUNDING

This is an area where I must concede a weakness !! However I am pleased to say that we have almost covered the costs that I was intent of achieving. I wish to express the heartfelt thanks of the Ifa Lethu family to the following donors:

Gavin Yeats R3000, Philip Rodwell R3000, Chris and Pam Warner R5000. Netty Hill R5000, Peter Ardington R3000. Total R19000. I still have a few possible donors to pursue but am happy, as mentioned from the outset, to underwrite and shortfall.

CONCLUSION

Generally I would feel satisfied that the project went off well enough to warrant another in 2019. I feel that we should set up a permanent Ifa Lethu Committee, made up from those involved in the 2018 project, to plan the 2019 event. We will be guided by the wisdom of the JLMT in this endeavour.

We must be aware of the fact however that this project will have been an exercise in futility if we do not follow up and give the participating pupils the guidance and support necessary to ensure that they do not “drop the baton”. Again we will be guided by the JLMT here.

Thank you all once again; it has been a pleasure working with you in this worthy cause.

Thug Haines.

Ifa Lethu Project convenor.

072 5470258.

28th August 2018.