

# “WILDERNESS PYRAMID”

By Jaco Badenhorst

A wilderness experience is all in the mind. In my opinion it is when your subconscious mind and spiritual contentment flow together with what you consciously experience in an untouched natural environment. Talk to or discuss it with people and you will find that although they more or less know what a wilderness area is, very few people really understand the concept of having a true wilderness experience. I know that this is all debatable. What is a true wilderness experience? There is no benchmark for a wilderness experience – we are all different and we see things differently (thank goodness) – there is a benchmark only for you as an individual when you measure one experience against another.

To some people a wilderness experience would mean driving around on the tarred roads of KNP in a luxurious 4x4 with the air conditioning on, dressed in designer khaki's with a leopard skin hat while sipping a pink gin. To others it would be to get dumped, naked and with absolutely nothing in the remotest part of KNP (where is that?) for 2 weeks. A wilderness trail in the KNP, as we know it, finds a good medium. It is not too luxurious but also not too primitive – the perfect formula for the average city dweller to enjoy it for a couple of days.

I can never talk to people about wilderness in the relative comfort of a trail camp. I also don't mention the word wilderness on the first day. The simple reason is that it normally takes a group a day to relax and to get tuned in, even if it is the case of preaching to the converted. How can a person understand what you're saying when every now and then he gets up to put more ice in his drink? In camp I prepare the group by telling them that KNP can not compete with the private reserves in terms of service and game viewing. We have got something that no one else has got and that is atmosphere, vastness, open spaces, remoteness. We have a wilderness ambience that you can find nowhere else in the world.

When I feel that a group is ripe and susceptible, I wait for the right moment to bring up the wilderness topic. It is always easier for people to understand what you're saying when wilderness conditions are near perfect. Walking next to the Nzikasi with a train rattling past makes it more difficult although you can change your approach and turn a negative experience around by pointing out the need not only to preserve wilderness internally but also to minimize negative influences from outside.

In layman's terms I give them a short definition of wilderness, the history of wilderness recreation in the KNP (ROZ plan), why wilderness areas, what it means and the value of having wilderness (heritage sites, cultural sites, non manipulative research sites, benchmark/reference sites, intrinsic and aesthetic values, economic value etc.etc.). I then go into a lot of detail about the spiritual value of wilderness recreation. It is something that is very important to me.

It is difficult for us to make another person/s understand what we feel when we talk about wilderness. I try to explain it to people with the help of an analogy. It's like climbing a pyramid. You start at the bottom, climb to the top and climb down the other side in a series of steps or levels. A balancing act – one of the most important laws of nature/life. Everything must be in balance for it to operate successfully.

Allow me to use Wolhuter Wilderness Trail (KNP) as an example (it would be hard to beat anyway). People coming on the wilderness trail starts at the bottom of the pyramid when they leave Johannesburg/Pretoria/London/New York/Wherever. They leave the concrete jungle with its millions of people, traffic, noise, crime, pollution, deadlines and other stress related activities and take a leap up the pyramid. Driving away from a city on a 2/3-lane highway with other traffic always in a hurry to get there and back is a step in the right direction.

As you leave the city the concrete makes way for a more rural environment in the form of mealie fields, cattle, sugarcane etc. and although you are still on a highway it is a step up the pyramid.

A big step is when you enter the KNP at Malelane gate and let the other traffic flash past at 120km/h. Only people that wants to visit the KNP enters through that gate. Immediately you are in a natural environment, the pace slows down to 50km/h (forced to), you take of your safety belt, say thank goodness we've made it, open a beer, open a window and start looking for game.

A 20-car traffic jam surprises you around the first corner. A leopard dragged a rhino up a Jacaranda but you don't mind because this is what you think you came for.

The next step is when you get to Berg-en-dal and you leave your vehicle behind and get into another with an irate ranger (because you're late – traffic jam). Up to that point in time you were in control of the situation; you decided when to stop to look at the impala or when to pass the old combi full of birders. You are very reluctant to give up your control so you ask the ranger if there is enough ice and to show you lion, elephant and buffalo as you have already seen leopard and rhino on the way.

You leave Berg-en-dal and set of on a gravel road where other visitors can also go. A very big step up is when you go through the no entry sign at Matjulu windmill and drive on the tweespoorpaadjie into the wilderness area. You realize that you are a bit nervous because you don't know the ranger, you don't know where the ranger is going to take you, you also don't know what to expect but somehow you feel adventurous and the unexpected and unknown enhances the feeling. The ranger says this area is  $\pm 50\ 000$  hectares and no other visitors are allowed in this area. He also says that you must switch of your cellphone, hope that you got all your gear because you will only be going back to Berg-en-dal in three nights time.

Then the next level is the rustic camp with no electricity but flush toilets, a fridge, a soft bed and a hot shower. The ranger then tells you not to talk, not to leave apple cores, not to take porcupine quills, not to lag behind and not to wear bright colored clothing on the walks. He also tells you to do whatever he asks you to do out of a safety point of view. He then waffles something about not to expect to kick a lions butt under every bush. If you only want to see game, he says, the best is to drive around in the Park or even better - go to a Zoo. Walking in the KNP is a unique experience. You can see the big five everywhere nowadays, but you cannot climb to the top of Mangake everyday. None of it makes sense but you don't want to argue.

Sooner or later you get to the most important step up this so-called pyramid. You either walk away from the comfort of the camp or the safety of the vehicle. You leave behind that last bit of modern technology. All of a sudden you realize that you are very vulnerable and exposed and that you feel small and insignificant. The same thorns scratch everyone, the

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same sun makes all sweat, the same thunder storm soaks and scares everybody and when that rhino charges you are all in the same boat/tree.

There is no better place to cut puffed-up people down to size than roughing it a bit in natural circumstances. Being on foot tunes you in, it connects you with the earth, it brings you back to your roots and it makes you feel the pulse. It may sound corny and stupid but it is true. The ranger mentioned that in camp the first night but you only understand it now. Driving around you only use your sight but when you are on foot all your senses come alive. You smell the fresh elephant droppings in the cool early morning breeze; you hear the liquid call of blackheaded orioles in the tops of marula trees; you feel the heavy, dew wet grass soaking your boots and socks and the ranger gives you a floury, sweetish kooboberry to eat and it leaves a dry after taste in your mouth.

You reach the top of the pyramid without realizing it. You were not looking for it but you know when you reach the highlight of the trip. A highlight is some moment or moments that will stand out above the rest. It can be a tranquil moment at a bubbling stream or the solitude at a beautiful sunrise/sunset. It can be the powerful roar of a male lion or the effortless and free gliding of an eagle in a thermal. It can be a rare sighting of an elusive animal or a close encounter with a dangerous animal. It can be walking through untouched wild land and knowing that there are no other people around for miles. Whatever, it is a state of mind that allows the rejuvenation of the soul. It charges flat spiritual batteries and puts you on a high. It helps you to keep your sanity.

The sad news is that you cannot stay at the top of the pyramid forever. We would like to but life doesn't work like that. Very soon you start to slide down the pyramid. After a highlight you walk back to the vehicle, drive back to camp, go back to Berg-en-dal, climb in your vehicle and take the same route back to the bottom of the pyramid.

But hopefully something has changed. You now know why the ranger said no talking, no apple cores, no quills, no bright clothes and to do what he tells you. You are quiet on the way back as you realize it is over and every step down takes you back to the rat race at the bottom of the pyramid. You curse the first vehicle you see; you hate to take control again after a carefree couple of days; the 5 tourists in Berg-en-dal restcamp shop crowd you and on the way out the 2-cars at what's left of the rhino in the Jacaranda are now a nuisance and in your way. You stop and lean out to tell them that the tree is an exotic and that we must save the wilderness so that the rhinos can take care of themselves.

Halfway between Middelburg and Witbank you cannot handle the traffic and you want to turn around and go back to the peace and tranquility. If you stay at the bottom of the pyramid you will commit suicide or go into a serious depression. You know you have to go back to build up your stress level with competition and deadlines but in the process to earn enough money to be able to afford climbing the pyramid and get to the top once again. You remember the ranger telling you that the bottom of his pyramid is Malelane gate. It doesn't make you feel any better but you realize that all of us have got a bottom and a top.

There must be a balance...

That is what keeps us going...