

Outgoing CEO of the WildTrust, Andrew Venter, speaks to Laura du Toit about his early life, the changing landscape of conservation in South Africa since the early 1990s and roles he has played.

Roving Reporters: What is your earliest childhood memory?

Venter: Two sets of memories that jump at me. One was holidays. My folks used to make a point of going camping for at least a week a year, either in Kruger or down at the coast. Mtunzini is probably the most graphic of those, because it was just after it got flooded. We'd been and when we went back, it wasn't there anymore. So that's a memory... The other one is actually just playing outside. I grew up in Johannesburg, and we literally lived on the streets. We'd come home from school at an early age, and the pack would get together and we'd ride, play football and have fun.

Roving Reporters: So, I'm guessing that on a lot of your holidays, your family take you out to nature?

Venter: My dad grew up on a farm, and my mom had this outdoor passion that she instilled in us. I was a Scout, and that was very influential, particularly during my high school years; everyone else was doing sports, and I was scouting on the weekend. Without a doubt, that rooted an outdoors passion. It wasn't technical, just an appreciation for the amazing natural space we have out there.

Roving Reporters: Is that how you ended up in conservation now?

Venter: That journey was a little bit disjointed. In a nutshell, my mom influenced me strongly and convinced me I should be a vet. I wasn't sharp enough to get into vet school, but in those days, you could do the equivalent of a BSc. and then swap over. I went to WITS, doing a Botany and Zoology BSc because I wanted to do the step into vet school.. I landed up falling in love with science, so when I could have moved, I didn't. I stayed and finished my degree, and then stayed and did a Masters. Evolving progressively from quite serious natural sciences stuff; Wetland Ecology onto Grassland Ecology, then moving into Conservation Biology. In 1991, I left the country. I had run out of my options of avoiding conscription as I wasn't interested in fighting for the then government, so I left. I spent a year bumming my way around the UK. I missed South Africa, while a lot of people at that point just left and never came back. It was crazy, I used to go stand in front of South Africa House in Trafalgar Square and cry while looking at the flag that I hated. I'd walk down the road and there'd be TVs in the shops, and if there was a wildlife programme on, I'd stop, and I couldn't move. I missed South Africa, and I consciously took a call that I was coming back to make a difference. And then the second thing was that I always had a calling around the environment, But I actually wanted to more than that, I wanted to find a way of bridging the environment with the social stuff. and that all happened in that journey where you move out, you find your own space, you have to survive... I've done it all, including cleaning toilets. I remember I once had one week's rental, enough Brussel sprouts to keep me going for a week, and 20p. But you survive. Then I came back, and I did a master's degree in Conservation Biology. Following that, I got the opportunity to work around Kruger, in 1993

(a brutal time in South African history), and shape a PhD around how Kruger could drive local economic development in the poorer communities around the park. There were two of us in the country at that time who were exploring this field (the other being Hector Magome); there were a number of others in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Namibia, but it hadn't yet translated into South Africa mainly because of where we were politically.

Roving Reporters: That's quite a turbulent time then, to be doing conservation work in those communities.

Venter: Well, the community side was the fun part. I got married in September 1993 and arrived in Kruger. I walked into a management system which was white male Afrikaans dominated, very conservative. That in itself was under siege, because they'd basically been told that the next year, there'd be a change in government. Everybody knew that the ANC was coming into power, and in that world the ANC was in many ways the enemy. They didn't understand that, all they knew was that the ANC was the enemy who would take away their future and everything they loved. It was very threatening. I only got in because I had an Afrikaans surname, I think they assumed I was part of *die volk*. When I arrived, my Afrikaans was pretty much non-existent, and then I came with very liberal views. Within three months, myself, Andrea and our project assistant were labelled and known in the park amongst management as *die drie kommuniste*. That was within three months, because we were challenging all the norms. In the orientation process, I asked what was wrong with the passenger seats in the vehicles, because I noticed that they were generally empty but there were lots of people at the back of the vehicle. Essentially, black individuals weren't allowed to sit in the front. I think others had questioned that but they were probably fired. I couldn't be fired as I was self-funded. WWF-SA had backed me and bought into my vision for the idea of finding this balance, and I was blessed by the then CEO of Kruger National Park, Dr Simon Joubert, who gave me protection to ask the awkward questions. The conservation pieces continued all the way through that, and it has its ups and downs. At that stage, Kruger was just coming out of a massive onslaught of elephant poaching but they got on top of that. Their biggest threat there was with neighbours they didn't know. Kruger was nearly 100 years old, and they didn't know the rural communities they were next to; they didn't know the names of them, they didn't know the *iZinduna*, the *aMakhosi*. So I was the first white individual to go out in National Parks uniform, with black staff who came from those communities, to go and map these communities. There were 61 communities; they all wanted to know what I was doing there, whether I was coming to break down doors and arrest people. So, there were a lot of interesting transitions; it was a fascinating time but very, very tough. I was young, I was idealistic at 25, I thought that I was going to change the world. And I crawled out of Kruger after two years. I was emotionally broken.

Roving Reporters: What led to you working for Wildlands and WILDTRUST?

Venter: There was an interim step – I met a lady by the name of Dr Jean Harris, who now runs WildOceans. She was a precocious young academic, working at the interface between marine conservation and local community harvesting of marine resources around St Lucia. At that stage this was an absolute no-no; the only way you protect it is that you don't allow any harvesting... but that guarantees that it will be stripped because you then put a bounty on it. We were both funded by WWF-SA's Green Trust, which was in its early days, I think it was two years old at that point. We started working together, as pioneers in that world. I subsequently moved to St Lucia to write up my PhD. We secured more funding from Green

Trust to do similar work to what we were doing in Kruger, around the St. Lucia area. In those days, it was lightly called the Greater St. Lucia Park, and was an amalgam of smaller parks. They weren't linked, but there was this embedded sense from the Natal Parks Board that communities were important. So, using the same model, we were trying to get a cohesive engagement going so it wasn't ad hoc, and then use the parks to drive local economic development. That then merged into the iSimangaliso Heritage Site, and along that journey I ended up meeting two individuals, Andrew Ewing and Dr Ian Player. Ian was a legend in the conservation world who had worked very closely with Andrew, a lawyer in Durban. We just got to know each other and they liked the work that I was doing. Ian had established the Wildlands Trust with Nick Steel in 1990, which was linked to the then-KwaZulu Department of Nature Conservation. They established this trust with the idea of raising funding. We got chatting, and essentially, I managed to convince them that there was a need for an environmental NGO in South Africa that could focus on community-based conservation. Other big NGOs, like WWF, WESSA, were all playing with that idea, but they already had their legacies and their core focus. I was funded by WWF for nearly 10 years, but that was them doing a project whereas their chief cause was environmental advocacy. So Wildlands created a CEO role, I applied for it and got it, and that's how I ended up being the first full time individual in the Wildlands Trust. I ran that for four years, and started building it, which was a fantastic opportunity to start from scratch and build something. We worked in parallel with the Natal Conservation Trust, which became the KZN Conservation Trust, was linked to the Natal Parks Board and subsequently Ezemvelo. They had effectively separated from Ezemvelo and were increasingly working independently. Dr George Hughes joined that trust in 2002 after stepping down as CEO of Ezemvelo, and he ran the trust as his final formal contribution to conservation. We'd worked together when I was in St. Lucia, and basically, we started spending more and more time discussing the synergies between the two separate entities which were starting to compete. That started to turn into conversations about pulling them together and getting the merger, which happened in 2004.

Roving Reporters: Were there any huge challenges along the way that you faced?

Venter: The hard reality that most of us don't realise is that the natural environment underwrites us. and we're putting lots of pressure on it. I started in 1993. The pressure has grown and continues to grow and that's largely due to the fact that we've seen exponential population growth. It would be interesting to see what the population of South Africa was in 1993 versus now. I would imagine it was 20 – 25 million as opposed to 55 million. So, there's this massive pressure on everything natural whether that's in the conservation world, think rhino poaching and other wildlife trafficking. The second thing is, we haven't really made a dent in poverty. I've worked in many communities with thousands of people, and we've made a difference in their lives with the ripple effect, but on the whole, we've barely scratched the surface. We haven't dealt with economic transformation substantively. Have we broadened society? Yes. Is there more opportunity for individuals with previously disadvantaged backgrounds? Yes. There's no question about that. But we haven't dealt with the underlying poverty issues.

So those pressures remain. At a global level, we are seeing the net impact of climate change in particular. That is insidious, we wax lyrically about it, but it's happening in a way that is going to be felt.

Roving Reporters: What is your vision for the future in terms of your Recycling for Life venture?

Venter: The recycling piece is one of the legacy pieces that I did with WILDTRUST. Moving forward, the WILDTRUST Board was not convinced that they'd have the ability to continue with the recycling, and so the conversation was whether I could take that with me to continue that. My engagement around recycling has two pieces. The first is to manage the movement of it out of WILDTRUST. More importantly though, we started to come up with some really interesting innovations. There's three that we're playing with. The first is glass recycling. Despite the billboards, it is a disaster in South Africa. There's about 20 million kilograms of glass that come into KZN every month. Of that, less than 1 million kilograms get recycled. It's smoke and mirrors from the industry – they don't want you to know that in KZN, the recycling rate is less than 5%. Every 10 bottles that are there, 9 get left behind. The reason for that, fundamentally, is that it is cheap to produce glass, which is made from river sand. River sand is mined illegally in South Africa and there's no permitting, so you don't actually pay the real cost. So then it doesn't justify the cost of buying recycled glass. We're trying to shift the glass recycling model to a model where the glass is crushed and used as a substitute for filter type mechanisms. The second thing is that we've demonstrated that it's possible at a local level to take ice-cream containers, margarine containers, yogurt containers, put them in one end of a machine and get diesel out the other end. We want to start closing the loop, because the plastic started as fuel, so to get it back to that stage closes the loop. The third one is the production of green building material where we make use of unrecyclable plastic. About 60% of plastic is unrecyclable, the other 40% is recyclable, but of that only about 43% is actually recycled. If you start doing that 100%, you're sitting at a reality of about 15% of plastic that comes into our lives is recycled. The rest is not, either because it can't be or it's just not. So, we've been able to take that, combine it with glass and produce building material. As a part of my transition, those are important innovations in terms of a sustainability perspective. You can take those and go into a small town, you can put up a plant and theoretically, that town can become litter-free because you just suck up that plastic material and glass.

That's the transition though, I'll probably still be involved when I'm older and greyer. But I'm not setting up a recycling business. My priority is to find and shape a new role where I have the ability to influence sustainability change at a business leadership/corporate leadership in South Africa into Africa. An example would working with Unilever to get them to the point where they're only going to use recyclable plastic. Roughly 35% of the material they put out is unrecyclable. If they switch that off, at the scale they're operating, the impact would be massive. So those policy shifts are vital, and that's where I would like to focus.

Roving Reporters: Would you say that you've embedded a sustainable mindset into mainstream economy, or are on your way to doing that?

Venter: The honest answer to that is no. There's an army of people trying to do that, so I'm just a very small cog in that space. I think that the face of conservation is really at a local protected area level. In most places in South Africa, definitely most places in Africa, conservation areas are increasingly being seen as an asset rather than a theft of resources. In 1993, South African protected areas were viewed as land thefts. I imagine that in rural South Africa, most communities would be interested in having their own protected area.

Not necessarily because they understand the real benefit but because they've been sold stories about what it can do for them, but they don't see it as a negative which I think is a big step forward. So I think that that's a shift, I'm not saying it's an absolute but I definitely think that that pendulum has swung so more people are positive about it than negative. At a broader landscape level, linkages are still not there. I think we are starting to get into the space that we realise as a society that water comes from rivers, and not from a tap. I've said that many times, but I don't think people realise where stuff comes from. I don't think they realise that this water is from that valley there, and if you chuck your crap over there, it's going to mess up that water. I think that slowly, society is starting to switch to that mentality. What that should mean is that in 20 years' time, there'll be an increased societal drive to protect resources like that. Whether it's done or not that's a different story, because that's a governance thing. But governance won't happen unless people ask for it, and that's what you've got to get right.

At a high conservation level, there's no question that we're failing dismally. We're failing dismally for two reasons. We can't keep up with the rate of climate change, so systems are changing faster than we'd ever be able to conserve the species that are being lost and evolving. More importantly, wildlife trafficking is rampant and out of control. It sits up there as one of the four pillars of organised crime, together with the trade in drugs, women and children and firearms trade. Globally, we have no real sense of it in reality. We only see the big stuff; we hear about shark fins but how do you conceptualize those numbers? I think it's your generation that has the challenge around this stuff. My generation carries two things; there's a network out there saying, "we've tried bloody hard" and all that. "Don't criticize me for what I've done" ... I think my generation has failed in that. That generation has wisdom and resource, but it's a tired generation. Your generation doesn't yet have the wisdom, nor the resource but you've got the indignance, you've got the knowledge and you have the energy. I think that's the single most important piece. In the same way that I was in 1993; freshly out of Wits, freshly embedded in the romance of the new South Africa with the decision of coming back to fight for what I believed in, the idea that nothing is unbeatable.

In addition to focussing on high-level decision making, which is where I want to be, I've had a focus over the last few years on youth. I'm sure that this will continue, whatever my new role is. Yes, I can probably shift the behaviour of a few CEOs out there, and that is massive. But if I can inspire, enthuse, nurture and enable 50 young, passionate Andrews, then that impact in 25 years' time will be the impact of 50 Andrews as opposed to one.

Roving Reporters: I think my generation is a lot more involved in social media; everyone posts on Instagram. I think environmental awareness has increased a lot, but action not so much, and that's where we're missing a bit of a link...

Venter: We're talking about three generations. The generation between mine and yours, the 30s, are well-informed but don't act. Your generation, on a global scale, are starting to act. The 20s generation is coming through now as a generation of change. Where I would love to spend time, if I'm invited into that space, is with your generation. It's fairly arrogant to assume that that generation would be interested in anything I have to say! Recently, I was involved in a Living Lakes conference in Spain. In the runup, I was asked my opinion and I flagged youth. I said that you should try get as many of your moderators as possible to be

young activists, which gives them a platform to listen and distil. I challenged the organizers to include a final session of voices from the youth. I landed up moderating the last session, which had five youngsters from five different countries. I challenged them to be honest, and to tell the audience about what they think the older generation has done over the last 30 years. That brought up quite strong emotive responses from them. Afterwards, I had a couple of the older environmental scientists argue with me, saying that we had denigrated the integrity of the conference by having that as the closing session. This reflects their arrogance; they're still a powerful group of people for another five years, but if that's how they're looking at that group of young people, then they're irrelevant because you, hearing that, would switch off, you'd smile and leave with a negative attitude. Those individuals still have resources and power though, and as a youngster you don't have that.

Roving Reporters: What do you think about the whole Greta movement? I've seen a lot of mixed reports about it; a lot of people say it's great that she's using her voice, but others complain that she hasn't offered any solutions to climate change.

Venter: My goodness, how old is she now? How can you criticize her for that. Where she's been very good is that she's mainstreamed the understanding that youth, genuine youth, have a voice. That's important and she's definitely done that. She's unusual for a number of reasons regarding her position going into that space. The challenge with it, for me, is that she won't be cute, interesting, unusual Greta at the age of 26. She'll be overtaken by the next generation. The media have gotten it wrong by focussing so much on one individual, as opposed to using that and searching for other individuals to give them airtime. There's an army of young voices coming through, and that's the only negative about the Greta thing, in that it creates the perception that this is a one-woman army, which it's not. Who are the other Gretas out there? Some are less real than her and some are more real than her.

Roving Reporters: This is backtracking quite a lot, but why did you decide to step down from WILDTRUST?

Venter: A whole mix of reasons really. You get to a point where you go left or right. If I'm honest, it was just a hard realization that it was just the right time for me to step down. It was probably at that point where I was going to slow the growth and impact of the organization rather than accelerating it. There's an amazing group of people coming through, and they need their own space to make mistakes and have fantastic impact. It's impossible to say when, how, if, etcetera. We've been working on a process for a while, and it gets to the point where it's like, "you probably need to step out the traffic now, because you're blocking it". On the other side, at a personal level, I've had the youth calling for a while now. In the same way I was saying earlier, when I was overseas, I had the calling to come back. It's not a religious thing, it's just that your head starts talking. I talk about being an environmental and social activist and being called to fight for those. Anybody who's close to me will tell you, I've been hitting the table for the past few years about youth, and I've been testing some options around that. There's also the letting go of WILDTRUST, where actually at the end all I was worrying about was raising enough money to pay people to do their jobs. So, the opportunity to step out of that is fantastic, but scary. I've got a few of those high-level relationships, and I've seen that you can influence that. You can sit with the CEO of a large company, and they're vulnerable. You can be the Green Peace, put on a monkey suit and climb the building, or you can be the person who is sitting in the room with the CEO saying, "see, I told you this shit was going to happen, let's talk about that".

Roving Reporters: Would you say that you've turned conservation into a business?

Venter: From the very beginning, I tried hard to run WILDTRUST as a charity using a business approach. Working to find the blend between the two worlds. I wanted to professionalize, by holding onto the integrity and values that come with working in the non-profit world but drawing on the inherent strengths of well-structured organizations. We were one of the first organizations to put a pension scheme in for staff and making it mandatory to have medical aid. Things like that are starting to trickle through most organizations now. I definitely focussed on that because that was where the robustness would be. This was not about building the Andrew Venter organization; it was about building an NGO that would sustain well beyond my leadership, which the test is now. The ultimate test would be to see if it's still doing amazing stuff in 25 years' time. And that required a level of institutional professional structure, which cuts all the way through. Professionalizing conservation is happening in parallel. The conservation agencies themselves are fighting for survival, as they're underfunded and are constantly trying to find ways to cleverly raise funds. We recognise that society does not have the financial ability to charitably fund all this stuff. The tourism movement is massive, and the impact of conservation tourism entities in terms of them taking a broader view; not only running a lodge but taking custodianship of the development of the local community... it's all very well if you've got your land and your wildlife, but if the next property isn't doing as well, you're in trouble.

Roving Reporters: I noticed an article about the new Act which classifies wild animals as livestock, which was interesting to me in terms of what that means for conservation. On the one hand you get more funding from the agricultural sector, but then what about poaching etc.?

Venter: That's a hot topic at the moment. The conservation movement is dead against it, mainly because you're domesticizing wildlife. The agricultural sector has a very different set of values around it. In that world, breeding lions, petting them and then shooting them is fine; you've made money out of the lion. It's no different to going to play with baby goats and then on the menu is goat pie. So, they're saying, "what's the difference between goats and lions?". But for us, there's an inherent value difference. They see no commercial difference. We're going to see ongoing, heavy genetic manipulation, which makes us very nervous.

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