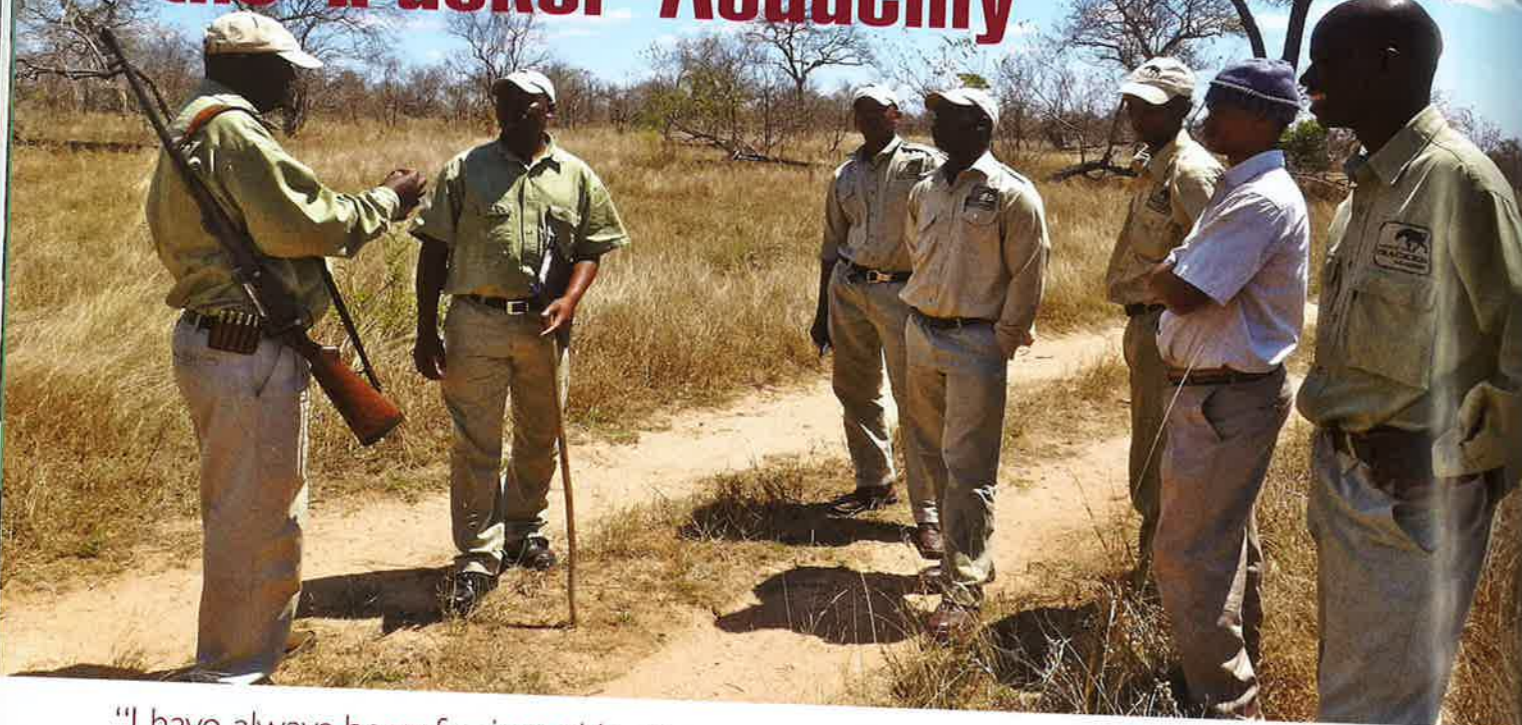


Signs of the times: the Tracker Academy



"I have always been fascinated by the marks on the ground, the signs left by animals," says Alex van den Heever.

As a nine-year-old on our family farm near Hectorspruit on the southern boundary of the Kruger National Park, I witnessed first-hand the skills of a tracker as he followed and found a lion for my grandfather to shoot. The killing appalled me, but the tracking skills I observed that day have always remained with me. I thought it was magic."

Years later, Van den Heever ended up at Londolozi Game Reserve as a game ranger. He was fortunate enough to be assigned to a tracker called Renias Mhlongo. "Renias has had a long association with tracking – he was born in a mud hut on a piece of what is today the Greater Kruger National Park. He is one of the last people to be raised in the original tradition of a Shangaan hunter-gatherer and quickly filled the role of mentor to me. For the past 16 years, I have been exposed to some of the greatest trackers in the country – men like Mhlongo."

Van den Heever also met Karel 'Pokkie' Benadie along the way. "Benadie is one of only two master trackers in South Africa. He worked at the Karoo National Park for more than 30 years. During that time he was spotted by Louis Liebenberg, author of many tracking books, and founder of the Cybertracker method of evaluating trackers. Using tracking, Benadie collected the data for the publication of a scientific paper describing the feeding habits of black rhino in the Karoo – no small feat."

Peace Parks helped found Tracker Academy

As he learned to track the traditional way, Van den Heever also became aware that this great art was gradually dying. "This

awareness inspired the creation of the Tracker Academy. I wanted a way to pass on these magnificent indigenous skills."

When the Rupert Nature Foundation, under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation¹, agreed to fund the academy through a non-profit organisation called the South African College for Tourism, Van den Heever designed a one-year intensive curriculum, and established the academy at Samara Private Game Reserve in the Karoo. "Shortly thereafter, we expanded operations to include a campus at Londolozi Game Reserve," he remembers.

The skills offered by the academy have never been more urgently needed. "Tracking skills are vital in anti-poaching efforts," explains Van den Heever. "They're also what makes or breaks a game drive. In eco-tourism, it's the tracker who is able to take tourists to the scene of animal activity. And as far as research goes, it's trackers who can find the animals being studied, no matter how big or small."

Restoring indigenous skills and traditions

Van den Heever believes fervently that trackers trained in traditional ways possess observational skills that surpass those of any scientist trained in 'Western' ways. "Our aim is to restore indigenous knowledge in South Africa, which every traditional hunter-gatherer, pastoralist and naturalist in Africa would have possessed in the past. Through apartheid, many rural people were forcibly removed from their land, and therefore many of these traditional skills started to slip away. Urbanisation also meant people no longer needed these ancient skills."

The Tracker Academy is dedicated to upliftment, job creation and what some call capacity enhancement. "We draw our students from rural areas all over the country – from the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and the Kalahari. We're interested in people with a genuine love of

nature. Often rural people who have spent time herding cattle and goats have a natural aptitude for tracking. We look for young single men between the age of 19 and 28 who are fit, healthy and keen to make their mark in conservation."

The academy is also the first of its kind to receive accreditation from the Culture, Arts, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority (CATHSSETA).

Knowledge with wisdom

The accreditation means everyone takes the academy seriously. Van den Heever elaborates: "We endeavour to create a culture of respect – for humankind and nature. During induction, students watch a documentary about the San Bushmen of the Kalahari. The film culminates in a traditional kudu hunt in which the hunters display immense physical, mental and emotional fitness. Upon its death their respect for the kudu is evident – it is clear that these people are 'at one' with their environment."

"After the film, we talk about the saying 'knowledge without wisdom is like water in the sand'. Our approach is intended to promote emotional maturity amongst the students. It allows the students to gain skills which can be used for the benefit of both wildlife and human communities. It is vital that our students leave the academy with a sense of humility, discipline and respect. Students cook and clean for themselves, and neatness, punctuality and general conduct are taken very seriously."



"We draw our students from rural areas all over the country – from the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and the Kalahari. We're interested in people with a genuine love of nature."

This holistic approach extends to all aspects of the Tracker Academy curriculum, says Van den Heever. "Dr Ian McCallum has played an integral role in the development of the curriculum. His experience in psychiatry as well as his

understanding of ecological intelligence is inestimable. McCallum is in the process of developing a life skills course designed to assist the students in dealing with the pressures they will face when they leave the academy. He also conducts one-on-one consultations with the students – many of whom have experienced abuse and neglect as children."

Curiosity crucial

Life skills underpin the tracker training core work of the academy. "Training takes place for the first six months at Samara with Benadie. Thereafter, novice trackers move to Londolozi for the final six-month semester, to be trained by Mhlongo. Students are therefore exposed to both the arid Karoo biome as well as the traditional bushveld (savannah biome) of the Kruger area. The shift from one training base to another forces the students to pay attention to new fauna and flora – it creates a sense of curiosity, which is a vital attribute of any successful tracker."

On an average day, reports Van den Heever, the students spend six to eight hours on foot, learning tracking with Benadie or Mhlongo. Monthly assessments of track and sign identification skills and trailing are conducted to ensure continuous improvement. In addition, students are required to learn over 100 species of trees and plants, and their uses. The identification of birds and their calls forms another vital part of the training. Attention is also paid to the alarm calls of all species – which is an essential component of a tracker's knowledge base. Students are also exposed to some of the original hunter-gatherer techniques by Benadie and Mhlongo.

Academy creates career opportunities

Van den Heever is justifiably proud of the fact that to date, some 84% of his graduate trackers have found permanent employment. "In some cases, game reserve managers are employing our graduates where they never before employed a tracker. Now, however, they understand the value a skilled tracker can bring to modern-day conservation."

By way of example, Van den Heever cites the story of alumnus Michael Krwece. "He came from Crossroads township near Cape Town. When he arrived at the Tracker Academy he had never done any tracking, let alone seen any animals! After qualifying, he started a job doing animal monitoring on a reserve in the Eastern Cape, using digital means to capture data based on tracks and tracking. He is now able to dispel many myths on animal behaviour in his region, because of the close to 20 000 data points he has collected."

Like most South Africans, Van den Heever is deeply concerned about the increase in rhino poaching in our country, and the desecration of our natural resources. But, at least, he says, the Tracker Academy is doing something about it. "We're ensuring a new lineage of custodians of the country's wilderness." ❀

To learn more about the Tracker Academy, visit www.trackeracademy.co.za.

References:

1. See, for example, <http://www.peaceparks.org>.
2. Dr Ian McCallum is a writer, psychologist, wilderness guide and director of leadership and education projects with The Wilderness Foundation, Africa. (Source: <http://www.wild.org/video/wild9-ian-mccallum-english-2/>)