

Hunt for wisdom in iSimangaliso

Saving species from extinction and protecting the natural environment is a priority for the young people who helped put this edition together. They are determined to reverse the damage done by generations before them

ROVING REPORTERS

A GROUP of young people from the journalism training initiative Roving Reporters visited iSimangaliso World Heritage Site recently where they slept under the stars and went walking with a convicted turtle poacher turned artist, Makotikoti Zikhali, on hippo trails that pre-date human settlement.

It was a Wilderness Leadership School (WLS) trail with a difference. Mentoring was at its heart, with students compiling a "Fireside Diary" for development into 1 500 word *Zingela Uluazi* (hunt for wisdom) narratives.

The presence of Zikhali in the camp in the Tewate wilderness area made the experience particularly significant for the young people who are all deeply concerned about the environment and the impact poaching is having on so many of the world's species.

Sentenced to five years in jail in 2011 for killing an endangered loggerhead turtle near Kosi Bay in iSimangaliso, Zikhali has turned his life around under the mentorship of internationally acclaimed sculptor, Andries Botha. His turtle sculptures are sold in aid of promoting marine conservation and environmental education.

Seated under an Mdoni tree, not far from the large skull of a hippo, students talked about how all things natural are connected by a delicate thread.

"If it's broken, it affects everything, the whole process of life on Earth," said Lelo Dlamuka, a University of KwaZulu-Natal media studies student.

"We need to conserve this place for generations to come to experience it as we do", added Melusi Mntungwa.

"Nature is a healer of the soul," said Sabelo Dladla, an eco-tourism student from the Durban University of Technology.

Dladla did a head count of hippos that had gathered in pools where coastal forest meets St Lucia's estuarine system.

"There are more than 115 hippos out there," said an animated Dladla, a stone's throw away from the hippo pods.

On the first night, the students battled to adjust, spooked by almost every sound.

"I'm super scared. I hardly slept through the first four hours," wrote journalism intern Nompilo Kunene in her



Out in the Tewate wilderness area, Makotikoti Zikhali, left, shows the Roving Reporters team how to distinguish between fresh rhino and hippo dung. From left to right: Nompilo Kunene (Mojo reporter), Lelo Dlamuka, Sabelo Dladla and Melusi Mntungwa.

Fireside Diary. "There was something (small) creeping around my sleeping bag area, making a crackling sound very close to my head, perhaps a snake or a scorpion. I don't know what sound scorpions make!"

As part of the wilderness experience – and for safety purposes – each person on a WLS trail has to do a night watch, keeping a fire going and patrolling with a torch to ward off animals.

"I'm just praying that every time I shine my light into the darkness I don't see a pair of luminescent eyes staring back at me," wrote Dlamuka. "I don't see too well in the dark, so I'm not even sure if what I see is a shrub, or a ferocious wild beast."

Students were also confronted with toiletry protocol: the bush provides for those needs – stones, sticks, grass or leaves serving as loo paper. The WLS golden rule is that you leave no trace of having been in a wilderness area.

For Mntungwa, this was something "filled with raw emotion and new experience, stripped of my cellphone, a fully-charged Mp3 player and my dearly beloved Christian Dior cologne that I was also unhappily forced to leave behind."

By the second night, the team began to feel nature's rhythm.

"The kettle is singing its song as the smoke billows toward me, engulfing every fibre of my dirt-stained clothes," wrote Dlamuka.

"I love how we help each other in preparing the meals, the cutting and slicing of cheese and onions, how we shared a cup of hot coffee around the fire," wrote Kunene.

"I can't wait to tell my family and friends that for three nights I slept outside, and now know the Southern Cross and the Scorpion constellation."

● This story was sponsored by the Human Elephant Foundation



Sabelo Dladla counted more than 115 hippos at this pool, nicknamed Tewate's Jurassic Park.

Young people are concerned about the plight of endangered animals, among them the iconic rhino, with 1 175 killed in the course of 2016, and a further 363 killed by the end of April.

They are also worried about habitat loss and outdated farming practices that have put our national bird, the blue crane, and other cranes, on the endangered list.

The bearded vulture and African wild dog are also facing a battle for survival, one that young South Africans want to fight.

Their stories focus on two of KwaZulu-Natal's favourite sanctuaries – also see page 19.



Snenhlanhla Ndudula

I am Snenhlanhla Ndudula. I am 19 years old and majoring in journalism at Durban University of Technology. I do work for RadioDur as well.

Determination, dedication, discipline and honesty are some of my core values. I'm a woman of integrity who promotes transparency and free communication.

Being at the SABC studios in Durban on occasion, and attending leadership seminars, has taught me how to gather the truth and take it to the masses. Importantly, I'm a team player.

My passion for environmental affairs sees me committed to conserving our planet. It was not by chance that I found myself in journalism – I am a born storyteller.

Preserving the planet is priority

SNENHLANHLA NDUDULA

OUR planet is one of the most precious pearls in the universe with the gift and ability to give life and sustain it.

But it is dying due to environmental degradation. Our environment's health is deteriorating at a drastic rate.

Mankind continues to exhaust and exploit the natural resources we are dependent on to provide for the growing population.

Our lack of interest in preserving what is essential to life, the unethical actions of by our citizens and improper treatment of natural resources cause many problems.

The need to understand the importance and effectiveness of cleaning up our waste is essential. We are responsible for the environment of all liv-

ing creatures. Young people should deem projects which preserve our planet a top priority. We should learn the indispensable importance of a clean environment that consists of clean water, air, and land.

The cleaning up of unwanted waste and preservation of our forests should be stressed as forests mitigate climate change, and clean the air that we breathe.

A report on Sustainable Development, published by the UN, in 2015 said, "Forests are the most biologically-diverse ecosystems on land, home to more than 80 percent of the terrestrial species of animals, plants and insects. They also provide shelter, jobs and security for forest-dependent communities."

It is our duty to change the way we treat Planet Earth.

Growing up in a village exposed to excessive coal dust has driven Sabelo Dladla into eco-tourism and environmental journalism.

I will fight for our environment

I AM a young man from Nkolo-kotho, near Mtubatuba. This is a village that has suffered excessive noise, air and water pollution from coal mining operations in the area, an issue my father, Gednezar Dladla, was gravely concerned about.

He stood up and challenged the mining bosses for not complying with environmental laws and human rights. He died seeking truth and justice in October last year.

Although he was not an environmental expert, he saw the need to protect our natural heritage.

It was my father who encouraged me to pursue environmental studies, and enrol for a diploma in eco-tourism management at the Durban University of Technology.



Sabelo Dladla is grateful to The Sunday Tribune for providing him with the platform to speak about issues that concern him.



SAVE OUR LEGACY

At our school we raised money for a rhino called Mafuto. Everybody loved her and worried about her safety because we had been taught about the poaching crisis. Then, after the December holidays, we heard Mafuto was dead. She had been poached for her horn. That day I was really upset and angry and I decided that I want to do something about it by learning more about conservation. I don't want the environment, and majestic creatures like rhino, elephant, tigers and eagles, to be destroyed because humans are greedy.

David Campbell, Durban age 12.