

● Graaff-Reinet bush school celebrates 94% placement rate

Tracker Academy expands paw print

Herald reporter

After a decade on the trail, a school for trackers established in the Karoo is at the coalface of conservation and rural development and is looking to expand its footprint globally.

The South African College for Tourism Tracker Academy was established in 2010 at the Samara Private Game Reserve near Graaff-Reinet.

Almost 10 years on, it includes two more campuses, 150 graduates and a 94% per-

manent placement rate.

The academy was started at Samara with just eight students, general manager Alex van den Heever, a former Grey High School pupil, said on Monday.

Most students were unemployed youths from rural areas, who were uncertain about their future, he said.

“Our curriculum isn’t simply about preserving the traditional tracking techniques which were starting to disappear, although that is vitally impor-

tant. It’s also about instilling a culture of conservation, because our graduates go on to spread the message to their communities.”

The academy runs under the auspices of the Peace Park Foundation and is funded by the Rupert Family Foundation and other local and international donors.

After the Samara campus got going, it was not long before a second campus with capacity for a further eight students was established at the Londolozi Pri-

ivate Game Reserve, in Mpumalanga, giving upcoming trackers an opportunity to test their skills in different terrain.

A third campus was opened in the Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve in 2017.

The academy accommodated 24 students across these three campuses each year, Van den Heever said.

“Since inception we have trained 150 tracker graduates in areas such as anti-poaching, wildlife monitoring and ecotourism and 135, or 94% of

them, have gone on to find formal employment in these industries.”

Benedict Phepheng, one of seven tracker graduates who have been employed at Samara, said his time at the academy had reshaped his world view.

“I was a DJ before I joined the academy.

“At the time, I couldn’t tell a warthog from a rhino.

“I used to think of birds as something to eat. Now I understand the critical role they play in the environment.”

Phepheng went on to receive his Field Guides’ Association of South Africa Trail Guide qualification and now works as a ranger at Samara.

Jason Williams, another Tracker Academy graduate, said he valued the experience even more than the knowledge he had acquired.

“The academy taught me a lot about self-confidence and life skills.

“Plus, I am able to support my family — something I never thought would be possible.”

Justa Frans, SA’s first Culture, Art, Tourism, Hospitality, and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority-accredited woman tracker, said she was proud of what she had achieved and excited about the future.

“My time at the academy was life-changing.”

Van den Heever said the quality of education offered by the academy was such that many graduates received job offers even before they had completed their courses.

“Our assessments get more difficult all the time, because our training standards keep rising.”

He said they were taking their skills worldwide, having been called upon to track leopards in Rwanda and jaguars in Brazil.

“Our goal now is to establish more campuses in more countries — an objective that’s entirely within our reach, as we have no need for extravagant infrastructure beyond tents.

“The bush is our classroom.”

New manager for Garden Route park’s Tsitsikamma section

Herald reporter

A senior SANParks official with humble beginnings has been appointed as the new park manager for the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park.

Victor Mokoena, who was previously the acting manager at the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, washed cars and did waiting jobs to finance his degree, and his interest in nature and tourism was born when he did gardening jobs as a youngster.

SANParks managing executive Property Mokoena said on Monday he was pleased to announce the new appointment.

“We congratulate Victor on his new role and encourage staff, communities, business and stakeholders to give him all the necessary support.”

SANParks regional spokesperson Nandi Mgwadlamba said Victor had joined the conservation parastatal in 2005 as a duty manager at the Golden Gate Highlands National Park.

In 2009, he was appointed



Four dead and six injured in shootings

Gareth Wilson

Four people were killed and six injured in four separate shootings across Port Elizabeth on Sunday.

Siyanda Xaluva, 27, and Lunkanyo Tulwane, 22, were gunned down while sitting in a car outside Siba’s tavern in Laman Street in Govan Mbeki, Bethelsdorp, at about 7am.

Police spokesperson Captain Andre Beetge said that as the two friends got into the car, a gunman walked up to the car and fired several shots. Both were killed.

At about 11pm in Endlovini Street in NU29 Motherwell, a group of men kicked open a shack door and shot Nomhle Meva, 48, in the head.

Beetge said the suspects were looking for Meva’s son and when he refused to open the shots were fired.

“Another two occupants in the shack managed to hide behind a door in another section of the shack but were subsequently shot,” Beetge said.

“Both were taken to the hospital a short while later. The shooter fled the scene on foot.”

Beetge said while the motive for the killings was unknown, detectives were looking into the possibility that the attacks were gang-related.

At 6pm, an 11-year-old boy was shot in the leg in what is believed to be a random gang-shooting in Martin Street in Helenvale.

Police spokesperson Colonel Priscilla Naidu said details were sketchy and the boy was in hospital receiving treatment.

Hours later, at about 9.30pm, three people were wounded and another killed

during a drunken brawl at a tavern in Walmer Location.

Captain Sandra Janse van Rensburg said the incident stemmed from an argument earlier in the day.

“A band was playing in the yard of the tavern when a fight erupted between two people.

“One of the men then got in a car and left.

“A short while later he returned with three people, all of whom were armed with firearms.

“They fired in the yard injuring three people and killing one woman,” she said.

inbrief

Bishops teacher engaged in sexual misconduct, investigation finds

An investigation has determined that a former woman teacher engaged in sexual misconduct with at least five pupils at Bishops Diocesan College in Cape Town.

“The investigators were not able to ascertain with certainty to whom she had sent video or

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