



MY WILDERNESS WAKE-UP CALL



How a city girl was won over on a bush trail.
By Nana Zuke

EXPERIENCING the Wilderness Trail near the Black iMfolozi River is like being on a different planet. There are no luxuries, just nature and the bare necessities. The worry of something lurking silently behind the bushes is a feeling I got used to over the five days that followed.

Leaving behind hot showers and having to use wet wipes as a means of keeping clean was all new to this city girl. As was doing without body cream and simply embracing dry, chapped skin.

The Wilderness Leadership School, founded by the late Dr Ian Player, has been at the forefront of conservation of our wild areas.

One moment I was at a meeting with my supervisor at the school, the next I was being offered the chance to go on a trail. I was on my way to sleeping under the stars on bare ground.

The green valley decorated by tall trees, walking on the dry river bed, or simply strolling past different species of wildlife. I was in the home of the Big Five, and the main white rhino territory.

We'd hardly walked an hour when nature called. When I caught up with the group, I was asked if I had noticed the hyenas sneaking up behind me. Hell no! If I had, they would not have seen me for dust!

I thought the trip would be all fun and games but it was suddenly very real – the insomnia on the first night because of the thoughts of snakes crawling into my sleeping bag, white rhinos just metres from us on the river bank picking up our scent while we kept dead still waiting for them to leave, being woken at the crack of dawn by a pack of wild dogs calling in the distance.

These are all encounters I would never have experienced. That is the beauty of the wilderness, nature at its best but now under serious threat.

On day three, while sitting around the fire, a few of the group mention hearing trucks and seeing lights in the distance. That is when I got to learn about the mining near the park.

Ibutho Coal has issued a proposal to dig an open-mine cast just 40m from one of the last true remaining wilderness areas in KwaZulu-Natal.

I found myself in a predicament because all that surrounds me is beautiful and worth protecting at whatever cost. However, I pondered on the need for electricity to charge my phone and computer for them to function. Not at the cost of nature, though, I thought.

I'm not oblivious to the fact that electricity is fundamental to the functioning of our everyday lives. I cannot deny that nature is being used for commercial gain and destroyed in the name of progress and civilisation.

The contradiction here is that I also came to realise that I need the fresh air, the green grasslands, clean water and the solitude to keep my sanity.

The truth is, I need nature to pull me back to reality and away



I'm still looking fresh but that all changed once the sun came out in all its glory. I'm joined by my fellow trailists Danny Griffin, left, Anthony Rogers, and John Rogers, who also wilted with me as the day wore on.

from my everyday life.

The school not only provides trail experiences to thousands of people, but also contributes to the fight against rhino poaching.

The presence of trail groups camping at the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve is one way of keeping the poachers at bay.

Leaving the park on the final day, my mind had been transformed. Aware of the existence of other life forms besides my own, I was more appreciative of nature, something I had never much thought about.

● *Nana Zuke is a final year Durban University of Technology student enrolled in the environmental journalism programme convened by Roving Reporters, in association with the Human Elephant Foundation, the Wilderness Leadership School, Wildlands and the GetSmarter UCT Feature Writing course*



Selfie in the wilderness. Modern technology provided me with a hi-tech gadget for this shot – some city habits never go away.

LAST year Ibutho Coal issued an application for an open cast mine on the border of the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park. The proposed Fuleni mine triggered an immediate response from conservation organisations.

Among those opposing the mining application is the Global Environmental Trust (GET) which recently sent a letter to national environmental affairs minister, Edna Molewa, warning that approval of Ibutho Coal's application would set a dangerous precedent for other companies to start mining next to, or even inside, any protected environment.

A draft environmental impact report, funded by Ibutho Coal, also concluded that the noise, dust and light pollution from 24-hour mining operations could "result in the possible declassification of the wilderness area and as such, be a significant setback for the reserve".

"A worst-case scenario would be the complete de-designation of the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park's wilderness status," stated the report compiled by the Scientific Aquatic Services consultancy.

Conservationists have also argued that the mine would make it easier for rhino poachers to get into the game reserve.

Resistance from local villagers has also been reported. Writing on the Save our Wilderness website, Sheila Berry said Ibutho Coal representatives had been chased out of the area by angry members of the Ocilwane village after they heard that they could be living just 500m from the open pit.

Ocilwane villagers are no strangers to being vacated. In the 1960s they were moved from their Empangeni homes to make way for an agricultural college.



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