

# The Role and Function of Wilderness Trails in the Kruger National Park

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**"In the end we conserve only what we love. We will only love what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."** Anonymous

## INTRODUCTION

This article is intended to highlight the importance of wilderness in the KNP and to record the role and functions of wilderness trails as well as that of the Wilderness Ranger.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF WILDERNESS TRAILS IN THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

In the late seventies Rangers Dearlove and English approached the then National Parks Board in the hope of establishing Wilderness Trails in the KNP. There was a fair amount of apprehension, as the board did not believe that people would want to leave their vehicles and walk in the dangerous African bush. The first Wilderness Trail in the KNP was the Wolhuter Trail established in the Stolznek section. The success of this trail led to the establishment of six other trails over a period of time namely: the Olifants, Nyalaland, Bushmen, Metsi-metsi, Sweni and Napi trails. The trails are situated throughout the Park in the most pristine and primitive wilderness areas.

Over the last twenty years thousands of people have been on trails and during this time no person has sustained any fatal injuries caused by animals on any of the walks. This alone indicates the high levels of proficiency and professionalism on the part of all the Wilderness Rangers.

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF WILDERNESS

**"Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed."** - Wallace Stegman.

### What is Wilderness?

Wilderness offers people solitude, inspiration, and a natural, quiet place to get away. At the same time wilderness protects biodiversity - the web of life.

Wilderness is a place where the imprint of humans is substantially unnoticed. It is where the natural processes are the primary influences and human activities are limited to primitive recreation and with minimum tools. This allows us to experience wild places without intention to disturb or destroy. Change will occur primarily through natural disturbances and minimum human influence.

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## Defining Wilderness

Dictionaries define wilderness as uncultivated or other wise undeveloped land. The usual dictionary meaning of wilderness implies that it is hostile to man but the term has positive connotations as well. On the one hand you have wilderness, which is "hospitable, alien, mysterious, and threatening" and on the other " beautiful, friendly, and capable of elevating and delighting us".

Today people define wilderness as a sanctuary in which those in need of consolation can find respite from the pressure of civilisation. Another definition can be taken from the United States of America Wilderness act of 1964. The act defines wilderness as:

"In contrast with those areas where man and his own work dominate the landscape, as an area where the earth and its communities of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain". The act went on to require that a wilderness retains "its primeval character and influence", and that it be protected and managed in such away that it "appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature".

James Stevenson-Hamilton, the first Park Warden of the KNP, wrote "A wildlife sanctuary ought to be a place wherein everything should remain so far as possible just as it has been from time immemorial".

## Wilderness Values

Although wilderness means something different to everyone, the main aspects of wilderness are: the value of the wilderness experience; the value of wilderness as a scientific resource and environmental baseline; the value of wilderness as heritage sites and the spiritual and symbolic value of wilderness to the nation and the world.

Many people have written and spoken about the wilderness experience. The experiential values that emerge are freedom, solitude and the beauty of nature. Some people regard these qualities as satisfying all human needs and to some the wilderness experience is spiritual.

Wilderness experiences change people and have a restorative power. This in itself is a very important value in today's cramped world and it will even become more valuable in future. Wilderness is an aspect of nature that grows on you and the more you experience it the more you become addicted – it is as intoxicating as a drug. A big challenge is to make wilderness users also addicts – to make them feel that they cannot do without solitude and tranquillity every now and again in their lives.

Dr. Player wrote "What we have in these places is the most precious of worldly gifts, a sense of the spiritual connection and the land". He then went on to say: "if we protect the nature of wilderness it could be our greatest gift to the modern world".

Most people entering the wilderness express the desire for tranquillity, natural beauty and the escape from the hectic urban pace that the wilderness experience offers. Research has shown that the values that trailists require such as solitude, tranquillity, etc. are only found in natural settings - the more remote the better. Several studies support the

importance of the wilderness experience on human well-being, with solitude being one of the most important characteristics. In the context of the wilderness experience, solitude refers to the withdrawal from complex social environments. Wilderness does not impose humanly demands; wilderness offers respite from the overly complex and chaotic everyday life. Nature is relatively non-threatening and non-judgmental in a world that is constantly judgmental.

Laurens van der Post once said that the wilderness experience encourages one's sense of selfhood: "those of us who spent time in the wilderness are aware of the fact that there is something more to wilderness than we ourselves can express". This is rooted perhaps in the effects that wilderness has on people who have become estranged from nature, who live in the industrial environments and who are estranged from their natural selves. Wilderness has a profound impact on them and those of us who are familiar with it.

John Aspinall in the forward to Dr. Player's book *Zululand Wilderness* wrote: "We alien Europeans are enthralled by the strangeness and wonder at the beauty and variety of the wild nature. To the old Zulu the wilderness was part of his life - part of his diet - part of his soul. The wild was his womb as well as his grave; its untamed denizens were his second kindred, his familiars. He imbued them with his own capacity of language and conversed with them. No greater compliment could a Zulu pay his chiefs and kings than to compare them to the lion, elephant, rhino and buffalo".

The old Africa influenced great men and women. Theodore Roosevelt who some believe to be the father of modern conservation wrote of his hunting journeys to Africa: "I speak of Africa and the golden joy; the joys of wandering through lonely lands; the joy of hunting the mighty and terrible lords of the wilderness. ... these things can be told. But there are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness - that can reveal its mysteries, its melancholy and its charm. Where the wanderer sees the awful glory of the sunrise and sunset in the wide space of the earth, unworn by man, and changed only by the slow change of the ages through time everlasting".

In an interview with the BBC, Carl Jung said: "We do not come into the world *tabula rasa*. Three million years of evolution in Africa is imprinted upon the human psyche and perhaps this leads to a deep yearning for us to feel the red African earth and to hear the call of the fish eagle, the roar of the lion and the scream of the elephant".

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## **ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE WILDERNESS RANGER**

Everything said, a wilderness experience is all in the mind. It is when your subconscious mind, spiritual contentment and sense of achievement flow together with what you physically or consciously experience in an untouched natural environment.

Wilderness Rangers are the custodians and guardians of the wilderness. They facilitate the interaction that allows trailists to enjoy the wilderness experience. Wilderness rangers have to be educators, public relation officers, marketers, managers, scientists, culturists, historians and therapists.

The Wilderness Ranger plays a very important role when it comes to putting trailists in the right frame of mind. Not only is he responsible for the trailist's safety and well-being, but he also has to lead the group in the right direction by steering away from the "big five" as

the main objective and slowly introducing wilderness aspects. Very few people in our modern, fast society take the time off to experience true wilderness. It is not something that you can force upon yourself or others.

The Wilderness Ranger must allow personal growth to develop when taking people into wilderness. It can be defined as a range of effects towards fulfilment of one's capabilities and potential. Naturally we all consciously or unconsciously seek growth for motivation and inspiration in our personal lives. To make trailists mentally aware and to expose them spiritually to a natural environment the Wilderness Ranger must know what he is talking about. He must not only be knowledgeable in all aspects but he must also have a deep feeling and love for what he does. He must convince people to see the bigger picture. He must be able to change perceptions and alter views to allow people to become wilderness conscious.

Therefore a good Wilderness Ranger not only walks with a group of people through the bush and identifies and interprets but he must understand the needs of the group. He must allow the group to be receptive to the wilderness experience by giving them the opportunity to tune in to nature and themselves and to become spiritually involved.

Wilderness Rangers have to be better naturalists, philosophers and bushmen than normal field guides. They have to be physically and mentally tough but sensitive to the natural environment. They must have a strong feeling for the pace and soul of wilderness as well as understanding the important concepts of wilderness such as solitude, tranquillity and peace in a natural environment. Although wilderness in itself is a wonderful teacher and classroom, the Wilderness Ranger has to "open the doors" and "pave the way" for trailists to become wilderness orientated.

A successful wilderness experience is when the group or individuals in the group tell you that although they know what the words "remoteness, solitude, tranquillity, peace of mind, spiritual rejuvenation, etc." mean, they now also understand it. This is the main role and function of a Wilderness Trail Ranger