

In this world, there are people who are the models for dedication and commitment. SANParks acknowledges that in order for this organisation to have reached the heights it has, there had to be pillars of strength and dedication that kept the fires burning and tonight, SANParks honours one of these special pillars whose life is intertwined with the Kruger National Park. It is an honour for us to announce the winner of

The Lifetime Contribution Award 2009:

BABA CHARLIE NKUNA

Charlie Nkuna was born in 1930 and grew up at Phabeni in the Kruger National Park. His house was north of Pretoriuskop close to the present day Phabeni Gate. The Nkuna family left deep tracks through the history in the Kruger National Park. Charlie's father, Merriman Nkuna, his uncle, Helfas Nkuna, and 3 brothers all worked as rangers and research assistants in the Kruger National Park.

Charlie started working in the Kruger National Park in 1948 at Tshokwane Camp where he was employed as a horse guard and labourer in the road building team. He was then transferred to Pretoriuskop where he worked under Ranger Henry Wolhuter (son of the famous Harry Wolhuter), and where his father Merriman and uncle Helfas also worked. Charlie's leadership qualities and high work ethic was noticed and was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, the highest rank a black ranger could hold at the time.

In 1954 Charlie assisted the well-known botanist, Prof Manie van der Schijff, to establish the fire research plots at Pretoriuskop, Skukuza, Satara and north of Letaba. These fire experimental plots are still being used for research purposes and are one of the longest running fire experiments in the world till date.

In the 1960's Charlie participated in the relocation of the first white rhino from the Umfolozi Game Reserve in the then Natal Province to the Kruger National Park. He made numerous lengthy trips with trucks transporting these valuable charges to their new home in the Kruger National Park and looked after them when they were released into the Faai Rhino camp and later into the rest of the park. The white rhino relocation program continued for 12 years and was a resounding success. The Kruger National Park now boasts the largest white rhino population in the world with over 9,000 of these magnificent animal species.

Together with ranger Thys Mostert, Charlie played an invaluable role in finding many of the archaeological sites in the southern Kruger National Park. He found the site where the Swazi chief, Matsafeni (the great grandfather of the current SANParks Chief Executive, Dr David Mabunda) was murdered just south of Ship Mountain, the site of Inhliziyo's kraal where Chief Matsafeni's murder was plotted, the site where Sir Percy Fitzpatrick's famous dog, Jock of the Bushveld, was born as well as marking out the whole historical Delagoa Bay transport route from Pretoriuskop in the west to 'Fihlamanzi' outspan in the east.

Charlie later also served at the Letaba and Satara ranger sections and at retirement in 1989, assisted visiting researchers at the Scientific Services section as a research assistant for 3 years. Many a young researcher benefited from the intimate knowledge and understanding Charlie had of the plants and animals in the bush.

Together with his fellow ranger colleagues, Charlie was responsible for the apprehension of many poachers in his 41 years of uninterrupted service to SANParks and survived many close encounters with these armed and dangerous bandits. He also experienced the heartache and loss that sometimes follows one who spends his whole life in the bush. Both his daughter Sinana, and the daughter of his brother, Willie, were killed by a lioness at Phabeni within days of each other. In spite of all these trials and tribulations, Charlie remained steadfast in his loyalty to the Kruger Park.

It is with the blood, sweat and tears and backbreaking work of loyal and dedicated individuals like Sergeant Charlie Nkuna that the Kruger National Park was build to the world-famous conservation icon it is today. Today we salute and honour him for this.

- ***'Nkuna Mabutane. Mabuta hiritiho. Wena nkenkelezweni nyanga leyi kulu'...***