

# Friendship in the veld

Two men from different backgrounds are saving the ancient art of tracking

**W**hat began as two distinct journeys became a powerful bond in the remote African bush for two men from vastly different backgrounds. Through their shared love of nature, these two men formed an unlikely yet very special friendship that has taken them across Africa and halfway round the world to share with others what they had discovered within themselves and their environment.

Now, Alex van den Heever and Renias Mhlongo are not only helping others to unlock the power of relationships and to preserve our precious natural heritage, but are also using their friendship and their shared knowledge and skills to help save from extinction the ancient art of tracking.

And instead of being revived for the original purpose of hunting, it is being put to good use in the fast-growing ecotourism industry, in the fight against wildlife poaching, for research, and in community-based conservation training.

For these two naturalists, it all began when they were employed as ranger and tracker at the world-famous Londolozi Private Game Reserve in South Africa's far northeastern wilderness.

In their formative years, however, they may as well have lived on separate planets.

Van den Heever grew up on a cattle farm outside Plettenberg Bay, the holiday playground of wealthy South Africans, and was sent off to boarding school in Port Elizabeth at age 11, which he says was "a massive shock to the system".

But the family also owned a cattle farm on the southern bank of the Crocodile River bordering



the Kruger National Park, and many holidays were spent in the bushveld.

Although he first completed studies in Marketing and Business Management, Van den Heever's heart lay elsewhere.

"It was never a conscious decision," he says about his dream to become a game ranger. "From the time I opened my eyes, I wanted to live and work in nature."

Van den Heever believes he inherited his mother's love for nature, while his parents instilled in him the understanding that he could follow his dream and unlock the potential inside, "which we all have, to do anything we want to, and succeed".

But becoming a game ranger was not that simple. Competition for scarce openings on the game reserves was tough. Eventually, in 1995, he was hired as a cadet ranger at Londolozi and, instead of heading out into the bush, was promptly set to work doing menial jobs, painting walls, helping set up dinners for guests and helping in the workshops.

After this unglamorous induction, the head ranger finally asked Van den Heever to drive a tracking team tasked with finding leopard for the lodge guests, exposing him to the fascinating local African naturalist skills.

By the age of 24, he became head ranger and in 2002, he was appointed as land manager, spending the next six years as custodian of the land.

While at Londolozi, Van den Heever raised money for habitat restoration projects, did

marketing presentations and also conducted specialised safaris.

He holds one of the highest qualifications for a guide in South Africa and, fascinated by local African naturalist skills, he went on to qualify as a senior tracker.

Thirteen years Van den Heever's senior, Mhlongo had been born on a farm in Mpumalanga, into a family that sustained itself by hunting and gathering, growing vegetables and tending cattle.

He considers himself fortunate to have been one of the last people raised in the original hunter-gatherer traditions of the Shangaan people.

He learnt from his brother, Elmon, and his stern father, Judas, who made frequent trips into the bush and traversed the greater Kruger National Park area with little or no concern for officialdom.

As a boy, Mhlongo had to gather food and tend to the cattle and goats and was not allowed to return home unless he could account for each and every animal in his care.

From an early age, he was under much pressure to help provide for the family, causing him to grow up quickly and assume responsibility, without gaining a formal education.

The area in which they lived fell inside of what today is the Sabi Sands Reserve. However, as a consequence of the apartheid policies of the government of the day, Mhlongo and his family were relocated to a designated settlement for blacks called Dixie – a place where his family live to this day.

Without any formal education, Mhlongo found employment as a labourer at MalaMala Private Game Reserve. Putting to good use the naturalist skills he had learnt as a boy, he became a tracker at Londolozi some 11 years before Van den Heever arrived there.

Since then, Mhlongo has qualified as a senior tracker, meeting the required 100% pass mark and, like Alex, becoming one of only 19 in the country. He also has qualified as a safari guide at Londolozi and has conducted training workshops in South Africa, Kenya and America.

When the two finally met at Londolozi, Mhlongo immediately made a huge impression on the young Van den Heever.

"His positive, confident yet humble character has always inspired me. He is a unique human being. Even after having had a difficult start in life – being poor, uneducated, dispossessed and disenfranchised – he has remained enthusiastic

about his prospects to improve his lot," says Van den Heever.

"He is always ready to try something new, travel, learn and engage with people."

Van den Heever also met and worked with other trackers and naturalists at Londolozi. Among others, he mentions Richard Siwela and Mhlongo's brother, Elmon, who have been working there for more than 30 years and mentored many well-known South African wildlife experts, including Londolozi's John Varty.

Another is Robert Sithole, who came to him for a job. With nothing to his name but an urgent desire to learn, Sithole now is the lodge's habitat manager.

"He did not know what a computer was when he started six years ago – today, he can drive an Excel spreadsheet, do payroll and more," says Van den Heever.

But it was Mhlongo's personality and knowledge, and the many unique encounters they shared in the African bush, which caused Van den Heever to forge a powerful and lasting friendship with the man who became his tracker.

It was particularly some of the more harrowing encounters, and the way in which Mhlongo handled them, which left a lasting impression and now forms the basis of a motivational presentation that the two do for audiences around the world.

"I was just fascinated by the unwritten, tacit knowledge of the Shangaan trackers in the Lowveld. We can all read about the biology of an animal, but this knowledge is relatively unknown. It sparked my interest," says Van den Heever.

"The success of the wildlife experience at Londolozi largely depends on the skills of the tracker to find animals, and to interpret their behaviour.

"Again, it was not a calculated decision to learn about African cultures. I believe I have a natural affinity to African people. I enjoy learning their language and hearing their stories and understanding our differences – between the Western and African approach," he adds.

"Renias taught me to speak Shangaan, which helped me gain a better insight into the culture, the stories and the knowledge they have to offer."

Van den Heever says their team at Londolozi was the classic game lodge setup of an educated, usually white person, at the wheel of the Land

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Rover as the guide or ranger, and a trained member of the local community acting as tracker or spotter.

“People usually view the guide as the all-knowing pivot of the safari expedition, but it is often actually the tracker’s knowledge of the environment around which it all revolves,” he says.

“The only reason I could do this job was because I could speak English and knew how to drive a Land Rover. For most of the rest, I depended heavily on Renias.

“It was an unusual situation, in that although the responsibility lay with me as the game ranger, Renias was in total control of that safari.

“I realised that if I had any chance of becoming a successful game ranger, I needed to start building a relationship with this tracker I had been assigned to,” adds Van den Heever.

From Mhlongo, he learnt about the environment, the wildlife and the complex behaviour and social systems of wild animals.

He discovered Mhlongo’s uncanny ability to interpret the alarm calls of birds and animals. Van den Heever says that Mhlongo would take nothing for granted and tells how, for example, he would make him stop the vehicle to listen to a tree squirrel calling in alarm at a leopard unseen in the woodland ahead. From the squirrel’s sounds, Mhlongo could tell exactly what the leopard was doing.

Van den Heever was invited by Mhlongo to spend a weekend with him and his family in Dixie – a rural village of 400 souls, with one tap and no electricity.

Reluctant at first, he was treated like a king, learnt more about Mhlongo and his culture in three days than in the 15 years he has known him. It taught him the lesson of breaking out of one’s comfort zone, of overcoming fear and prejudice and “walking in another’s shoes” in order to understand them and to earn their respect.

But the experience that really created the bond of trust between them was the infamous encounter they had with a beautiful but dangerous leopard in a dry river bed – an experience they recall to the great delight of their presentation audiences.

Taking a group of tourists on a leopard-spotting drive, Mhlongo made Van den Heever stop the vehicle when he spotted a track. He knew the leopard from a previous encounter and wanted them to follow her tracks. Van den

Heever took his rifle, winked confidently at the tourists who remained in the vehicle, and set off after Mhlongo.

Proceeding cautiously down a donga with dense bush on either side, the bush went very quiet, adding to the tension. A tree squirrel made its alarm call, but they did not know whether it was for an eagle overhead or for the leopard somewhere ahead.

Holding his rifle, Van den Heever stepped onto a log in the river bed when suddenly, he heard a loud roar and the leopard exploded out of the bush beside him. He tripped over the log, falling over backward, and his rifle went flying.

The leopard had charged right up to him, standing with one paw on the log over which he had tripped, and then walked back and forth, its tail swishing from side to side, as if readying for attack.

While Van den Heever lay helpless and unarmed on his back, unable to defend Mhlongo as he was supposed to do, it was Mhlongo who took charge calmly and instructed him what to do, urging him to remain quiet, not to look the leopard in the eyes, and finally, when and how to move away from the leopard.

It turned out that the leopard’s anger had been provoked when Van den Heever had come too close to her cubs in the nearby thicket.

It was out of this encounter that a relationship of trust grew.

Van den Heever says he was able to return the favour when Mhlongo travelled beyond his rural area for the first time, accompanying him to Johannesburg and London where he showed Mhlongo the wonders of the Western world.

As their relationship grew, so did the demand for their services and their presentation, with regular overseas visitors to Londolozi opening new doors for them. Since those early days, the pair have conducted safaris in Kenya, Tanzania and Botswana, as well as tracker training courses in the United States for American trackers.

Through the efforts of a regular visitor at Londolozi, an American tracker called Mark Elbroch, whom they had trained to become the first foreigner to qualify as a senior tracker in South Africa, the International Society of Professional Trackers invited them to present on the role of the ranger and tracker at the society’s annual conference in Redway, California.

It was on this trip that they saw their first bears and engaged in tracking them.

This year, they are due back in Yellowstone National Park in the US to run a tracking course, trailing bears and wolves.

And as it was through tracking that they met, it was only natural that this would be the focus of their next endeavour together. Realising that many of the traditional tracking and naturalist skills rapidly are being lost forever, the two have recently, with the help of a number of other people and sponsors, started their Tracker Academy that hopes to preserve these ancient skills.

According to one of South Africa’s best-known trackers, wildlife conservationist and author of *The Art of Tracking*, Louis Liebenberg, the skills of early inhabitants of the subcontinent to locate both their food and their enemies are fast dying.

In the Kalahari Desert, for example, the San people are fast losing their world-renowned tracking skills because, Liebenberg believes, they are now using domestic dogs for tracking.

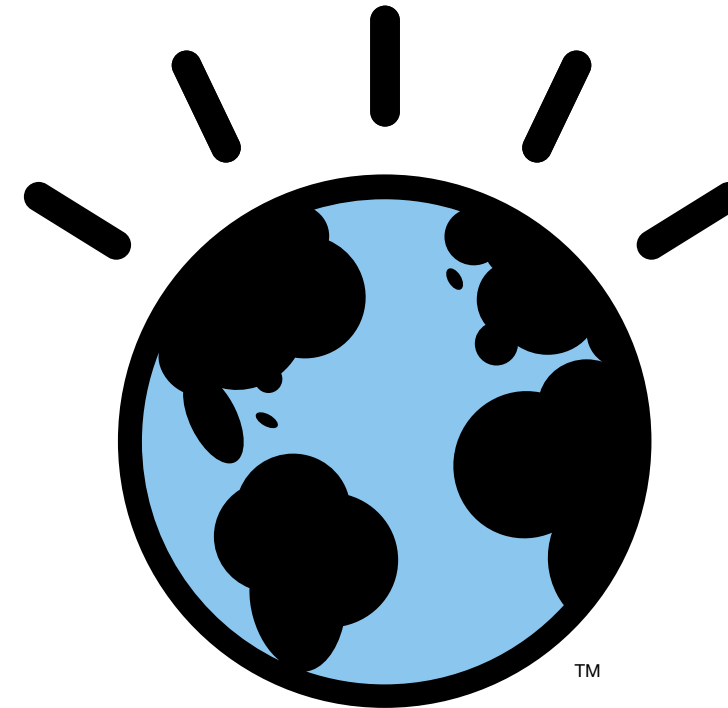
In addition, wildlife in the Kalahari has been affected badly by fences that have cut off traditional migration routes, directly impacting on the lives of hunter-gatherers.

Their academy offers a one-year course, training unemployed people in the traditional tracking skills. Students spend the first six months in the Karoo learning from Karel Benade, one of only two master trackers in South Africa. For the second six-month semester, they move north to the Kruger Park area where Mhlongo continues their training as teacher and mentor.

“I attribute much of my success as a safari guide and naturalist to my relationship with my mentor, Renias,” says Van den Heever.

“A deficiency in skills due to inferior training and the lack of quality mentoring leads to mistrust and breakdown in relationships. South Africa, in its state and private sector, has a responsibility to create a secure environment for the transfer of knowledge and values if it is serious about transformational success. Successful mentorship improves skills and cements relationships across this diverse landscape,” he concludes. ▲

*Stef Terblanche*  
Read more about Van den Heever and Mhlongo, their presentation and their Tracking Academy at [www.alexvandenheever.com](http://www.alexvandenheever.com)



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