

back on track



KARIN COLSEN SCHERBRUCKER

It's all very well taking down fences and laying the groundwork for enterprise, but promises of gainful employment will come to nothing if people don't have the skills required for the jobs on offer. The Peace Parks Foundation, together with numerous partners, has identified key areas where training is needed and is making it happen. **Ian Michler** spent some time at the Tracker Academy, which is reviving a vital art.

The process of piecing together the signs of the wild, be they spoor, scats, calls or any other indicators, to discover what has gone before is often referred to as an art. In its least challenging form, it may be simply trailing a pride of lions or a lone bull elephant that has wandered down a dirt track. But more often than not, tracking is rigorous – it demands a fine balance between meticulous attention to detail and an almost mystical level of intuition, tempered with heaps of patience.

Anyone who has been in the presence of a master tracker at work will attest to how thrilling it can be. It's as much about watching the way he reads the wilderness and links the participants in an ecosystem as it is about finding the quarry. For Louis Liebenberg,

author of *The Art of Tracking* and regarded among his peers as one of the best in the field, 'the art of tracking may well be the origin of science'.

Despite these lofty appraisals, Liebenberg and many others also believe that the skills of tracking, as well as its cultural significance, are rapidly being lost to the world of wildlife management, conservation and ecotourism. Not only are there fewer trackers at work today, but their overall ability and knowledge has fallen behind the standards of yesteryear.

Much of this has to do with the nature of the modern-day safari experience. Whether photographing or hunting, safari-goers have less time to spend in the bush. Visitors want to view or shoot as quickly as they can and, with an explosion in the numbers of camps,

lodges, road systems and vehicles, access to most protected areas has become faster and easier. Add the technological advances in tracking devices and the widespread use of radio systems, and most species have nowhere to hide.

The upshot is that outside South Africa the customary tracker seat, perched on the front of most safari vehicles, is fast becoming a thing of the past. And those that do still occur more often than not accommodate apprentice guides or somebody to pour the sundowners.

Time constraints have also had an impact on walking trails. The most sensory of bush experiences and the best way to watch trackers in action, guided walks have fewer takers simply because it's easier to see more in a shorter period from inside a vehicle. Accordingly, many guides opt for life behind a steering wheel rather than on their feet.

All, however, may not be lost. Alex van den Heever, himself a highly experienced bush guide and rated as a Senior Tracker, with significant assistance from the Rupert Nature Foundation and others, has established the Tracker Academy. Its primary aim is to revive age-old skills and restore what he refers to as 'the indigenous knowledge base'.

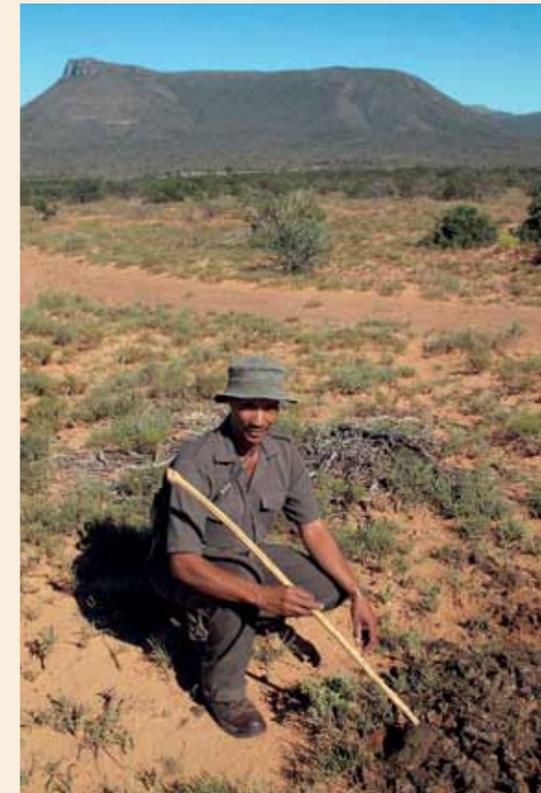
'It would be an indictment on modern conservation to lose this important traditional knowledge,' says Van den Heever, although he concedes that a huge amount of tacit expertise has already disappeared. ▶

LEFT Deep in concentration, tracking gurus Alex van den Heever and Renias Mhlongo trace a path through the bush at Londolozi Private Game Reserve.

BELOW Following the tracks of an animal, such as this one left by a lion, in soft sand is relatively easy – until conditions change.



ALEX VAN DEN HEEVER



IAN MICHLER

Karel Benadie: Master Tracker

Among his peers, Karel Benadie (above), otherwise known as 'Pokkie', is one of a handful of people who have earned the status of Master Tracker. Hailing from the mountains of Beaufort West in the Western Cape, Benadie started learning the art when his father asked him to follow caracals that had escaped from traps. (The tuft-eared cat preys on livestock and is heavily persecuted by farmers.) At the age of 15, he joined SANParks, where he worked for 33 years. For most of that time, he was based at the Karoo National Park, where he took care of the black rhinos that were reintroduced in 1994, following their every move on foot for 16 years. By the late 2000s, he was also running the park's Data Collection Unit.

Of all the species Benadie has tracked, he finds those he refers to as the 'soft walkers', especially cheetah and caracal, the most challenging to follow. Black rhinos crossing rocky terrain can also be very testing. Benadie left SANParks in 2010 to join the Tracker Academy at Samara, where he is now a permanent trainer and mentor to the students.



ALEX VAN DEN HEEVER

The academy is backed by an array of people and institutions, some providing financial support, others assisting with education and training. Among the latter group, Dr Ian McCallum, Director of Environmental Education and Leadership Projects at the Wilderness Foundation, works closely with Van den Heever on course development and is integrally involved in the mentorship programme. 'Tracking is an important metaphor for life. I am particularly interested in how it translates into leadership and life skills,' he says.

McCallum, who is also a practising psychiatrist, achieves this by helping students to link their tracking skills with general human development. 'We are born to track,' he says. 'We keep track of time, weather, family, finances. We sometimes lose track of ourselves and of our relationships, and then we get back on track... The art of tracking is also an art of living.'

Ultimately, Van den Heever also sees the academy providing a solid career choice for a generation of people who may not otherwise have entered the job market. 'Our experience shows that some of the very best trackers are illiterate. We provide them with a career opportunity and then, hopefully, they go back to their communities as leaders.'

He relates the story of Michael Kwrece from Crossroads, a township just outside Cape Town. 'Before enrolling, Michael had never seen a gemsbok, let alone its tracks. By the end of the year he was regularly following and finding gemsbok, rhino and aardvark in the Karoo. By the time he moved to the second semester at Londolozi, he had become a proficient lion tracker.' Kwrece now monitors wildlife on a reserve in the Karoo, using Cybertracker (free software that assists data collection in the field).

Van den Heever envisages that the academy will train sufficient trackers to fill posts across southern Africa in both the private and government sectors. And through this process, he believes there will be a significant contribution to conservation, scientific research and ecotourism.

Now into its fifth intake, the academy has seen a total of 32 students graduate, an achievement that Van den Heever, his staff and supporters are immensely proud of. 'I am happy to report that the academy is restoring the pride that was once associated with skilled African trackers and naturalists,' he beams.

McCallum concurs: 'The success of the Tracker Academy will ultimately depend on the quality of the graduates and this is already

proving true,' he says. 'People want to know "Where do these guys come from?" Almost all of the qualified students are now employed. This speaks volumes for Alex, Renias and their team.'

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Anyone interested in applying to the Tracker Academy should contact Alex van den Heever at alex@nns.co.za or go to www.trackeracademy.co.za

Read more about Van den Heever in the March 2009 issue of Africa Geographic.

Higher learning

The Tracker Academy is part of the SA College for Tourism (below), which was established in 2001 by the late Dr Anton Rupert, then chairman of PPF. Every year, in addition to the 16 academy recruits, PPF and other donors sponsor 90 young women from disadvantaged backgrounds on a year-long course that focuses exclusively on developing hospitality service skills. Thus equipped, they are able to return home and find employment within the tourism infrastructure supported by TFCAs. To date, 612 young women have graduated, with a high proportion finding work within the tourism sector. To find out more, or to 'adopt' a student, go to www.peaceparks.org

Since its inception in 1997, the Southern African Wildlife College has trained more than 6 000 students from across Africa in the essential skills of managing parks and conservation areas. Supported by PPF, which sponsors bursaries and contributes to operating costs, the college programme covers GIS, community-based natural resource management, biodiversity management, resource economics and practical skills such as 4x4 maintenance, managing fires and anti-poaching training. Many of its graduates have gone on to occupy more senior positions in some of the region's most prominent wildlife areas. For more information, go to www.wildlifecollege.org.za

Students at the SA College for Tourism are put through their paces in four key areas: accommodation; culinary art; food and beverage operations; and reception services. Entrepreneurship and tourism also form part of the course.



PEACE PARKS FOUNDATION



IAN MICHLER

ABOVE Alex van den Heever and psychiatrist Ian McCallum at Samara Private Game Reserve, where the academy is based. The two collaborate closely on course development and mentorship.

TOP Renias Mhlongo in full teaching mode at Londolozi, where students spend the second half of their year-long course.

Van den Heever's own career in tracking started during his 13-year stint as a field guide in the Londolozi Private Game Reserve adjacent to the Kruger National Park. Here he met Renias Mhlongo, a senior tracker whose general bush knowledge and tracking skills proved inspirational. Mhlongo taught Van den Heever the tricks of the trade, as well as the Shangaan language and cultural aspects of tracking, and the two became firm friends. In 2007, the team sought new pastures and after a short stint in the US teaching tracking and bush skills, they both realised the need for a tracking school in South Africa.

Upon returning, Van den Heever and Mhlongo were approached by the Rupert Nature Foundation and, in association with the SA College for Tourism, the Tracker Academy was set up in early 2010. Based in the Samara Private Game Reserve in the Karoo and operating out of a few renovated farm buildings, the academy offers a year-long intensive tracking course. Two intakes of eight students, most of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, complete their first six months at Samara before heading to Londolozi for the second half of their curriculum. Van den Heever, as general manager, oversees proceedings at both camps, while Karel Benadie heads the training at Samara and Mhlongo is based at Londolozi.

Whether one's vision is inclined towards the arts or sciences, the essence of tracking remains the same. It is an ancient language, as old as humankind's ability to think, that reads and understands the natural world. Successful interpretation was essential for the early survival of our species, and among the few remaining hunter-gatherer communities it is still their most essential life skill. For the rest of us, modern civilisation has dulled our senses – we no longer require an acute awareness of smell, hearing, sight or instinct when going about our daily lives.

Despite these evolutionary losses, Van den Heever believes that the ways and habits of a master tracker can be taught. Like any skill, there are those who are probably born with innate talent, a tracking intelligence if you like, but anyone who has a keen eye and the patience of a leopard and, of course, a genuine love of the wilderness already possesses the right attributes.

Once the groundwork of basic identification and general ecology is laid, students turn to understanding the need for total concentration and how to apply the knowledge they glean in a deductive process. 'Great trackers need to be creative, because with a minimum amount of information they must form ideas of what the animals are doing,' says Van den Heever.