

Letter from Africa

October 2013

I am not sure what was more distressing on arrival in Zimbabwe – the broken reversing alarm on the luxury bus squawking every 3 seconds the entire way from Victoria Falls to Hwange, or the two hours of Christian soft rock. Still, the prayer for our safe travel as we departed was a nice touch, and must have worked, as we arrived at Hwange National Park safe and well and right on time.

It was great to be back in Zimbabwe – warts and all. The aftermath of the shambolic eviction of commercial farmers in the early 2000s saw the economy go into free fall, bringing empty supermarkets, a fuel drought, and Cuban style rationing. Zimbabwe plunged into nonsensical Alice in Wonderland hyperinflation, resulting in notes as high as 100 Trillion Dollars. Zim unhappily claimed the unwanted title of the fastest deteriorating non war economy in the world. Eventually forced to give up completely, in 2009 the laughing stock Zimbabwean dollar was abolished, replaced by the US dollar. In one stroke, inflation was beaten, and amazingly, things were now actually looking up. The discovery of a massive diamond deposit in the Eastern Highlands, immediately grabbed by the dictatorial Mugabe regime as a personal cash box, together with a stuttering recovery in tourism and massive investment from China, had finally seen Zimbabwe's economy turn the corner.

Out in the bush, it is another story, far from the worries of politics. Even in Victoria Falls, a cold beer by the palm clad banks of the majestic Zambezi River, with waterbirds circling and diving, and the burble of hippos in the background is enough to relax and reinvigorate a tired traveller.

The Wildness

Further south, in Hwange National Park, the slow rhythms of the African bush continue. Hwange is not Disneyland Africa. It is not the Serengeti, not endless plains stretching to the horizon, the green hills of Africa, punctuated by thorn trees, milling herds of millions of wildebeest and zebra, predators openly on patrol. No, that is most certainly not Hwange. At times in Kenya and Tanzania, the most significant migration can seem to be the congregations of camera clad European tourists. Hordes of minibuses crowd around predators and chase them about, distressing both animal and visitor. Budget travellers with poorly trained guides pack the parks. It is often impossible to take a photo of “unspoiled nature” without yet another minibus in the background. That is not Hwange. What Hwange has is wildness.

Hwange in winter is like a desert; a flat, semi arid, tangled mass of scrub half the size of Belgium. Trees stand as bare as a European winter. On foot, the deep sands are hard going. Venture off the animal paths, and thornbushes of all descriptions scratch at you. Some have lance like spears, some have cat like claws, some fishhooks... Walking, they snatch your hat from your head, grab

your arm and hold you tight, tear at your legs. In places they are simply impenetrable.

Yet amidst this harshness, Hwange has small vignettes of great beauty. After driving for 20 minutes through featureless scrub, a pretty vista will open up unexpectedly. Dopi Pan is a basin of golden grassland, surrounded by tall green topped acacia trees. Hundreds of elephants slowly mill around the waterhole, then the grey giants amble slowly into the bush. Tiny shy steenbuck antelope peer curiously from the bush. A troop of noble kudu antelope stride across through the grass, massive corkscrew horns resplendent like military battle standards. A pair of ostriches, with their weird periscope heads, stalk across the flat.

Surrounding the pan, like the walls of an amphitheatre, towering acacias provide a cool green canopy of shade, year round, exploited by elephant families in the noonday heat. At Hwange you often have such scenes to yourself. Driving through the park, mile after mile of bush seems deserted, still and silent in the dust and heat.

Even at the busiest waterhole, Nyamandhlovu, visitor numbers are modest, and fellow travellers provide an entertaining interlude to have a chat about sightings with, rather than yet another annoying tourist to get away from. Sometimes Nyamandhlovu is deserted, even of animals, save for the crocs and hippos and ever present birds. At other times, hundreds of elephants crowd the place like people on a busy day at the beach. Drinking, playing, trumpeting, swimming, squirting water over themselves, it is on for young and old.

Mysterious. Who would expect a giant green frog in a dusty sandpit? Yet that is what we saw at Nyamandhlovu, along with an encouraging change notable after nearly twenty years of visiting Zimbabwe. The number of African visitors to the national park is on the rise – both school children on educational visits and adults visiting to observe the animal life, perhaps for them a reminder of the simpler rural times of their ancestors. A Christian pastor from a pentecostal church in western Sydney, taking a break from church work in the down at heel high density townships of Harare spots my Sydney Swans football cap, and breaking my personal news drought, excitedly informs me that my team has signed superstar player Buddy Franklin. Great to catch up on this vital information.

The Hwange bush is weirdly addictive. Like a tick, it grabs onto you, burrows under your skin and won't let go. Despite the harshness, the thorns, the dust, the lack of sweeping vistas in many places, there is something strangely compelling about a wilderness that can make a thousand elephants disappear. Brief glimpses of predators may be all you see – or you may be more lucky. Our group certainly has been, with sightings of lion, wild dog, cheetah, leopard, hyena and jackal – all the apex predators of the park. The predators can be hard to find. The grass is, put simply, lion coloured. Kennedy Vlei and Dete Vlei, named from the Afrikaans word for valley, are ancient skeletal rivers, turned to rivers of grass. They snake

across the land, disappearing into the distance, providing an animal highway through the bush.

Now, in the spring of October, the bare trees of winter begin to push out tender lime green new leaves, preparing for the rains of November. Within days the bush is painted green, though the new growth seems incongruous in the heat, which approaches 40 degrees.

On the track of predators

We have done far, far, more than the average photo-tourist, for we are on the tracks of leopards - the ultimate super predator. These secretive carnivores are one of the least understood big cats. They range from the mountains of South Africa's Western Cape, almost the Cape of Good Hope, right to the far north of Africa, the middle east, the jungles of India, Sri Lanka, and South East Asia, and even to the snows of Russia near Vladivostok. Not just resident in remote bush, they occur even on the outskirts of Cape Town, where they live mainly on dassies or "rock rabbits", a cute creature resembling a giant guinea pig. They also consume baboons and the sparse mountain wildlife, and scrounge scraps from semi urban areas and farmlands when they can. In the Hwange bush they bring down massive antelope.

The lion may be the king of beasts, the tiger the lord of the jungle, but the leopard is the ultimate survivor, and we want to collar one.

The Hwange Leopard Project, based at Umtshibi Camp, is run by Paul de Montille and Stephanie Larrieu. They, together with the Zimbabwean National Parks ecology unit, are trying to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. Our aim is to assist the researchers on their fascinating mission. Once a satellite collar is attached to a wild leopard, a new world of knowledge opens up about these threatened cats. Leopards are not big pussy cats, they are savage predators, with the potential to become problem animals, venturing out of the park into tribal lands, killing livestock such as chickens, goats and cattle, and in rare but serious cases becoming man-eaters. Problem animals soon become dead animals, as they are immediately targeted for destruction. Just outside the boundary of park in forest and communal tribal lands distasteful but important hunting safaris occur. Commercial hunters cater for rich Americans and Europeans with more money than sense, if you ask me, pay handsomely for hunting safaris. They can shoot antelope, buffalo, elephant and leopard.

In an ideal world no hunting would ever occur, no dirt poor tribal farmer would lose any livestock to wild predators, or crops to night raiders. Animals would die peacefully of old age, surrounded by their loving families in national park retirement homes. That is not nature, though. Nature was famously described as "the quick and the dead" and "red in tooth and claw". In theory at least, culling the aged and worn out may mimic the natural cycle and prevent overpopulation. For most species, though, overpopulation is far from a pressing problem. Since the catastrophic land grab of 2003, commercial farmlands outside the park, formerly given over to photo safaris, have been pillaged and wildlife populations

there have plummeted. Whilst much of the wildlife of the park is safe and prolific, the rhino is now virtually extinct in Hwange, despite some valiant efforts, after a poaching rampage in the last few years. The big news that breaks during our visit, is the sickening cyanide poisoning a hundred elephants in the remote south of the park for ivory.

The obvious worry is that hunters may be overdoing it and driving species into terminal decline. It is suspected that in the case of leopards, rather than the old and near death, it is juvenile animals battling for a home range and driven from the park in the search for territory that are being shot. The future of the species may be being wiped out. No-one knows for sure. That is where it is hoped the Hwange Leopard Project can fill the gaps. By gathering vital data on leopard populations and ecology, the future of this majestic spotted cat can hopefully be assured. Perhaps, like in Kenya and neighbouring Botswana, hunting may be banned or restricted, but factual research data is needed to make decisions.

One amazing finding so far from the first male collared is the size of his range. He unexpectedly ventured 70 km south of his capture point in just a few days. Remarkably, he seems to know that to step over the rail line marking the park boundary into the hunting zone means death and he won't do so. The satellite picture of his range shows him patrolling right down the rail line yet sticking like superglue inside the park. He even ventures right to the edge of the camp, even brazenly stealing biltong (beef jerky) drying on a washing line from the workers compound one night. Contrary to leopard mythology, in which leopards sleep in trees during the day and are active at night, he moves by day. Now a female must be collared to complete the picture.

Dawn patrol

We pull our boots on and walk from the parks bungalow, home to the researchers, scanning the ground for clues. Paul de Montille, Zimbabwean born, a veteran of thirty years in Hwange National Park, picks up clues from the sand as easily as the rest of us would read the comments on the back of our box of breakfast cereal.

"Lion have been here", he announces, pointing out the classic pugmarks of the big cats. "Three - two big ones and one small - and here are hyena tracks". He points out the difference between leopard, lion and hyena. We move on, Paul poses a puzzle for us.

"Now what are these tracks ?", he asks.

We study the sand. Monkeys, baboons, some kind of bird ?

Finally someone pipes up with "ground hornbill", guessing they are tracks from the huge, mainly ground dwelling birds.

"Correct".

Later Paul points out elephant tracks, giraffe, buffalo, and even the odd, tank like track of a tortoise. At the brand new looking track of a kudu antelope he picks up a piece of sand from the edge of the imprint and crumbles it in his fingers.

"Several hours ago", he announces, then describes to us how the upturned sand can remain moist for only a short time before the sun dries it again. It is a lesson

from a master guide in animal detective work – seemingly simple signs painted on the timeless sands of the Kalahari.

Over a basic breakfast and tea or coffee, we plan the day. Paul, Stephanie, our other Zimbabwean guide, Innocent Maketo, the French research volunteers from Planet Urgence, and myself.

We head out on patrol. It is hot, almost uncomfortable, approaching midday - the safer time of the day when animals sensibly rest, sluggish, in shady places. Our guide is still armed, with a heavy calibre rifle, just in case. Generally speaking, the African bush is a safe place in this troubled world, but even so, when dealing with wild dangerous animals, there are plenty of spectacular ways to die if things go wrong. When we get out of the Toyota, the gun always comes with us. We scan the bush for lions, elephants, buffaloes or other potential trouble-makers and trek in to the camera traps. We swap the memory card, trek out and return to base over bumpy dusty roads, watching for thornbush branches brushing the side of the open vehicle, ready to have a piece of us if we don't pay attention. At base, over cool drinks, we scan the computer, opening the images with the anticipation of small children opening Christmas presents. Candid images of animals in their natural state unfold before us. Sable antelope, impala, kudu, elephant after elephant after elephant. Now and then predators show up in night shots; hyena, leopard and lion, eyes blazing in the camera flash, sending a chill up your spine, even back in the safety of the base.

We get to see the African parade in real life too, though. We stake out Nyamandhlovu waterhole. We are well prepared with spotlights, binoculars, cameras, check lists, food, tents and sleeping bags, Innocent is armed, ready to protect us if needs be. Rostered onto two hour watches throughout the night, from the heat and diamond light of noon we count every beast coming to drink for a full 24 hours. Anxious zebras, fearful of attack, cautiously edge in. A crocodile lunges unsuccessfully for an African fish eagle. Slender giraffe stride elegantly across the sand. In the late afternoon, the sting of the heat fades and in the gentler light elephant families emerge from the bush until hundreds crowd the water. Giant bull elephants emerge, solo. With sun down, the first stars appear. Jupiter stands out, blazing red. The eyes of lions shine in the spotlight. A hyena lurks in the shadows. The moon rises. The soft slurp of elephants drinking is the only sound.

Soon after dawn, the first vehicles appear from Main Camp, arriving to an empty landscape.

“What have you seen here ?” tourists ask.

“Oh, nothing much” we tell them, satisfied with our unique and unforgettable experience. Then we fill them in on the night shift.

A South African fellow, travelling with his wife, strikes up a conversation. They had been 4 wheel driving all over Africa. He mentioned the Chinese road construction in Tanzania and how some of the Chinese men were taking up with local African women, creating as the South African put it, “a new race”. Struck

with the thought of delectable legions of Naomi Campbell super model lookalikes I said.

“Wow, they must be a pretty good looking race.”

My pot bellied new colleague looked directly at me, his red eyes peering past a vein streaked bulbous nose, as though I was insane.

“Naah” he said sourly, “They’re disgusting.”

He sucked on his beer.

It seems most of his countrymen are no longer so uptight about race. During my one night layover in Johannesburg, watching South African TV, I was astounded to see a commercial for a bank depicting a happy interracial couple cheerfully announcing their engagement to family. It ended with the tagline “Helping you achieve your dreams.” I was flabbergasted. Thirty years ago interracial marriage was illegal, twenty years ago still almost inconceivable, ten years ago notable, now it was staple advertising that most South Africans were quite happy with. Truly the new South African rainbow nation Presidents De Klerk and Mandela strove for was emerging.

It is hoped that Africa’s wildlife will remain part of that future. Whilst in reserves like Kruger National Park (South Africa) with 8000 elephants, Hwange with 40,000 and Chobe National Park (Botswana) with a massive 120,000 elephants their future seems secure, the pressure is always on from some quarters to cull “excess” elephants that are “destroying the environment.” In truth, at the end of the dry season, areas surrounding Hwange’s waterholes look like they have been carpet bombed. The vast concentrations of elephants crowding those waterholes provide a spectacular sight. Yet when the rains break, the elephants disappear, swallowed by the forest, gone like phantoms.

The trap

We plan our trap; Paul selects a site in dense bush and we get stuck in. In a whole afternoons work, we dig a shallow ditch, place the converted crocodile trap in, then shovel the dirt back inside, concealing the base of the trap with leaf litter and grass. Outside, we camouflage the cage with thorn tree branches, clumps of grass and sticks until it blends into the bush. Meat is placed in the cage, attached to the trigger for the cage door and Paul connects an ingenious finishing touch, a light that is switched on when the trap is sprung and the cage door drops closed. A log is placed in the entrance to protect the animal’s tail when the door drops and we cover the trap with mud and fresh elephant dung collected at the local waterhole to conceal any smell of humans. In the process I sink into the mud and gain a new pair of mud “socks” up to my knees.

The wait commences. We retreat to base, conveniently located just across the airstrip from the trap, settle in for dinner and the night watch commences. Paul tells us of the discomfort of early efforts, waiting up all night in the 4 wheel drive near to the trap, unable to sleep, rechecks by vehicle in the dark after “hearing a noise” - false alarms that needlessly disturbed the cage environs, not to mention the hassle and disturbed sleep. The trap door light seems a much better idea. The sun sets, a blazing orb silhouetting the tangled bush.

Just hours later there is a yell from the volunteers.

“The light is on !”

Engines splutter into life and the team moves in, tense with anticipation, Paul and Stephanie drive in first, then the radio crackles. We have caught a lion. Our jubilation is tempered by a dilemma. It not the species we want to collar, and must be released in such a way that no-one gets hurt, including the cat. As if that weren't enough trouble, there is a pride of lions camped around their captive mate, in thick bush, in the dark. Potentially far too much excitement for our own good.

Paul and Stephanie cautiously approach. A full bellied roar shatters the night. From their vehicle, Paul pulls the rope lifting the trap, releasing the chastened carnivore. The researchers are elated, though our objective is incomplete. We still need a leopard.

Over a drink to calm the nerves, we review the release. A good result. Lion unharmed. No-one hurt.

Paul brings out his computer and shows me painful footage of the last white rhino of Hwange National Park, a sad tale of the final chapter in the gradual loss of the iconic species. Found collapsed riddled with bullet holes, despite hearty efforts it succumbed to its devastating injuries. Suddenly the frustration and disappointment boil over. Paul becomes emotional and sheds a tear. The rhinos had no reason to die. They could have been saved – if enough people cared. If the will was there. A tragedy in our lifetime.

Later we discuss the ghastly toll. Africa is being swept by new winds of change, this time not the winds of decolonisation post World War 2, but a gale straight from Beijing. In the context of the gigantic roll out of Chinese investment in coal mines, power stations, and hydro electrical schemes, it is of grave concern that wildlife are being targeted to provide souvenir trinkets. The situation has not been helped by the inane pronouncements of a Vietnamese minister that rhino horn cures cancer.

This ghastly upsurge is jeopardising the few remaining environmental jewels of Africa. Africa is no longer vast and untouched. Most of it is cleared, farmed, and heavily settled. A simple look at satellite views on Google Maps shows the human tide encroaching on the great parks like Hwange, and the virtual desertification of the surrounds. The vultures are circling.

At night, a storm sweeps across Hwange. Thunder and lightning cleave the silence and darkness. The house we are staying in shakes. Windows rattle. Rain drenches the Kalahari sands. The dust is settled. Tracks are erased. The slate is wiped clean.

We are running low on meat. What is left by the lion is just a scrap of flesh and bone, unlikely to be attractive enough to lure anything into the trap. Feeling lucky, we set the trap anyway.

During the night, against the odds, it happens. The light goes on again. We move in.

“Look, I’m afraid it is nothing much, it seems the wind has blown the cage shut.” radios Paul. He pauses.

“Just kidding. We got a leopard !”

Uproar. Paul and Steph confirm that a juvenile is trapped. There is concern that another leopard may be nearby and there is debate on release by night or day. We take photos for identification and the decision is announced. Paul and Steph will remain on all night stake out to protect the leopard should an elephant herd or pride of lions arrive and start harassment. The release is scheduled for morning.

At dawn, the door is lifted, a snarling cageful of spite explodes out and is gone.

Two weeks are up and we are on the road to Victoria Falls. As we approach Vic Falls airport, Paul points out the “Chinese city” of workers performing the airport upgrade. Shortly after dropping off one of the French volunteers for his flight home, we pass the construction site of the huge new Chinese conference centre on the road to town. Mao’s Long March has reached deep into the heart of Africa.

The basic but central Victoria Falls Rest Camp features cute but mischievous vervet monkeys patrolling the campground. Some cheekily invade my lodge as I write, even in the absence of food. Perhaps they are eyeing off my computer for sale on the black market to local touts. We have a farewell dinner at the Boma Restaurant with melodic African singing and lively dancing. I opt to see the African fortune teller for a glimpse into the future and enter his tiny room. After a theatrical display involving throwing bones and seeds, and hearing encouraging news about safe travels, good fortune and a wonderful love life, I press him on the important stuff – yes but how are my football team, the Swans, going to do next year ? He throws the bones, and asks me to pick out an item. I choose some kind of seed pod. He studies it seriously and pronounces that my team will bring joy and happiness. I ask him if he will cast a spell to help make that come true. He promises he will do his best. Premiership here we come.

On the agenda for the last day is the famous white water rafting on the Zambezi River, the largest commercially rafted rapids in the world. Jan, the French volunteer, seems cool with that. I am petrified. Another great opportunity - to be scared out of your wits. Adrenaline overdose here we come. Then it will be back to work with the cats and dogs of suburban Sydney, but I don’t think I’ll look at a pussy cat in the same way ever again.

James Thompson is the owner and practice principal at Turramurra Veterinary Hospital, Sydney, Australia. Special thanks to Paul de Montille, Stephanie Larrieu and Innocent Maketo of the Hwange Leopard Project and the Zimbabwean National Parks Service.