



Instilling a culture of conservation

Alex van den Heever (front/right) General Manager of the Tracker Academy at Sanara Private Game Reserve near Grooff Reinet, together with tracker graduates. The Academy skills trackers in areas such as anti-poaching, wildlife monitoring and ecotourism. (See full story on page 6).

PHOTO: S...

Decade of success at Academy

REPORTER

SAMARA Private Game Reserve, home of the Tracker Academy, is celebrating its 10th anniversary this month.

Alex van den Heever, general manager of the Tracker Academy, said that the NGO – which falls under the banner of the South African College for Tourism and is funded by the Peace Parks Foundation – was established at Samara Private Game Reserve in 2010, with just eight students, thanks to the generosity of Gaynor Rupert.

It wasn't long before a second campus, with capacity for a further eight students, was set up at Londolozi Private Game Reserve, giving up-and-coming trackers an opportunity to test their skills in a different terrain.

The most recent campus, located at Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve,

opened its doors in 2017.

Capable of accommodating 24 students across three campuses every year, the Tracker Academy has trained 150 tracker graduates in areas such as anti-poaching, wildlife monitoring and ecotourism since inception; an impressive 135 (94%) of whom have gone on to find formal employment in these industries.

Van Den Heever explained that this is significant because most graduates joining the academy are unemployed youths from rural areas, who are uncertain about their future.

"Our curriculum isn't simply about preserving the traditional tracking techniques which were starting to disappear, although that is vitally important.

"It's also about instilling a culture of conservation, because our graduates go on to spread the message to their communities," he pointed out.

Benedict Phepheng, one of the se-

ven tracker graduates who have been employed at Samara, shares Van Den Heever's enthusiasm in this regard.

"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 has recently achieved his Field Guides Association of South Africa Trails Guide qualification and works as a ranger at Samara.

Jason Williams, another Tracker Academy graduate, insists that he values the experience for more than the knowledge he has acquired.

"The academy taught me a lot about self-confidence and life skills," he said. "Plus, I am able to support my family – something I never thought would be possible."

For Justa Frans, attending the academy was life-changing. "I am the first female tracker in South Africa, and I'm super excited about that," she said proudly.

Van den Heever notes that the quality of education offered by the academy is such that many graduates receive job offers even before they have completed their courses.

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

He adds that they are 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," Van den Heever concluded.

For more information, visit

www.samara.co.za.



Samara Private Game Reserve, home of the Tracker Academy, is celebrating its 10th anniversary this month. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

'Catching Light' opens at Imibala

ELSABÉ PIENAAR

A NEW exhibition titled "Catching Light" opened at the Imibala Gallery in Graaff-Reinet last Friday.

More than just providing visual satisfaction, a walk through the art now on display is quite a sensory experience.

Captivating charcoal drawings and paintings by Nick Walsh provide a time-travelling opportunity back to early buildings in the rise of Johannesburg from shanty town to City of Gold.

Walsh's new venture into the use of three-dimensional ceramic works invites one to touch and turn the pieces, while changes in light reflection enhance this fun interaction with exquisite art. A number of charcoal pieces also boast the beautiful architecture of historical landmarks in Graaff-Reinet.

Marina Walsh brought a playful element to

the exhibition with enchanting bronze sculptures (one can hardly resist touching the rippling muscles of *The Swimmer*) and resin head figures skilfully combined with colourful electrical wire.

Local optometrist, Johan Minnaar's atmospheric landscape photographs, invite the eye of the beholder to dance with the play of light over breathtaking Great Karoo scenery.

Catching Light also includes works by Stellenbosch architect, Piet Dekker and Karoo artist, Janet Dixon.

Inspired by her commute drives between Oudtshoorn and Graaff-Reinet, Dixon's work captures a day a year ago just after the rain late afternoon: the veldt refreshed and glowing, depicting the essence of "Qwandobowa", the green hollow now called Camdeboo.

Visit the Imibala Gallery at the Drostyd Hotel in Church Street, Graaff-Reinet, or contact them on 084 468 0027.



Kim Imrie, Janet Dixon, Ros Goodson, Marina Walsh, Johan Minnaar and Nick Walsh at the opening of the Catching Light exhibition at the Imibala Gallery.

PHOTO: ELSABÉ PIENAAR



WRSA staff training day in Graaff-Reinet

On Friday, November 22, the Wildlife Ranching South Africa Graaff-Reinet Chamber presented a staff training day at the Botanic sports grounds. A total of 215 members of staff from farms in the area attended, and received training in skinning, rural safety and awareness, driving skills, financial planning and snake identification. WRSA is recognised by government and stakeholders as an organisation representing the wildlife ranching industry on national and international platforms. The team from the farm, Riverdale, in Graaff-Reinet, all completed the five courses successfully. Here they are pictured, proudly showing off their course certificates with Katjana Ott (WRSA Graaff-Reinet chairperson) and Bonita Thiar (ABSA).

PHOTO: JOSEPH OTT