



# Lentswe la Madikwe

A NEWSLETTER FOR AND BY THE MADIKWE GAME RESERVE STAKEHOLDERS

JUNE  
2008



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## EDITORIAL

I guess the main difference between humans and nature is found in the way we handle change. Other than in a natural environment change in terms of human nature seems to be something that we want to resist at all cost. Micro as well as macro changes occur in an ecosystem on a continuous base through seconds, minutes, days, weeks and eons but if I hear something has to change I get upset and start dwelling for hours on all that can go wrong—or for that matter go right. For me this was emphasized after visiting the south coast area the week after serious floods caused extensive damage to beaches, tourism infrastructure and other.

Everywhere you go people discussed the damage to main beaches where thousands of tourists used to gather to sun bathe and swim. Some beaches disappeared totally and I have to chuckle about earth's way of cleaning her closet. No one seems to realize that new beaches were formed where previously none existed and areas that had been seriously polluted before have been swept clean. It made me aware that even though we might think we are managing a natural area and that we are in control of it that might not always be the case—except for the fact that disease, wind, water or fire can change the system to what we

See as an undesirable state we can seldom predict accurately what the consequences of our management decisions will be. Therefore we brainstorm, we search the internet; we research and we ask advise of so called experts before making these decisions.

In the end it's all about adaptive management...thinking through your decisions, taking an educated guess...keeping your thumbs crossed and staying humble...knowing that ultimately you cannot control nature -

On that note during this month we have been introducing game (Impala—795, Blue Wildebeest—501 and Kudu—36), burning fires and fire-breaks, capturing wild dogs and doing what we believe is appropriate to the best of our knowledge...

I am struggling to Keep our letter section alive. Remember this is the forum where you can have your say! Send your letters to: [mgoosen@telkomsa.net](mailto:mgoosen@telkomsa.net)

or

[dhofmeyr@telkomsa.net](mailto:dhofmeyr@telkomsa.net)

Hope you all enjoy this months edition of Lentswe la Madikwe!

Magda Goosen

## LETTERS

I have heard many stories about the famous jungle lane but on the 21 & 22 May I got to experience it first hand! On Friday Craig, Declan, Kevin and myself went down to the jungle lane shooting range with targets in hand. We spent the entire day hiding static targets and pop up targets making sure any experienced guide will get a quicker heart beat. According to Declan this was probably one of the most exciting jungle lanes he has seen. Saturday morning started with a slightly nervous Brad from Tau, he was the first to experience this jungle lane- and experience it he did! He emptied his magazine on the first two pop up targets and I think his heart rate was well above normal. He assured us he had enough rounds to continue and he carried out the rest of the jungle lane with style and confidence. However he was nicknamed John Rambo for the rest of the weekend. One of the highlights on Saturday morning was Wynand from Tau. As most of you know he is about 12 ft 3 and he spotted most of our targets over the trees. At the end of the jungle lane Kevin and Craig decided to place a poacher target, for a bit of a difference. Well all of us were completely blown away when Wynand got a fright and did a triple turn around leap in one breathe!! He would have put a lot of high jump athletes to shame! The poacher at the end gave the evaluators a bit of a laugh as most of the guides did not really know what to do so the expressions and actions were unforgettable.

Needless to say that the poor poacher nicknamed Samson was screamed at and shot at all weekend.

On Saturday afternoon we had the pleasure of seeing four field rangers go through the evaluation, more poachers were placed up and off we went. I know that they had a wonderful time and a great experience, and I wouldn't like to be a poacher with these guys shooting at me. TK from Bravo 1 was another experience all together, the rangers are told to handle this as they would a normal walk with normal guests. Well TK sure handled us. At one pop up target (the famous leopard) he asked us to move back, (after listening to every guide say move back we eventually started to stay still) well TK did not appreciate this and swiveled around and in a demanding voice said "well are you just going to stand there?????" well we moved- and pretty fast too! Brad lost the nick name of John Rambo as soon as we sent Declan through the evaluation but because he had already seen the Jungle Lane as it was laid out on Sunday Craig, Kevin and I moved the targets around in such a manner that even if you knew where the targets were you would still jump. Declan set off with determination and a plan- to kill everything in sight! Poor Samson had no chance as Craig shouted "he's shooting, he's shooting" Declan did a stylish stop, duck, and roll to reload and fire. I think everyone enjoyed this jungle lane, and I can't wait till the next time!

- Gemma Hattingsh & Kevin Linforth

**HAVE  
YOUR  
SAY!**

## MADIKWE SECURITY OPERATION

Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of this month people passing Tswasa would have been excused if they thought perhaps that a tent town had sprung up in front of my house. It was in fact something far more intimidating as the North West Parks and Tourism Board Counter Poaching Unit led by Rusty Hustler, our head of Resource Protection, descended on the reserve along with 7 vehicles, 3 microlights, a mobile radio repeater and enough arms and ammunition to satisfy any gun-ophile.

We all know that we live in interesting times and with the rising fuel price food costs go up. Combine that with an increasing refugee crisis from our northern neighbors and I'm sure everyone will appreciate the need for, fortunately in our case, mostly preemptive activities to ensure that our Madikwe remains the safe and comfortable place we all love so much.

The unit itself is made up of NWPSTB members as well as members of the SAPS and other government departments and while not based in any particular reserve they work across all 14 of our protected areas as well as associated land (eg: Sebele which we are mandated to protect even though it isn't one of our properties).

Over the course of the 4 days the following successes were achieved:

18 snares were found and removed (mostly in the riverine area between the eastern fence and the river).

1 drying rack was recovered (found in the riverine between the eastern fence and the river).

1 person apprehended and removed from the reserve for drunk driving.

1 person apprehended on suspected poaching with the assistance of the microlights (in the same riverine area as mentioned above) but released once it was proved that he was innocent and just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

2 injured white rhino were followed up on from the air (only one was found unfortunately).

An aerial fence patrol was conducted.

Notes were made of a variety of offences related to health, safety and environmental laws (particularly in staff villages and on the two construction camps) which will be followed up on between us and the relevant concessionaires, companies and government departments.

Assistance (along with Jaci's and Morukuru) in capturing and translocating an injured wild dog (See "The Woes of Midnight" in this issue).



*Above:* Rusty leads a CPU patrol on the Rant during the sweep (Photo: R. Barnes)

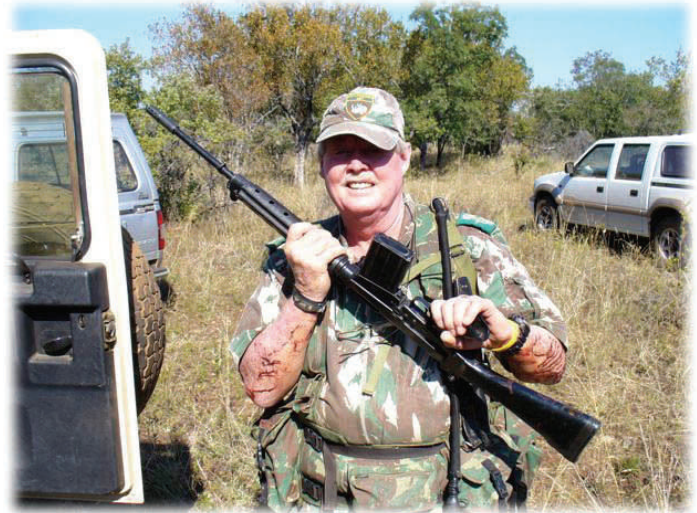
## SECURITY OPERATION (CONT)

All in all a successful four days.

It is not possible, with the limited manpower, to cover the entire reserve in such a short time and future operations will occur in areas not covered during these four days. These operations are not done with the intention of inconveniencing anyone (other than lawbreakers) but unfortunately this does occasionally happen. It is hoped however that everyone appreciates the fact that in order to ensure that Madikwe remains a long term safe and successful environment to live in we need to acknowledge that while so many threats to our personal well being remain outside our reserve boundary there will be occasional overflow. Fortunately this has not had any major consequences inside Madikwe to date (unlike so many other reserves around the country where poaching is commercial, hijackings happen inside the boundaries and doors must remain continually locked) and we have no wish or desire to allow it to get to that state so long as we can do anything to prevent it.

Unfortunately, like any high risk activity, there can be casualties. Fortunately though the only one this time was Rusty's arms as he decided in his confident way that elephants aren't the only animals that can

storm straight through *Dichrostachys* thickets.



Above: Rusty shows off his injuries after convincing a thorn bush to step aside (Photo: R. Barnes)

Shortly after the counter poaching operation Rusty endured an operation of a different kind as he went under the knife to have major knee surgery. We at Lentswe as well as, we believe, all the residents of Madikwe wish him a speedy and smooth recovery.

- Declan Hofmeyr

## FIRE SEASON

Madikwe's fire season has begun in earnest this month with approximately 3 500 hectares already burnt (the largest burn being east of the Enselbergs to Tlou dam at 1 575 hectares). The total to be burnt in Madikwe has not been finalized yet as the fuel load analyses isn't complete but with the exceptional rains of the last season it is likely to be well over 10 000 hectares.



Above: Massimo link burns. Though putting on an impressive night time display this fire only burnt 200 hectares. (Photo: D. Hofmeyr)

The objectives of burning in Madikwe are:

To reduce and break up fuel loads to prevent huge late season wild fires

To improve forage quality

To promote game viewing in the park,

To protect infrastructure

Over and above the formally stated objectives as laid out above fires also increase small mammal populations in the long term and are used to alter structure (as anyone who remembers the area north of Pipeline opposite Tlou Plains before the big fire of some years back).

In order to achieve these objectives the proposed approach is to have as many fires as possible in the early part of the season (up to the end of July), and to break-up the fuel loads with a large number of small fires spread over the entire park. This involves initially targeting areas with high fuel loads. The fires themselves are placed as point or line ignitions which reduces the risk of heat vortexes forming when two fronts burn into each other. Heat vortexes super-heat the air between two approaching fronts extinguishing the fire in the process but also creating such hot air that very little survives once the fire is out. Such fires can be used for limited bush control but are unsuitable for Madikwe's purposes where a heterogeneous vegetation structure is required.

This year's fires will be concentrated in the north east, north west and south central areas of the reserve.

- D HOFMEYR

## THE WOES OF MIDNIGHT

Some people seem for all intents and purposes destined to live lives less ordinary than others. It seems that in the case of wild dogs this also happens as the ongoing saga of Midnight, the alpha female of the Collection Pack, evidences.

As previously reported in *Lentswe* (October 2007) Midnight managed to get herself stuck up a tree while trying to scavenge off a leopard kill. After being rescued from that situation she survived not one but two attacks from the Dwarsberg pack that resulted in 63% percent of her fellow pack members being killed and went on to not only retain her alpha status but successfully produce a litter of pups that were born on or about the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May. She, Scud and Junkie (the other survivors of the attacks) were doing well to raise the pups when it seems lions paid her and her pups an unexpected visit.

No one saw the event so it is not known whether she was defending her pups or was caught by surprise but she was badly bitten on her neck and head. By the 15<sup>th</sup> of June the infection was so bad all her milk had dried up and the pups had all starved to death and since it was clear she was going to die it was decided that we would interfere (a practice we normally reserve only for human inflicted injuries). Midnight was caught on the 16<sup>th</sup> and quickly rushed to Medivet in Thabazimbi. On arrival in Thabazimbi she was immediately operated on by no less than three vets. Her injuries were far more extensive than was first thought and so much flesh had rotted away that her jugular and her trachea were visible. Her phrenic nerve



**Above:** Midnight (in the sling) is recovered from the veld post darting to be transported to Medivet in Thabazimbi. (Photo: C vd Berg)

had rotted completely away which means she can never hiccup again but after two hours on the operating table, three weeks in recovery and 173 stitches in total she could be brought back to Madikwe where she has been placed in the Lion Boma to be rebanded with her pack which is hopefully what we will be able to report on successfully in the next issue of *Lentswe*.

—D Hofmeyr



**Above:** Midnight on the operating table with lead vet and owner of Medivet, Dr. Louie Greed, supervising her operation. (Photo: C vd Berg)

## PREDATOR BIODIVERSITY PROJECT

The Predator Biodiversity Projects first attempts to radio collar jackal in Madikwe were filled with the pre-conception that this would not be too difficult. So it was with the help of Stephen Dell - Madikwe Field Ecologist at that time - that we dragged a dead wildebeest carcass across the Madikwe plains with the idea of placing it at a suitable spot from which we were going to dart and radio collar jackals.

The plan was to radio collar jackals only living around the Madikwe plains as, by all accounts, here was probably the largest concentration of jackals in Madikwe and we wanted to research the territorial interactions of jackal family groups in specifically one area of the park.

In essence we wanted to see if territorial jackal pairs have any influence on non-family individuals from entering or residing in their territories. If this was so then we could illustrate beyond doubt that by allowing territorial pairs and their family group to co-inhabit farmland a farmer would limit jackal numbers on his farm and thereby limit damage caused by jackals to his livestock be they sheep, cattle or game. Plainly spoken a herd of springbok or sheep would then only be subjected to possible predation from a family group of jackals and not every jackal that may wish to "attend" the food supply so to speak that's if jackal territoriality was to have any value to the farmer at all.

The initial steps of our plan to dart and radio collar Madikwe jackals went extremely well with Stephen reporting that he had at least 6 jackals following the carcass whilst it was being dragged along Western Plains Road and so I concurred this was going to be easy - I mean the jackals on the Madikwe plains are extremely habituated to vehicles it would just simply be a matter of darting accurately.

The first carcass was placed close to the intersects of Western Plains Road and Fly Road (for those familiar with Madikwe Roads) and that's where our expectations were slowly but surely driven into the Madikwe dust for no jackals, no not one, approached the wildebeest carcass after we stopped the "drag"..

Of course I should have known better - having worked with jackals on the farmland for over 5 years jackals are renowned for their Neophobia - an aversion to anything strange - and the wildebeest carcass was definitely "strange". Yes here was a very edible wildebeest carcass but it had some "downers" firstly it smelt of humans as we had all touched the carcass whilst attaching the drag ropes secondly our two vehicles were parked within the "darting" distance of +/- 15metres from the carcass and thirdly there were no lions around the carcass. Evidently to a jackals mind this was indeed "strange" and to be avoided despite their habituation to the Madikwe vehicle traffic!!

## PREDATOR BIODIVERSITY PROJECT (CONT)

Eventually at around about midnight a Brown hyena came to the rescue and started to feed on the carcass. This made the situation a little more normal and jackal friendly and eventually 3 jackals approached of which one J13, became the first Madikwe jackal to be darted and radio collared. Fortunately J13 was an "excellent" darting for the Projects purposes and turned out to be a territorial male jackal with a centre core area close to the West side of the Plains and a regular range over the middle of the same. It was indeed exciting to see him trotting over the plains doing his boundary patrols followed by or following his female only a few days after radio collaring.

Over a period of a few months several carcasses were dragged and placed in different areas around the Madikwe Plains whenever the opportunity presented itself however we eventually gave up the idea as the jackals became progressively resistant to approaching the carcasses. In fact the final two blows to our attempted jackal dartings from "dragged" carcasses were delivered to us on Ngori Road. Here not one jackal approached these last two attempts and we spent 2 nights on each carcass staring at the blackness of the night - not a jackal in sight. This jackal resistance to approaching objects that they suspect may lead to a bad experience fits in perfectly with jackal behaviour experienced on farms countrywide for over 350 years this is just why they have survived.

In this instant the jackal from all over the Madikwe plains had learnt that carcasses with a green bakkie parked 15 metres from the same spelt bad news!!

So we resolved to only attempt jackal "dartings" at natural kills. This strategy has really tested our resilience over the last 3 years. Firstly kills do not happen around the Madikwe plains every night! Sometimes over a month passes before an approachable kill opportunity presents itself. Secondly once a kill is made you have to wait for the lions to leave the kill before you can dart the jackal otherwise there is a good chance of a lion killing a drugged darted jackal Thirdly and once again back to the jackal's extreme cunning - you have to be able to get to within 10-15 metres of a jackal to dart the same. Unfortunately for us we needed to dart territorial jackals and this comes with the "resistance" price tag par none - for territorial jackals do not acquire this status without some very solid credentials..... to be continued next issue



J13 controlling a carcass on the Madikwe Plains

--Rob Harrison White

The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors and do not in anyway reflect the official view of the North West Parks and Tourism Board.

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