

Image by Scott Ramsay

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THREE YEARS  
IN THE WILD

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# THREE YEARS IN THE WILD

**AN OFFICE ESCAPE  
TURNS INTO A  
SOUTH AFRICAN ODYSSEY**



by

SCOTT RAMSAY



**S**ometimes, I feel like I'm the luckiest person in the world. For the past three years I have lived almost exclusively in South Africa's national parks and nature reserves.

On a typical day, while some people are sitting in city traffic, I could be photographing lions in the Kalahari, tracking rhinos with rangers or swimming with turtles. My good fortune is made more palpable by the fact that I once had an office job; a so-called successful career working in the cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town and London.

But I spent a lot of time staring out the office window, pretending I could see elephants on the horizon. Perhaps it stems from my childhood. My parents regularly took me and my two sisters to the Kruger National Park. At the time I probably took these family holidays for granted, but many years later the memories are still clear.

Interestingly, the most visceral reminders of those holidays are not the sight of wild animals, but the smells and sounds of the bush – the unmistakable scents that rise from the dry earth after rain has fallen, the chirruping of woodland kingfishers, the barking of baboons and the rasping grunt of leopards.



A breeding herd of elephant crosses the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers, Mapungubwe National Park, South Africa.

©Scott Ramsay

I only realised later that, while I enjoy the excitement of cities, I felt most alive and connected to myself when immersed in nature.

While I was at my desk in Johannesburg, I was very conscious that I was just a few hours away from places like Kruger, the Okavango Delta and the Drakensberg mountains. It was infuriating and inspiring in equal measure.

But then, after daydreaming for several years – and no doubt annoying my successive bosses – the little voice in my head became a booming demand I could no longer ignore. So I listened.

I approached South African National Parks and proposed travelling through the country's most important protected areas for a year. I'd write a blog, take photos and tell the stories of South Africa's wild places, showing why are our national parks and nature reserves are so important, what is

being done to protect them, which species are endangered, who the people are that live and work there and what their stories are.



Top: Cape vulture, Giants Castle, uKhahlamba-Drakensberg, South Africa.

Bottom: The Author takes flight.

©Scott Ramsay

Getting SANParks' endorsement, and working for a year to raise sponsorship to cover the costs, I was able to set off on my "Year in the Wild". Ford loaned me an Everest 4x4 and a variety of other sponsors, like Goodyear and Cape Union Mart, were equally enthusiastic in their support.

# wild places transcend social and political divisions

I found that almost everyone I approached believed in supporting conservation and that wild places generally transcend social and political divisions. On top of that, everyone seemed to love a good adventure, and the most common response I got on meeting potential sponsors was, 'Can we come with you?'

It wasn't all easy, though. Any wilderness can be a physical test. I've sweltered in temperatures of more than 50°C in the Kgalagadi, and I've shivered through a few sleepless winter nights in my tent at the top of the Drakensberg escarpment. And the novelty of hiking for days through thick, thorny bush wears off pretty quickly, especially when the animals are scarce.



The author looks over the Orange River cutting through the Richtersveld mountains. To the south is Richtersveld National Park in South Africa, to the north is Ai-Ais National Park in Namibia.

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**But being in the wilderness is more of an emotional test, especially if you're on your own. You can't hide from yourself, and at first I was lonely. But I learned to find companionship in the land and the animals, and I became grateful for the basics: food when I'm hungry, water (or beer!) when I'm thirsty, the shelter of a rooftop tent in a thunderstorm, sunshine on a cold Karoo day, and my own health.**

**Often I would go to sleep feeling down, but then I'd wake up in the middle of the night and see the blazing stars. Or I'd rise in the morning to the panorama of the Richtersveld, or watch elephants walk past my camp.**





Moonrise near Rooiputs campsite in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park traversing  
South Africa and Botswana.

©Scott Ramsay

**At these times, when the enormity of wilderness swallowed me up, I was able to transcend my own personal story. It was in forgetting myself that I was able to find myself. Trust me, a violent Kalahari thunderstorm directly above your tent will quickly put your emotional preoccupations into perspective.**

**The African wilderness is full of these experiences. It was here I found a belonging and contentment that eludes me in a city. To me, life makes more sense when viewed through the prism of wilderness. In the wild, I sometimes drift into a meditational state and inadvertently achieve an unexpected mental acuity. Perhaps the wilderness gives space for our thoughts and emotions to expand.**



The author was lucky to photograph this Aardvark in daylight hours in Tankwa Karoo National Park, South Africa.

©Scott Ramsay

It wasn't all deep and serious. After a few days on my own, I'd sometimes find myself laughing aloud for no apparent reason. Or I'd talk to the animals. It may seem nuts, but the animals gave me a sense of community.

But I spent time with lots of great people too. It's one of the reasons I love my work so much. Generally, conservationists, researchers and rangers are deeply connected to the earth. It's hard work and poorly paid, but they are driven by something more than money and external validation, and I found them inspirational.

People like Sonto Tembe at Ndumo Game Reserve, who can imitate almost every bird species' call, giving visitors an unforgettable experience. Or wildlife vet Dave Cooper and his

associate Dumisane Zwane, who work countless hours to treat ill or injured animals, including rhino that have been wounded by poachers.

I chatted to Nonhle Mbuthuma, an environmental activist who has stood up to politicians and mining corporations on the Eastern Cape's spectacular Wild Coast.

'I live in paradise and it's a paradise I want my children to inherit one day,' Nonhle said. 'We are not against development, but we have the right to have a say in what kind of development takes place. Open-cast mining will destroy our area, our heritage and our sense of identity.'



Top: Sonto Tembe entertains guests at Ndumo Game Reserve.

Middle Left: Activist Nonhle Mbuthuma teaches Eastern Cape youngsters.

Middle Right: Vet Dave Cooper and Dumisane Zwane take a break between treating injured animals.

Bottom: Ranger and pilot Lawrence Monro pioneers the aerial anti-poaching program in KwaZulu-Natal.

Not least is Lawrence Munro, a ranger and pilot who, against considerable odds, pioneered and now leads the aerial anti-poaching teams in KwaZulu-Natal, after years of being told that such a service was not required.

## **In 100 years, people will look back and think of Africa's conservationists as heroes**

These are just five of the people I met who are doing vital work, even if our materialistic society doesn't value their efforts. I believe that when people look back in a hundred years time, they'll think of Africa's conservationists as the heroes of this century. Human slavery was once considered acceptable, and when Abraham Lincoln worked to abolish it, many people with vested interests in its continuation railed against its abolition.

Today, everyone knows that slavery is abominable. The emancipation of the environment is this century's greatest challenge, but as with human slavery, many corporations, governments and individuals have vested interests in the sustained destruction of Africa's natural heritage. Conservationists today are fighting a similar battle to Lincoln's. And like society today considers slavery detestable,

in the future we will consider today's abuse of Africa's wild as one of the most tragic and loathsome periods of mankind's history.



The Author and Mountain guide Caphius Mthabela at the top of Rockeries Pass, uKhahlamba-Drakensberg, South Africa.

©Scott Ramsay

My first “Year in the Wild” went so well that it turned into two, and by the end of September this year, I will have completed three years of almost continuous exploration of South Africa’s 40 most special protected areas.

It’s one of the many tragedies of apartheid that so many people in South Africa were denied access to the most beautiful parts of the country for so long. Everyone deserves the right to engage with their natural heritage.

So I consider myself extremely fortunate. Not many people –

even within SANParks – have been to all the national parks, and even fewer have been to all the other special protected areas. I have been to all of them several times, explored them extensively, and slept in wild places that few have ever seen.



A young white rhino rescued after its mother was killed by poachers in KwaZulu-Natal. The rhino is watched 24 hours a day by rangers until it can be released again.

©Scott Ramsay

Initially, I was happy to just cover my costs and to complete the journey, sharing the inspiration with others through my photos, social media and articles.

But now my journey has become somewhat of a pilgrimage. I find myself increasingly bonded to African wilderness and wildlife. These wild places and their animals have become part of who I am, and are probably the greatest source of inspiration in my life. They have taught me that nature is far more important than I ever imagined, and that we humans need both wilderness and wildlife if we are to live a full, rich life.



When the author took a break from travelling South Africa's wilderness, he visited the neighbours. The bull elephants of Mana Pools in Zimbabwe are legendary, and guide Stretch Ferreira has been walking among them for more than 25 years.


©Scott Ramsay

South African film maker and photographer **Craig Foster**, who has worked a lot with Bushmen, wrote, 'It seems like our bond with animals is deeply rooted in our psyches and we need them just as much as we need wild open spaces. We don't need them just because they are pleasant – we need them for our psychological survival. At a deep level a land without life, without creatures, is really disturbing.'

After three years I find myself even more determined to make others aware of Africa's natural treasures. My journey started out as a dream, an adventure, but it has become my vocation.

I'm sure that if other people – especially those in business



and government – can see for themselves what I have seen, then they too will be inspired to care more for the few pockets of wilderness that remain. 

*For three years, several organisations have been supporting Scott. Ford South Africa has loaned him an Everest 4×4, Cape Union Mart and K-Way support him with gear, and Goodyear supply tyres. WildCard, South African National Parks, CapeNature, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, Eastern Cape Parks, Big Game Parks Swaziland and iSimangaliso Wetland Park have all given Scott access and accommodation to do his work. Other sponsors are: Safari Centre Cape Town, Globecomm, Frontrunner, Vodacom, EeziAwn, National Luna, Outdoor Photo, Tracks4Africa and Hetzner. BirdLife South Africa have supplied information on important bird areas.*

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# FIVE ICONIC WILD PLACES

**SCOTT RAMSAY'S PICK  
OF SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL PARKS  
AND NATURE RESERVES**



People often ask me which of the national parks or nature reserves is my favourite. It's impossible to choose. Each is so different. What is most striking about South Africa is its enormous diversity, and every park plays a critical role in protecting this natural abundance. But if I must choose, these five leave the greatest impression on me.

## **Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park**



©Scott Ramsay

**This is South Africa's finest wilderness area, adjacent to the southern Namibia border. Extremely arid and hot in summer, with**

temperatures over 60 degrees Celsius, it is cut through by the Orange River, a vital vein of life in this desert. Despite the harsh environment, the Richtersveld is one of the most beautiful protected areas with fine desert mountain scenery, the most diverse arid ecology in the world, unique plants and animals and the local Nama people are very friendly. I once spent two weeks here on my own, but since then I have taken several friends, all of whom have grown to love the area.

*For more information, visit: [SANParks Ai-Ais/Richtersveld website](#)*

# Kruger National Park



©Scott Ramsay

Kruger remains the iconic national park of Southern Africa, and it performs an invaluable role for conservation. It's the first place most international visitors ever interact with wild African animals, and the park's success is critical for sustaining the rest of the country's non-profitable national parks. Despite the soaring level of rhino poaching and the traffic jams at lion sightings, Kruger is the finest national park in the country – perhaps the continent. In the early 1900s, when warden James Stevenson-Hamilton first started his crusade

here to conserve the wild animals of South Africa, he was mocked and ridiculed. But, one hundred years later, no one is laughing. If it wasn't for Kruger National Park, very little of South Africa's wildlife would exist today. Our politicians and conservation organisations need to employ the same long term thinking as Stevenson-Hamilton in order to conserve what we have.

*For more information, visit: [SANParks Kruger website](#)*

# iSimangaliso Wetland Park



©Scott Ramsay

The story of this protected area is hopeful and reassuring. It's the most diverse protected area in Africa, with more species of animals than any other. Encompassing estuaries, lakes, rivers, forest, savannah, beaches, coral reefs and bushveld, this 3 000 km<sup>2</sup> park (whose name means "miracle" in isiZulu) is bounding with life. But it was almost all lost. For several years, mining companies wanted to rip up the coastal forested dunes and dredge ilmenite – also known as titanium – from the sands. Then in the early 1990s, a coalition of concerned citizens, including Nelson Mandela, stood up to big business, and the mining was banned. The park became South Africa's first World Heritage Site and today it's doing a good job of balancing the needs of conservation and tourism with the surrounding community.

*For more information, visit: [iSimangaliso website](#)*



## uKhahlamba-Drakensberg



©Scott Ramsay

The Drakensberg is South Africa's largest mountain range and one of the country's World Heritage Sites – one of the few worldwide that is valued for both its natural and cultural importance. It has incredibly photogenic landscapes, and you can happily lose yourself while exploring the gorges, peaks and plateaus. It's the biggest living depository of Bushman rock art in Africa, with thousands of paintings, some dating back 7 000 years. While hiking in these mountains, you are likely to stumble on several paintings, where Bushmen interpreted their dreams and trances on the sandstone walls. Today, the Bushmen are gone, but their evocative spirits remain, perhaps soaring with the endangered bearded vultures above.

*For more information, visit: [Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg Park website](#)*

## Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park



©Scott Ramsay

Bordering South Africa and Botswana, this semi-arid protected area is probably the last place in the country where animals can truly roam free. The transfrontier park is one of the largest in the world. Without interference from fences and communities and only a few roads and jeep tracks, it remains wild and unfettered. Despite an arid environment, the Kgalagadi is full of wildlife. It's a photographer's paradise, with one of the largest, healthiest populations of wild lions in Africa, and the summer thunderstorms are breathtaking. Here you can camp surrounded by a pride of lions or a pack of hyenas. A friend of mine – a regular visitor to the park – recently had to punch a lioness on her nose when she stuck her face too far into his tent! Now, try explain that to a tourist who's just stepped off the plane from London or New York. What a wonderful continent we live in.

*For more information, visit: [SANParks Kgalagadi website](#)*



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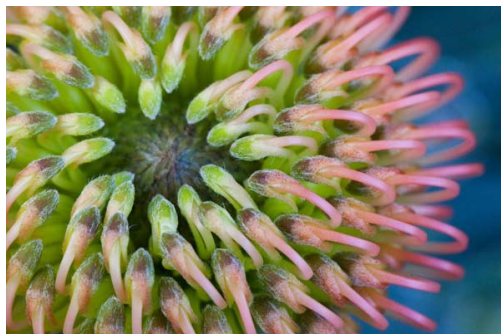
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## Five reasons South Africa's national parks and nature reserves are worth protecting



**1. South Africa is the third most biodiverse country on Earth.**

From the arid Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park in the west, to the tropical iSimangaliso Wetland Park in the east, South Africa is

blessed with incredible natural diversity. The protected areas are not only powerful symbols of the land and ocean that sustains us, but they are critical providers of invaluable ecosystem services, like fresh water, clean air, healthy soils and plentiful fish. These we take for granted, but without them our country will collapse.



## **2. South Africa's protected areas are global icons.**

Think of Kruger National Park and Table Mountain. These are among the most popular tourism attractions on the continent. The parks employ thousands of people, and the ancillary industries are critical for a sustainable economy. What would South Africa be without its wild places? They give South Africa and its diverse people a unique identity.



## **3. We have an ethical duty to protect, and expand, the wilderness.**

Modern man has transformed about 90% of South Africa. Much of our land and ocean has been stripped and utilized for our own benefit, almost beyond nature's ability to restore itself. But we are

just one of several million species on the planet. We are composed of the same minerals and chemicals as the earth. Sometimes, in our human arrogance, we forget that we too are animals.

“Ubuntu” is a Xhosa term meaning, “I am who I am because of other people.” But as the South African conservationist and poet Ian McCallum illustrated, “ubuntu” is a term that is deeply ecological. Everything in nature is related to everything else. We are part of nature, and we depend totally on our environment and thousands of other species for our survival.



#### **4. The protected areas are symbols of our original home.**

We all come from Africa. Every person on earth has ancestors who evolved here, alongside wild animals. ‘Three million years of evolution in Africa is imprinted upon the human psyche,’ wrote South Africa’s famous conservationist Ian Player, ‘and perhaps this leads to a deep yearning to return to see the red earth, to hear the cry of the fish eagle, the roar of the lion, and the scream of the elephant.’



#### **5. People are truly happy when surrounded by the Earth’s natural wonders.**

Wild places are potent counterbalances to our modern lifestyles. The materialistic world is built on the assumption that increasing consumption leads to increasing happiness. How wrong this has been proven.

Contrastingly, in Africa's wild places, where there are no modern conveniences, I've seen how people of all ages, status and race respond positively to the wonders of nature. In our protected areas we can feel truly connected, to ourselves, to one-another and to the wild.

When we're confronted by the enormity of wilderness, we realize that some things will always be bigger than us: the heat of a Kalahari day, the power of a breaching whale, the venom of a black mamba or the fury of a summer thunderstorm. Personally I am most in awe of the blazing stars in the African night sky.

These things hint at something larger than us, and they remind us that we're not the most powerful force in the universe. You may call it God or you may call it nature. Whatever it is, it is vital to a meaningful life, and it is most bounteous in Africa's protected areas.





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- Andrew Schoeman

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**A MERE GLIMPSE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA'S  
NATIONAL PARKS AND RESERVES**



by  
SCOTT RAMSAY







*A lion encountered while walking on foot with ranger Irving Knight near Lower Sabie in **Kruger National Park**, South Africa.*



*Ranger Cedric Sethlako looking towards **Mapungubwe Hill**, the archeological site of the oldest formal settlement in South Africa, dating back to 1000AD.*



*One of the most impressive rock art sites in Africa, Elands Cave near Cathedral Peak in **uKhaklamba-Drakensberg**, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.*



*A herd of Eland in **Mkambati Nature Reserve** on the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.*



*The **Karoo National Park** near the town of Beaufort West,  
South Africa.*



*A hippo in its element in **Kruger National Park**, South Africa.*



*Tali and Michelle Hoffman look out over **Karoo National Park**, South Africa.*



*Wild dogs on the move in iSimangaliso Wetland Park,  
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.*





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*Desert adapted elephants of the Kunene region of **Namibia**.*



*Himba woman in Kaokoland, **Namibia**.*



*Golden Gate National Park, Orange Free State, South Africa.*



*A goliath heron takes flight over **Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve**, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Photo taken while flying with anti-poaching pilot Wayne Cornhill.*



*South Africa's marine protected areas play an invaluable role in the conservation matrix. This southern right whale and her calf were photographed while flying over **Table Bay** near Cape Town with pilot Jean Tresfon.*



*Silaka Nature Reserve on the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape,  
South Africa.*



*Lionesses on the move in **Hlane Royal National Park**, Swaziland. Conservationist Ted Riley and his team have restored lions and more than 20 other large animal species to the little kingdom of Swaziland.*



*Wolfberg Arch in the Cederberg Mountains, Western Cape, South Africa.*





*A lone elephant crosses the White Umfolozi River in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.*



*Mweni Pass, **uKhahlamba-Drakensberg**, KwaZulu Natal,  
South Africa.*

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# Contributor

## ‘THREE YEARS IN THE WILD’

Issue 7, 15 August, 2014



**Scott Ramsay** is still out there, somewhere. But he's not hiding. He's always feeding us great stories and insights through his [Africa Geographic blog series](#), taking photographs



of the wild and interviewing the experts who work in the protected areas he loves. Through his work, Scott hopes to inspire others to travel to the continent's national parks and nature reserves, which Scott believes are Africa's greatest assets and deserve to be protected at any cost, not only for their sake but for our own survival. His one year journey to explore South Africa's wild places turned into three. Perhaps as the wild places beyond South Africa's borders lure him, the journey will continue for many years. Lets hope so. But if you haven't yet been on a journey with Scott, this is the place to start: **THREE YEARS IN THE WILD.**

Follow Scott's journeys on: **Year in the Wild,**  
**Facebook & Instagram**