

# Where the Wild Things Aren't

Africa's wildlife is in danger of being loved—and hunted (yes, still)—to extinction. Traversing Botswana, Kenya, and South Africa on extended safari GRAHAM BOYNTON tracks down a rare black rhinoceros—and the human conscience determined to save the continent.

By  
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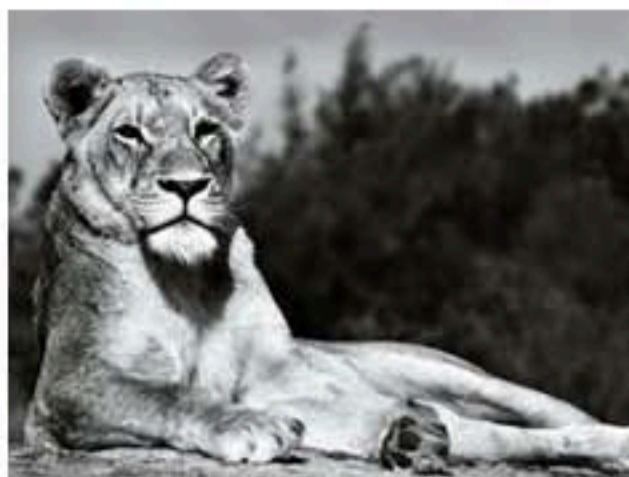
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I have been in Zarafa, Botswana's newest exclusive safari camp, for barely five minutes when I have my first encounter with a wild animal. I am halfway down the path that leads to my tented room when a large bull elephant emerges from the bush and stands stock-still directly in front of me, just twenty yards away. I hold my ground, as the guides instruct you to do, but I can hear my heart beating, partly out of excitement and partly out of fear. For a moment there is complete silence as three tons of bull elephant stares down at 190 pounds of puny *Homo sapiens*.



Then I hear footsteps, and, looking over my shoulder, I see the lean figure of Dereck Joubert striding toward me. As he passes me, he raises his hands and claps twice. That's all just two hand claps. The big bull shakes his head, looks Joubert up and down, and turns off the path toward the fever berry trees. "Isn't that fantastic," Joubert says with a broad grin. "These elephants are so relaxed. They're already getting used to this camp, and we've only been operating here for six months." That isn't quite what is going through my mind.

Joubert is one person you would expect to know the difference between a relaxed elephant and one that in an instant would drop its head, flatten its ears, and charge you with deadly effect. He has, after all, spent the last quarter century living in Africa cheek by jowl with wild animals, in a tent with his wife, Beverly.

Once Joubert has dispatched the bull elephant, he returns to the main camp and I continue my walk to my room. I sit for half an hour on my veranda, gazing out onto the lagoon that lies in front of the camp. That brief exchange between man and animal, the smell of the bushveld, the serene quiet of the wilderness, the changing light as the sun begins to set behind the ilala palms beyond the lagoon all of this infuses me with the spiritual nourishment that seems absent from so much of our scurrying daily lives in the so-called civilized world's great urban agglomerations. Out here I can breathe again, I can feel connected to the planet I normally barely touch. Out here my olfactory senses come alive and my skin tingles as the evening breezes whip up.

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Minutes to midnight: Africa's lion population has dropped from 75,800 in 1980 to 23,000 today due to various forms of human encroachment. Here, a lioness at South Africa's Londolozi Private Game Reserve.

The bull that had confronted me just minutes ago has now moved down to the reeds and grasses by the lagoon, joining other members of the herd.

A pair of gray herons are fishing at the water's edge, and against the setting sun, huge flocks of quelea ebb and flow like gossamer against the reddening sky. It is a sunset scene with which I have become familiar over the past three decades, and it is one to which I am constantly drawn back.

Joubert's call from the main tent interrupts my reverie. We are to drive off across the lagoon to look for a lion pride that has recently moved into the area. The Jouberts are now the most famous wildlife filmmakers on the continent—five-time Emmy Award winners who are preparing to release their first feature film. In twenty-five years of bush living, they have become integral parts of the ecosystem, as much components of the environment as the leopards, lions, and elephants they live among. Now this camp, Zarafa, and [Great Plains](#), the wildlife tourism company that the couple launched with

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The company's mission is "to conserve and expand natural habitats," according to Bell. The strategy: high-end, low-volume tourism. Instead of paying fees based on the number of guests, camp owners pay the local people each month regardless of occupancy. In exchange for these guaranteed payments, tribal landowners agree to create and maintain a viable and sustainable conservancy so that wildlife can prosper. As a result, Great Plains encourages the locals themselves to become custodians of the African wilderness. If a model based on working with the community sounds blindingly obvious, one should be aware that in most of Africa's diminishing wilderness areas, safari tourism has had such minimal economic impact on local communities that tribal people see the animals as competitors for the land.

Zarafa is the penultimate stop on a long trek that began in Kenya and includes the Masai Mara National Reserve, South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal Province and the fabled Kruger National Park, and Botswana. Ahead lie a couple of days at South Africa's [Londolozi](#), the private luxury camp on the border of Kruger. Everyone I have met on my journey through the continent's major safari areas says the same thing: The wilderness is at a tipping point. Hell, the whole of Africa is at a tipping point, faced as it is with unsustainably massive population growth, attendant poverty, corrupt government, and the growth of misguided mass-tourism safari outfits. It has been like this for generations, but the decline of the great herds accelerated with the turn of the century, and the wilderness—the bushveld, the last refuge for the planet's big-game populations—is facing a crucial decade.

The problems have become especially apparent in Kenya's Masai Mara, one of the world's most famous safari destinations, which has based development on low-cost, high-volume tourism. There has been little benefit for the fast-growing local communities and a shocking impact on the animals. In the early 1980s, there were maybe a half dozen lodges in the Mara, with fewer than three hundred beds, whereas today there are more than twenty-five permanent lodges with well over three thousand beds. African conservationists have said that soaring visitor numbers have damaged the park's roads and grasslands. Safari fees are generally paid to the community based on tourist numbers, and so after the 2008 post-election riots scared visitors away, the Masai understandably needed some convincing that their financial security is best served by travelers coming to photograph animals.

Equally threatening to wildlife have been the growth and changing lifestyles of rural populations. The once nomadic Masai are leaving their mud-and-wattle homesteads and gravitating to more permanent settlements along the borders of the Mara Reserve. Thus, the wild animals that move in and out of the reserve are now competing for habitat with Masai livestock, as well as with the large-scale crop cultivation that has come with a more settled lifestyle.

According to a report by the [International Livestock Research Institute](#), the Mara's ungulate population declined dramatically between 1989 and 2003 as a result of poaching and human encroachment. Giraffe numbers are down by ninety-five percent, warthogs by eighty percent, hartebeest by seventy-six percent, and impala by sixty-seven percent. The carnivores that depend on these wild animals, according to Joseph Ogutu, a researcher at the institute, are the latest casualties. "The number of lions is dropping, the cheetah numbers are declining, and wild dogs in the Mara system have become extinct," he says.

The Mara is famously the setting for the annual wildebeest migration, often referred to as the greatest wildlife show on earth. In previous decades, more than 1.25 million wildebeest and an attendant caravan of predators—mainly large lion and hyena groups—would move from Tanzania's Serengeti up onto the Mara Plains. The number of migrating wildebeest had dropped as low as 300,000 two years ago, although strong rains this year did cause a rebound. According to Brian Heath, CEO of the Mara Conservancy Trust, "the migrations into the Mara will not be sustained if the numbers keep falling as they have in recent years."

This dramatic surge toward the extinction of one of the world's most famous wildlife habitats supports the views of Bell and the Jouberts that nothing short of a conservation revolution will save Africa's wild places.

Great Plains' move into the Masai Mara is a test of Bell's and the Jouberts' model of modern wildlife tourism. In Botswana, the company is operating in a climate of relative stability, with government support that is free of corruption; by comparison, Kenya is the Wild West. Conservationists argue that cynical tour operators and lodge owners and corrupt local councils have siphoned off most of the profits from foreign tourism over the years, leaving almost nothing to trickle down to the local people.

Thanks to the guaranteed community payments by Mara Plains—a six-room, twelve-bed camp run by Great Plains on the [Olare Orok Conservancy](#) (OOC), on the Masai Mara's northern border—the Masai have moved their homesteads, cattle, and goats out of the thirty-thousand-acre area. Lions and other predators are beginning to come back. Wild Africa is reclaiming itself.

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The OOC deal was brokered by Jake Grieves-Cook and Ron Beaton, two respected Kenya hands who have long been involved in wildlife tourism, and among the four partners are Richard Branson's **Virgin** group and the Great Plains group, which have each put up \$200,000 for the right to build and operate tented camps. What is unique about the OOC is that it has strict limits on visitor numbers: one tourist tent for every seven hundred acres of conservancy land. "This land is critical to the survival of most resident and migratory wildlife species such as elephants and wildebeest," says Dickson Ole Kaelo, a well-known Masai ecologist who is urging the government to support the expansion of conservation and tourism on Masai community lands along the lines of the OOC. "These conservancies have demonstrated pragmatic approaches to sustaining the Mara's wildlife, giving a better tourist experience, and providing returns to the landowners for investing in conservation."

Unfortunately, the OOC is the exception to the rule. Development remains the abiding theme in East African tourism, and Kenya's growth problems are not confined to the Masai Mara. Farther north, in the Samburu National Reserve, Iain Douglas-Hamilton, the world-renowned elephant scientist, was threatened with eviction by the local government, presumably for protesting a huge new lodge which he says has been built "right in the middle of vulnerable riverine habitat" that serves as a feeding ground for the elephant population. And near Kenya's Amboseli Reserve, fourteen new lodges are planned, potentially cutting off the elephants from their migratory routes.

Botswana is African wildlife conservation's model citizen, in large part because of its clean, stable government. In contrast, many of its wildlife rivals—Kenya, Tanzania, and most notably Zimbabwe in recent years—have been riven with corruption that starts in the higher reaches of public office and finds its way to the gates of the national parks. One East Africa conservationist told me recently of an official arriving at the conservancy he manages with a briefcase packed with \$200,000 in crisp notes. "This was what he was offering me to allow some Middle Eastern clients to come big game hunting in this proscribed park," he said. "I ordered him to get off the conservancy immediately."

Botswana stands out for its wise tourism policies, too. In the 1980s the government took the advice of conservationists and decided to develop the high-end, low-volume tourist model, with communities being direct beneficiaries. The government also wrings a bigger commitment out of the companies that run the lodges and safaris in its parks. Companies such as Great Plains, Wilderness Safaris, and **Abercrombie & Kent** pay sizable lease fees up to \$250,000 per concession per annum to the local communities and a further 4.5 percent of revenue. According to safari insiders, that works out to be about 25 percent of the net profits of a well-run safari operation. In addition, fifteen-year leases encourage camp operators to invest in their surroundings.

The Toyota Land cruiser is bouncing across the rutted track when Joubert sees movement in the jackalberry trees to the left of the vehicle. It is a female leopard heading west in the dusk light. Reluctantly, Joubert tells our driver to keep going or we'll miss out on seeing the lion pride hunting buffalo.

This part of Botswana was until recently a hunting area, and the Jouberts' philosophy is not surprisingly driven by a fierce anti-hunting position. Dereck points out that in the time that it took him and his wife to make their documentary film *Eye of the Leopard*, about a leopardess called Legadema, "ten thousand leopards like her were legally hunted and killed, all with approved permits."

Although sport hunting was banned in Kenya in 1978, it remains not only legal but a source of considerable revenue in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, and some parts of Botswana. Thanks to the Jouberts, Bell, and other conservationists, Botswana is leading the drive to ban hunting completely in prime areas. There are seven major wilderness areas in the country—a total of some two million acres now used for photographic safaris instead of hunting. Botswana's president, Ian Khama, a friend of the Jouberts, has endorsed the initiative.

Bell and the Jouberts are taking their anti-hunting message into the heartland of big game hunting safaris: Tanzania. Trophy fees there have remained the same since the mid-1980s, making it the international hunter's bargain basement. Although there are no statistics available on the number of animals shot, it is estimated that Tanzania generates thirteen million dollars from what is coyly termed "wildlife utilization," which includes hunting and live-animal capture. In South Africa, which does keep statistics, more than 54,000 animals were hunted in 2006, earning more than \$250 million in trophy fees. Big business, indeed. "We are buying the hunting licenses and tearing them up," says Joubert with glee. "What we are saying is that we are going to own these animals for the year."

Having wrenched Dereck away from the lone leopard, we head out into the evening looking for the lions. It isn't long before we find them, a pride of nine animals lolling around in the turpentine grass, occasionally standing alert as a nearby herd of buffalo show signs of movement.

As dusk envelops us and the extraordinary night sky fills with stars, we find ourselves contemplating the impact *Homo sapiens* is having on this magnificent wilderness. Dereck stares at the pride and says, "Around the time the occupants of this vehicle were born just over half a century back, there were more than 450,000 lions roaming across Africa." His voice echoes in the stillness: "Today, there are as few as 20,000 left on the whole continent."

Soon, grim statistics are punctuating the night air. We all agree we are overpopulating our planet at such a pace and that we are minutes from midnight ecologically, with rural Africa experiencing one of the highest population growth rates on the planet. The continent's population grew from 130 million at the turn of the twentieth century to 800 million at the end. By midway through this century, it will have ballooned to 2 billion, and although the concentrations are in the cities, the wilderness areas are increasingly under pressure from rural populations and their domestic animals.

Black rhinos are splendid and dangerous beasts. They are as blind as, well, a rhino, but if you are on foot and within twenty-five yards and upwind of one that can smell or hear you, you'd better have a tree nearby to shinny up. The only problem is that a black rhino can cover twenty-five yards in about six seconds, which doesn't leave you enough time to find the tree and climb it.

So it is with some trepidation that we find ourselves this close to a black rhino in South Africa's Phinda Reserve. Our guides, Daryl Dell and rhino researcher Zama Ncube, have led us single file into the dense clusters of tamboti trees, and the sight of a pair of fork-tailed drongos hovering is evidence enough that a rhino is in there. Then suddenly we are upon it, close enough to see its hook lip pulling at the fresh leaves; a ton and a

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This seems entirely in line with the type of business model Africa's progressive conservationists are preaching. So I decide to drive off into the community to see what the locals are doing with their newfound income stream. What I discover, however, is that in Africa, even well-intended projects often go awry, a result of a persistent culture of dependency that has built up over the decades. On the way, a development officer for Phinda's Africa Foundation explains that there are three main communities on the northern border of the conservancy, with a total of 35,000 people. The Africa Foundation provides funding for business start-ups, medical clinics, and schools. When the government ran out of money to build a local school, Phinda finished the building. We reach our destination, a Zulu wedding in full cry. Standing outside the reception hall waiting for the bridal procession to make its entrance is David Nsukwini, secretary of the community's land claims committee, who deals directly with the Phinda lease. **&Beyond** is paying a monthly rent for Phinda, he says, but the money earned over the past year, far from being invested in community projects or improvement programs, is sitting in a bank account "because we cannot decide what to do with the funds." When I ask why the community turned to Phinda for more than \$65,000 to build the Mduku Clinic just around the corner, instead of spending its own funds, he smiles and shrugs. In a donor-dependent culture, such a question is bordering on naive.

My last stop on this extended safari is Londolozi, a private reserve with four luxurious camps. It was created in the early 1970s on the edge of South Africa's Kruger National Park by Dave Varty, a co-founder of CC Africa, and thanks to its success the argument for its model of high-end, low-impact safari outfits that work with the local communities has been slowly spreading across the continent. The pioneering **Campi ya Kanzi** in Kenya (a winner of the 2008 *Condé Nast Traveler* World Savers Award), for example, also shares revenues with the local people in the Masai Mara. Great Plains not only operates projects in Botswana and the Masai Mara but also at Kenya's **Oi Donyo Wuas**, in Tanzania's **Selous Game Reserve**, in Rwanda's mountain gorilla habitat, and at a marine lodge in the Seychelles.

Like the most progressive East Africans, Varty thinks the solution lies in returning this entire area of South Africa to wildlife, moving the rural population that is pressing up against Kruger's western boundary away, and creating an enormous wildlife corridor that reinstates the elephant migratory paths that existed here until the arrival of the white colonials. There are five villages with some forty thousand people living in this hardscrabble landscape, and to say that their existence is subsistence almost understates the case. In the same way that the Masai have been incentivized to move out of the OOC, so Varty believes that wildlife tourism can subsidize the relocation of these communities into more viable rural towns.

Over the next two days, we drive around Londolozi tracking leopards, looking for lions, and watching a large herd of elephants grazing along the banks of the Sand River. This is part of the 155,000-acre Sabi Sand reserve, and Londolozi and its luxurious neighbors Mala Mala, Singita, and Richard Branson's Ulusaba promise their wealthy American and European clientele accessible wildlife from the comfort of a vehicle, with perfectly mixed sundowners at some stunningly beautiful spot at the end of the drive.

Over sundowners on my last night, Varty goes intergalactic, waving his arms around and raving about optimum land usage and why "we Africans have to tell people like Sir Richard Branson and Bono what it is exactly we need. We don't want a school to be built here we want you to pay for three hundred miles of fence and you can tell the world that Virgin built the Sir Richard Branson fence."

Then he's off again, this time addressing South Africa's president, Jacob Zuma. "I'm not going to build a school here, Mr. Zuma," he declares to an audience of elephants washing themselves and drinking down at the edge of a water hole. "No, let's build one at Thulamahashe or at Bushbuckridge [rural towns some distance from here]. Let's put up proper housing, proper towns. There is nothing for people in these semiarid, low-rainfall areas. This is for wild animals."

Then he falls silent. There is nothing nuanced about what Varty is saying.

And there you have it, the rolling thunder of so many voices, desperate to be heard, messianic in their message: Cut corruption. Stop hunting. Create wildlife corridors. Move people. Pay people. Make tourism responsible.

The sun has gone down, the elephants are barely visible in the soft moonlight. The stars stud the inky sky. It has all been said. But is anybody listening?