

THE POACHER

and other hunting, fishing and
conservation stories

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many books have been written about game rangers. Most are set in the African bushveld or savannas and portray the romantic image of rugged men exposed to harsh elements and dangerous game. The stories in this book are different. They give an insight into the lives of conservationists in the Eastern Cape; ordinary men and women who may not face the dangers of lions, crocodiles and *Anopheles* mosquitoes on a daily basis, but who have a passion for protecting one of the most beautiful and diverse regions in Africa. I must therefore firstly thank all the professional conservationists and field rangers who form the basis of the stories. This book is dedicated to them.

I have been privileged to work with some of the pioneers of conservation in the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces. As a young nature conservator I looked up to them and valued their mentorship. I think of men like Fred Birch and Wensly Brown who patiently showed me how to catch game when the wind was right and conditions were good... and not so patiently when things were going wrong. I fondly remember Uncle Flippie Philips teaching me about problem animal control; running with hounds in Rhodes and Ugie, setting coyote getters for jackal and cage traps for caracal. But it was my direct supervisors who need to be singled out and thanked: Bedford Edwards, Braam Basson, Mike Fryer, Jaap Pienaar and Albert Mfenyana each taught me different skills. Their passion for conservation was infectious and our experiences in the field have been worth recording; however, I promise that some will remain for us alone to share, along with beers around a campfire.

My colleagues in the Eastern Cape and throughout South Africa are too many to mention, but the constant inspiration from them to record our stories is greatly appreciated. The encouragement of the legendary Ian Player and Jim Feely was especially instrumental in getting me to publish this book.

My stories would not have been as polished had they not been edited by various friends. Bruce Truter published some of them in *The Fishing Journal* and his comments were always welcome. Jim Feely and Sheila Bell Cross read many of the stories in rough draft and corrected spelling and grammar. Solly Duna looked perplexed at some of my poor *isiXhosa* and laughed heartily while correcting it. But it was Ilana Stein who edited the final manuscript, as she did with my book about Mkambati. I think it was a sterling job and I really thank her for the effort. Any mistakes that may have crept in are entirely my own doing.

An important part of the book is the sketches. I began drawing them as cartoons to illustrate the stories and asked my daughter, Lauren, to assist. We have painted and drawn together since she was old enough to hold a crayon and some of my friends and colleagues still have her early masterpieces on their walls,

tiles, curtains, books and floors that she practised on as a toddler. They were unconvinced at the time, but I told them, while frantically scrubbing with all kinds of detergent to try and remove the scribbles, that they would one day be valuable items. Lauren has not only been blessed with blonde hair, blue eyes and her mother's beauty (thank God she did not get my looks), but is now an exceptionally talented artist with work that has been displayed in South Africa and abroad. I battled a bit to get her to fix my attempts at artistic fame, but she finally helped out and I think the pictures tell a story on their own.

Having finally completed the sketches, our book needed a publisher and I was not sure who to approach. Then, at an ECGMA function, I saw Kevin Thomas's book, *Shadows in an African Twilight*. Kevin and I worked together in the 1980s when he was reserve manager of Tsolwana Game Reserve so I contacted him about his publisher and he could not stop raving about her. That is how I met Barbara Mueller of New Voices Publishing. How right Kevin was about her professionalism too. I am deeply grateful for her advice and assistance in putting the work together.

They say you must not judge a book by its cover. Unfortunately most of us do. I was keen to put a gory picture of a dead rhino on the cover because in the past two years South Africa has lost more than 250 rhino to poachers. But I have purposely not included any stories relating to rhino and elephant poaching because most of the cases are still being investigated and I did not want to jeopardise the outcomes. A cover picture of a dead rhino would therefore have been a bit misleading so I provided Barbara with a few photographs and asked her to have something more appropriate designed. The cover that has been developed comes from John Lamberti's photographic collection and, depending on one's mindset, conjures up the image of poaching, hunting, conservation and The Great Outdoors – ideal for this book.

Lastly I would like to thank my family for their support. My children, Ryan and Lauren, have experienced a life somewhat different to most of their friends, but they have survived to become wonderful young adults. Ian Player said that the wives of game rangers deserve medals. We are a breed that likes wine, women and song, but we also enjoy solitude and the simple pleasures of life like walking in the veld, canoeing down a quiet river, *braaiing* meat over a campfire, fishing and hunting. It is a special woman who can stand by a man who does not shower her with jewellery, flowers and fine clothes; who hates shopping malls and fancy dinner parties, and who goes everywhere in a pair of khaki shorts. I cannot thank my wife, Annette, enough for her unfailing support. She is a beautiful woman who has stood by me, even in the toughest financial times when I went to bed with torn khaki clothes and tried to convince her that I was sexy. With the proceeds of this book, if there are any, I'm buying a new pair of khaki shorts, going fishing, getting my kids the latest heavy rock CDs ... and buying my wife that medal.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Ian Player sat opposite me in his chalet at Letaba Rest Camp in the Kruger National Park. We were attending a conference of the Game Rangers' Association of Africa. I had earlier used the opportunity to ask him to write the foreword for my book about Mkambati and the Wild Coast¹. Now, as he agreed to it, I felt elated and simultaneously deeply humbled. Ian Player is an icon of conservation, in my opinion in the league of Stevenson Hamilton and Aldo Leopold. But although he was impressed by the thick manuscript that I presented him with, he could not hide the disappointment in his deep, patriarchal eyes. "This is a monumental piece of work, but it is not your story," he said, slapping a gnarled hand on the cover of the manuscript. With that, he began imploring me to write a book about my experiences during more than 20 years of conservation. He emphasized over and over, "People want to know your stories. Few lead the adventurous lives of a game ranger. You owe it to your fellow man to tell them about your experiences." Jim Feely, another old-time game ranger and close friend of both Dr. Player and me, added, "And your stories have us rolling with laughter. You have an uncanny ability to portray events in a humorous and yet thought-provoking manner." This was a flattering compliment from a man widely acclaimed as one of the great readers and thinkers in the environmental field. It was then that I decided to compile a book of some of the stories that I felt warranted being recorded, either to convey a conservation message, or just to give someone a good hearty laugh, or, wherever possible, both.

As a young boy growing up in the rapidly developing northern suburbs of Johannesburg, there were only a few professions that I ever dreamt of entering: a policeman, a fireman, a soldier or a game ranger. Everyone knows these are not the highest paying jobs and my father kept trying to steer me towards the better-paid engineering profession, but as far as I was concerned that promised no excitement. I never told my Old Man, but when I reached my testosterone-driven teens, a gigolo or a rock star seemed particularly interesting options to add to my list (plastic surgeons that specialized in breast enlargements weren't around in those days or no doubt that would have featured highly as a potential job too). After much thought and a serious lack of shaping with girls, I decided I was probably a bit shy to be a gigolo – I never once considered that a paucity of playboy looks might have been the problem. I convinced myself I stood a better chance of being a rock star. Many an afternoon after school, *Led Zeppelin*, *Deep Purple*, *Golden Earring* and *Pink Floyd* blared from the cheap hifi in my room while I jammed on a make-believe air guitar and imagined screaming girls

¹ Mkambati and the Wild Coast, published by Wilderness Safaris, 2006, authors: Div de Villiers and John Costello

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throwing bras and panties at me. But although I had all the head-shaking moves of Ritchie Blackmore and Jimmy Hendrix, I was never able to string more than a few chords together on a real guitar. So out of all these potential professions, becoming a game ranger held the edge.

I must admit I liked being an officer in the army and almost joined the permanent force after my two-year conscription with the South African Defence Force ended, but my father refused to sign the necessary papers of consent. I think he was tired of watching me jump into step every time I walked beside him and he insisted that I try out civilian life before making any rash decisions. That was how I ended up at Rhodes University, the scene of my first story in this compendium.

Following the Rhodes debacle, which lasted a mere three months, fate pushed me into a conservation career filled with adventure, some of which I cover in stories like *The Poacher*, *Cycad Stakeout* and *Taxi Hunt*. I make no apologies for any of my writing. It is based on factual experiences that I have had and reflects my thoughts at the time of the events. I have deliberately changed a few names and used my poetic licence on occasion to spruce up a story, but I have not changed text to be politically correct or to appear metro-sexual or liberal. As time marches on and as we become older, and hopefully wiser, some of our thoughts and opinions change (otherwise I may have become a gigolo). In my case my thoughts about apartheid, our war in South West Africa (Namibia) and Angola and my attitude towards black people have changed markedly, so too my thoughts about hunting, fishing and conservation. This is reflected in stories such as *The Prawn Pirate, Is he Tame?*, *The Power of Politics* and *The Call of an African Ranger*.

I consider myself extremely fortunate at having been exposed to experiences in wild areas that revealed the truth about so many aspects of life of which, in my younger years, I was totally wrong about. I wish that more people could be granted the opportunity of discovering who they are and how dependent we all are on one another and on our natural environment. It was perhaps this realization that started me writing short stories and articles in the early 1990s, the material drawn from comprehensive work diaries that my supervisors forced me to keep. Surprisingly most of the stories found their way into an array of magazines. A few editors made minor changes or omitted controversial issues that I would have preferred to retain. Nevertheless there were still some outraged responses by readers. One upstanding businessman thought he recognized himself as the cursing hunter in *Aloe, Aloe, is this Hunting?* and threatened to take me to court for defamation of character. My take on that was, if the cap fits, wear it *boet*. A rock and surf angling club was outraged that I “tarnished the fraternity’s image” with the article *Bang goes our Fishing* and a flood of letters was sent to the editor

telling him I was an arsehole. He asked whether I wanted to write a letter of apology in a later edition, but I declined and maintain my arsehole status with some rock and surf fishermen to this day.

Fortunately most of the responses to my stories have been remarkably positive, so I have kept writing. More importantly I have retained the desire to keep fighting for conservation. It is a cause that I truly believe in. Contrary to what many think though, it is not all fun and roses; at times it is one of the most disheartening professions to pursue as *Game for an interview* and *Bloody baboons* highlight to some degree. There are numerous conservationists receiving counselling for work-related stress. I know of eight conservators who committed suicide because of depression and I can identify with the feeling of helplessness that so often manifests itself within dedicated conservationists. If you are passionate about a forest, river, lake or mountain with all its beauty and wealth of life and you see it wrecked before your eyes by the greed or stupidity of your fellow man, the feeling of being powerless is crushing.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges that face this beautiful planet of ours, I believe there is still hope. It does not lie alone within the hands of a few game rangers and environmentalists however, because, although it may be their profession to look after the Earth, it is everyone's responsibility. There is a growing realization that we live in a global village and there is an environmental awareness tenfold greater than when I began work as a 'baby ranger' in 1983. However, I like to believe that the handful of men and women who pioneered the cause for conservation were more heroic and visionary than given credit for and professional conservationists still play an essential role in modern-day society.

It has been a privilege to get to know some of the early conservationists of South Africa and to work with a few of the most colourful characters that have walked the face of this Earth, fighting a worthy cause beside them. As Ian Player said, the life of a game ranger (and by that he meant professional conservationist) is filled with excitement that few others experience. Perhaps it is our duty to society to have this recorded.

Here then is my story – bite-sized chunks of it anyway. If I succeed in making people laugh, stimulate some thought about real conservation issues, and make even one young person interested in following a career in environmental conservation, then it will have been worth putting pen to paper. If not, I should have rather watched more of *Metallica* and *Nickelback* on MTV. Hell, I'm sure I could've been a rock star!