

IAN CEDRIC PLAYER

- MEMORIAL TRIBUTE -

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*“I tell you that which you yourselves do know ... You all did love him once,  
not without cause ... My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,  
And I must pause till it come back to me.”*

Relevant to this memorial, these are lines from one of the greatest eulogies in English literature ... Marc Antony's, Shakespearian tribute to Julius Caesar.

It is with a deep sense of humility, responsibility and gratitude that I stand here to honour the life of Ian Cedric Player. I am very aware that there are many in this audience who are more than qualified to do so and who would have willingly taken my place on this podium. I trust what I have to say will echo with what is in your own hearts, for to speak about and to remember him is to speak at the same time about those whom he loved and influenced as well as those who loved and influenced him. No man is an island said the poet, John Donne and it is true. The identity for which we all strive and for which we are ultimately known is impossible to define outside of our relationships not only with others, but with the animals and with the landscapes in which we live. They shape us in much the same way as we shape them. It is in this regard that I am mindful and appreciative of you, Ann, and not least, the influence of those many outstanding and

passionate wilderness characters who, in their own way, played significant roles in the shaping of Ian's life. The list of these men and women including those who wholeheartedly supported his work and vision, is too long to include in this address, but what they all had in common, in his own words was courage, discipline, loyalty and commitment. For those who belong on that list and who are here today, you know who you are and I salute you.

Ian passed away peacefully on Sunday 30 November 2014. He was 87 years of age ( the birthdays of Winston Churchill and Mark Twain ... and the death of Oscar Wilde. These coincidences in life would not have gone unnoticed by him.) His final peaceful surrender at his home in the Karkloof Valley not far from here, contrasted sharply with the way he lived his life, with the way he dealt with his ailing body and ultimately, his own mortality. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas would have been proud of him. He raged against the dying of the light, not simply his own dying, but against the toxic darkness of human indifference to the damage it is inflicting on Nature. He did not go gentle into that good night.

Ian was the founder of Wilderness Leadership School (1957), the Wilderness Foundation (1974) and the internationally acclaimed Wilderness Congress (1977) - a 4-yearly event that over the years, through his efforts and later, that of Vance Martin and Andrew Muir has brought together many of the world's most prominent environmental campaigners, photographers, conservation scientists, artists and journalists - think of Jane Goodall, Sylvia Earle, Wangari Muthaai, Michael Faye, Ian Douglas-Hamilton, George Monbiot, Art Wolff, Frans Lanting and more ... but back to his history. He was the founder of the Natal Canoe Club and in 1950 he initiated the world-famous 'Duzi canoe marathon, winning the

epic 110-mile event on three occasions. As a game ranger for the Natal Parks in the early 1950's, inspired by previous park wardens, Vaughan Kirby and H.B. Potter's efforts to protect the remaining white rhino in the Umfolozi, he and pilot Hendrik van Schoor, conducted the first aerial count of the sole surviving group. The unforgettable number was 437... four hundred and thirty seven!

In 1960, as a senior warden, alarmed by what he described as "the horrific poaching" of these animals, he initiated and directed the famous 'Operation Rhino' relocation programme. The result was the successful placement of many of the survivors to other national parks throughout the country as well as to sanctuaries in the USA and Europe. Without this initiative, it is almost certain that these creatures would have been classified as extinct, today. Instead, his name is now synonymous with the present lively, yet threatened status of this species. Sadly, it would appear, history is repeating itself.

A fierce campaigner for the conservation and protection of wild areas, not only in South Africa - think of St Lucia - but worldwide, his long list of honours is testimony to his credibility. They include two honorary doctorates, and the Decoration for Meritorius Service from the Office of the President of the Republic of South Africa. A recipient of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Conservation Statesman of the Year Award, he was also a Paul Harris Fellow - The Rotary Foundation International's highest award for "furthering a better understanding of the friendly relations among people's of the world". In 1981 he was honoured by the Prince of the Netherlands and admitted to the Order of Knight of the Golden Ark.

His legacy, like many of the pioneering poets, writers and campaigners for the wild will no doubt be his commitment and dedication to the conservation and protection of wild areas. To this cause, he was both driven and tireless, reminding me of the lines of a poem by Robert Frost:

The woods are lovely  
Dark and deep  
But I have promises to keep  
And miles to go before I sleep ...

He was a voice and fighter for the natural inhabitants of the wild, for “the grazers and browsers, for the herds and the hunted ... and the small” (Finuela Dowling), not only for their sake, but for the sake of the human species as well. Who and what would we be without wild areas and animals in our lives? Deeply interested in the psychological significance of wilderness, this is what set him apart from many conservationists. It is an aspect of this deep and determined man that not too many people knew of. Influenced by the writings and psychological perspectives of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung as well as that of Laurens van der Post and for whom he was a great advocate, he warmed to the living significance of the symbolic life. It was van der Post’s book, *Venture to the Interior* however, that significantly shaped his attitude to wilderness as a young ranger. In his own words: “After reading this book I trod the Earth differently.” He saw the wilderness differently. He began to see wild animals and wild places not only for what they are but for what they *represent* in the human psyche. If for instance, a wild animal becomes extinct, then the human psyche suffers. If a wild species dies, then something in the psyche dies as well. Put differently, he understood the deep reciprocity of Nature. The fight for the

natural environment could be understood as the fight for human sanity. Deep down, he knew it. And so do we.

Soldier, adventurer, game ranger, conservationist, activist, author, leader, visionary, speaker, dreamer, there is so much to admire about him and deservedly so. Like many who knew him, I will remember him most of all for his enduring spirit of respect for the wilderness. But I will remember him also, for other reasons. We first met in 1981 - another story - and within a month I was on trail in the Umfolozi with him and the wonderful Magqubu Ntombela. It did not take long for me to realize that I had found my spiritual home. I will never forget that.

I will remember him as a loyal friend and as a man who was very human. Sometimes he was like a dog with a bone ... he wouldn't let go. We did not always agree with each other ... we didn't have to and it is precisely this that protected me from the paralysis of hero worship. He was generous with his time for anyone involved or interested in wilderness. Even those with the most obscure approaches to solving wild life issues found an ally in him, provided he believed that they shared a common concern.

I will not forget the many hours spent with him and Ann around the kitchen table in their home at Phuzamoya ... what a name ... the Zulu word which means ... "to feast on the wind" ... or, if you prefer, "to drink the breath of life ... to be inspired. Such was the alchemy of that kitchen and the tangible atmosphere of torment, laughter and the intellect it generated.

I will always savour the warmth of the wood burning, Falkirk stove, the slow, simple meals and on the table, the newly arrived books ... the ones "You just have to read" he would say. He feasted on books and for those who have been to his home, you will agree with me - it is like a library, a museum of South African history, psychological theories, natural history, wilderness philosophy and biographies - he loved T.E. Lawrence of

Arabian fame . Where did this appetite for books come from? Vance Martin as reported in Graham Linscott's biography of Ian, summed it up. "In keeping with his hunger for intellectual content and personal understanding", he said, "Ian devoured everything he could about the wilderness concept. He learned all the arguments and how to answer them".

Returning to the kitchen and to our conversational feasts, we argued about methodologies for dealing with wild life crime. We dissected sport, politics and dreams, but we always came back to the fight for wilderness. And how can anyone forget his laughter? Tears would roll down his cheeks as he put his head back and roared his delight. No one else could laugh like him and I loved to make him laugh. And then there was his voice. When he spoke, it was like listening to a firm, but subdued roar ... a kind of territorial call. Ann heard it as a grumble. "As long he is grumbling", she would tell me when I would phone to ask after him, "then I know he's okay." He grumbled until the last week of his life, but there is no escaping, he was territorial. In a wild analogy, he was an alpha male. He knew his turf - the wilderness - and he was prepared to protect and die for it. I once asked him to imagine a world without rhino and his response was immediate ... "Over my dead body ..." he said. And he knew about rank. His very first job with the Natal Parks was that of relief ranger at St. Lucia. He was told to get on with it - no hat, no badge, no uniform, only a piece of paper authorizing his position as a ranger. How on earth was he supposed to establish authority armed only with a paper document? In his own words "to add a bit of clout to my authority, I pinned my three service medals onto my shirt. And it worked!"

He was a leader. He took charge. He fought for what he believed in, determined to have his way at times, but he also knew the cost. There is a certain loneliness that all leaders have to endure and more ... it is the

knowledge of ever-present adversaries, individuals who would show their respect but at the same time wouldn't mind him out of the way. He often spoke about the inevitability of adversaries if you were involved in conservation. Sometimes accused of self-promotion, he learned to ignore this. I believe he was aware of that strange human truth ... that you will often be disliked by those who see you as different from them, not because you are different, but because you are doing what they cannot do. He has been quoted as saying that the measure of one's success in conservation is reflected by the number of enemies you have made. I think otherwise. Yes, there will always be adversaries. Sometimes we need them to keep a check on our own blind spots but to me, the measure of Ian's success is surely, the number of people he inspired.

To highlight the essence of a man who stirred the imagination of so many and who certainly stirred mine, I would like to read from a letter he wrote to me in September, 1995. He was on a safari with two American friends in the Savuti Channel of northern Botswana. I was preparing to travel to that same country to meet with the late John Hardbattle, an eloquent and handsome half Bushman campaigner and director of the First People's Trust in Botswana.

"... a short note to welcome you to the last remaining piece of God's country. Ian Michler told me that you may be seeing John Hardbattle. It appears he is having a struggle to ensure settlement rights for the poor remaining Bushmen. I will be in London next month (if I survive the anopheles and the glossinia morsitans who have fed grandly upon me)." I will be staying with Laurens van der Post so will mention it to him too, but Hardbattle should write to him and ask him to take the matter up with the Botswana ambassador in the UK." He continued "It is grotesque that in 1995 the poor bloody Bushmen should have no rights at all. I feel for them

as I do for St Lucia too, our species seems hell bent on destroying everything that is wild.” He signed off ... “yours, Madolo.”

Let us have a closer look at that letter for within it, I believe are the essential ingredients of the man. It begins ... *welcome to the last remaining piece of God’s country*. Stay with the words “the last remaining piece ...” Significantly influenced by the writings of the American naturalists Henry Thoreau , John Muir and particularly, Aldo Leopold, he too was gripped by a chronic nostalgia for the vanishing wild areas of the world ... he took it personally. It was Jim Feely who introduced Ian to the writings of Leopold and a quote from the latter follows:

“One of the penalties of a sound environmental education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on Nature is quite invisible to laypersons. We must either harden our shells and make believe that we can do nothing with what we know, or we must be doctors who see the marks of death in a society that believes well and does not want to be told otherwise.”

Ian chose the latter. He simply refused to believe that we can do nothing with what we know, or better still ... that he could do nothing. Instead, he raged. He gave a damn! This is a leadership quality and unless we forget, rage is a hard-wired emotion in the brains of all vertebrates. He never apologised for what he was occasionally accused of - his emotional stand on environmental issues. “Dammit!” he would say, “Environmental issues are emotional issues!”

His reference to *God’s country* in that opening sentence of the letter was not a cliché and neither was it figurative. He meant it. God’s country in this instance, was not a reference confined to the wild expanses of Botswana, but to his conviction of the presence of God in Nature. It is in this regard that he echoes the persuasions of John Muir who said “the best place to discover the true attributes of deity was in Nature.” If Muir was committed



to immersing in mountain baptism everyone he could, then Ian Player was a kindred spirit, committed to exposing as many as possible to the healing significance of wilderness. If the conservation of South Africa's wild life was to make any sense to the general public, he was convinced that the best way to do it was to give individuals a direct experience of wilderness. Ahead of his time, he believed that environmental issues would inevitably become leadership issues. It was on this premise that he founded the Wilderness Leadership School. Fifty years on, more than 40,000 young men and women of all ages and cultures have been on a Wilderness Leadership School trail. For many, these trails were life-changing.

The wilderness, in effect, was a sacred place ... a church without dogma, an inner and an outer journey, a space in which, if you were open to it, you could hear "that still, small voice" of God. However, it was not without structure. A certain discipline was required. The trail would be no less than four nights in the wild. This was the necessary time for participants to shed urban personas and routines. No watches or time keepers were permitted. Without them, you learned to pay attention to Nature's timekeepers ... sunrises, sunsets, the changing positions of the stars and not least the diurnal variations of animal activity and bird calls. The rituals were simple but profoundly meaningful ... walking in silence ... story telling around the fire and then, the unforgettable night watch, each trailist taking turns to be alone, to stay awake, to keep the fire burning, to keep watch over your companions and to be alert to potential nocturnal threats from curious or hungry animals.

Returning to the letter ... *I will be in London next month (if I survive the anopheles and the glossinia morsitans who have fed grandly upon me).*"

Referring to the malaria mosquito and to the tsetse fly, it was a small reminder of his immense knowledge of the bush and of animal behaviour. It was part of his credibility as a conservationist. He knew the Latin names.

Urging John Hardbattle to contact Laurens van der Post in order to involve the Botswana ambassador was a reflection of how important political clout was in his own campaigns. And it didn't matter who the politicians were. The wilderness took priority over political leanings. Like the rhino that he championed, Ian was politically thick skinned but not as short sighted. He was a strategist of note.

That he felt for the plight of the Bushmen in the same way as he felt for St Lucia ... that our species seems hell bent on destroying everything that is wild says everything about his compassion and rage against the loss of the wild geographies of human identity ... that the much vaunted economic model of political decision making can be trumped by the notion that there are some things that are simply not for sale.

Finally, he signed his name "Madolo", the Nguni name for knee. As a young boy, a post-injury, septic arthritis resulted in a disfiguring adjustment to the shape and function of his right knee. It may have put an end to any dreams of success on rugby and cricket fields, but it did not dampen his determination to overcome his handicap. Instead, he turned to canoeing. One can only wonder how much his attitude to that injury fuelled his attitude to life in general and to the fight for wilderness in particular. Last week I asked my Xhosa-speaking domestic worker what it meant to be given the Nguni name for a knee. She did not hesitate in replying. "It means that the person is down to Earth", she said ... "that he knows how to kneel ... that he knows what it means to pray." I believe this says so much about him. The battle for the future of wilderness is in the balance. It is time to pray.

In 1999, I wrote this poem ... it is dedicated to him:

## WILDERNESS

Have we forgotten  
that wilderness is not a place,  
but a pattern of soul  
where every tree, every bird and beast  
is a soul maker?

Have we forgotten  
that wilderness is not a place  
but a moving feast of stars,  
scales, footprints and beginnings?

Since when  
did we become afraid of the night  
and that only the bright stars count  
or that our moon is not a moon unless it is full?

By whose commands  
were the animals,  
through groping fingers,  
one for each hand  
reduced to the big and the little five?

Have we forgotten  
that every creature is within us,  
carried by tides of earthly blood  
and that we named them?

Have we forgotten  
that wilderness is not a place  
but a season  
and that we are in its final hour?

Farewell Madolo. You were a man of courage, discipline, loyalty,  
commitment ... and compassion. You will be missed. Your legacy is in  
good hands.