



I love my job! Q&A with an expert tracker

Renias Mhlongo is one of only 5 Lead Trackers in South Africa and founder member of the Tracker Academy. He was born in what is today part of the greater Kruger National Park.

How did you become a tracker?

I grew up in the bush. Almost as soon as I could walk, I was sent out to look after my family's cattle. There I learned to love and understand nature. Not having any formal education, I began working at MalaMala Game Reserve as a labourer, before becoming a tracker at Londolozi Game Reserve in 1984.



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Karel Benadie, Renias Mhlongo and Alex van den Heever: colleagues and co-authors of *Tracker Manual: A Practical Guide to Animal Tracking in Southern Africa*. (See how you can win a copy on page 20!)

How has tracking helped you in life?

It has taught me to be patient, to just watch, and how to read people.

If we don't hunt for food anymore, is tracking still important?

Some people think tracking is a useless career, that we should rather be living in big cities, but they don't understand yet that nature can make you feel richer. I see people become happy when I take them into the bush! Tracking also creates jobs. Londolozi would not be famous for its leopards were it not for the trackers finding the leopards every day for the past 40 years.

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Just some everyday encounters on foot...

What makes a great tracker?

It must first come from the heart. The best trackers have good eyes, understand how animals behave, and never stop learning.



What is your favourite animal to track?

Leopards! It's always tricky because they walk lightly on the ground. You must always be thinking about what the leopard is doing and listening to the birds' alarm calls. The better you know the leopard, the easier it gets to track him or her.

Most people walk in the bush like they walk in the city – they make a noise, don't listen, don't respect the animals, and so they end up in danger. Beginners are usually too fast and unaware of their surroundings.

Any dangerous encounters?

Too many! I've been charged by all of the Big 5. In Malawi, a black rhino charged us. I ran and climbed up a tree, but the branch broke and I fell out, almost on top of the rhino! I was lucky: the rhino wasn't expecting me to come from the sky and he got a big fright and ran off.



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Tracking a leopard in a dry riverbed.

You are known for sensing an animal long before anyone else. Tell us the truth: are trackers psychic?

No, not exactly. But growing up in the wild, you get to know the behaviour and movements of animals, your senses become sharp and you tune into the environment. It feels as if you become the animal, as you follow and interpret its tracks and signs. This deep connection is gained only through experience.

Are you good at finding lost school shoes or missing homework?

[Haha!] Not really. But I can see when my boss has arrived back at Londolozi – I know his shoes and tyre tread marks.

I once tracked a thief. I trailed him through the reserve to his house, where we found him watching soccer on our TV!

And your most unusual tracking experience?

My friend Alex and I went to track bears and wolves in America. Bears walk lightly too. We struggled at first, but slowly improved. I learned which plants they were eating and that helped me to stay on the right trail.

How can I practise my tracking skills in an urban area?

Nature is everywhere. Walk in a park, listen to the birds, notice the behaviour of domestic animals. Watch a sparrow nesting under your roof and learn how it behaves. Then one day, get into the wilderness to practise your skills in a natural place where you are undisturbed.



SA College for Tourism Tracker Academy is an NPO that trains disadvantaged rural South Africans in the traditional skills of wildlife tracking. www.trackeracademy.co.za