

## *Ian Cedric Audley Player (1927–2014)*

*(This is an edited version of an address given at Ian Player's memorial service in January 2015).*

**M**Y mandate today is to speak on Ian's life in the Natal Parks Board and to share with you some of my personal insights, reflections culled from a close friendship and working relationship spanning some 48 years.

First, allow me to repeat a dictum uttered by a wise old history master of mine at school. He exhorted us to, by all means, stand in awe of the deeds performed by great men but, more importantly, to pause to examine carefully the human qualities that produced them; that was where seeds of wisdom lay hidden. So in addition to simply reciting the highlights of Ian's life and times in the Natal Parks Board, I hope to convey to you a glimpse of the inner person and those character traits that were responsible for his many achievements. Context is also very important in tracing Ian's NPB career; Zululand and iMfolozi in the 1950s were not what they are today nor can we fail to acknowledge the impact of his achievements and the milestones in his life upon wildlife conservation in general.

In 1951 I bunked school – and got caned for the liberty taken – to watch a determined Ian Player set off on his epic canoe expedition, an event that has grown into a world-famous canoe marathon. Off he set into the wilds of the Dusi and uMngeni rivers between Pietermaritzburg and Durban, in fulfilment of an ambition he conceived whilst on active service in Italy. One cannot help wondering what a young man awaiting demobilisation after wartime experience was doing setting his sights on navigating a wild, uncharted river by



*Ian Player*

canoe except to say that it was the kind of pioneering adventure many young men dreamed of doing and many of us eventually did.

Next was meeting Ian in person 48 years ago when I attended a St John's ambulance first aid course in Durban. He was also there with a group of his Zululand rangers. I was the lone Drakensberger. I found myself grouped with Ian and Hugh Dent for practise sessions. We did more nattering about canoeing and conservation than was good for our assimilation of First Aid knowledge, with the consequence that when the time came for our competence to be assessed, with Ian trussed up to demonstrate a broken arm, we were found wanting. A *Natal Mercury* photographer was present to capture the scene. His photograph depicts Ian staring into the far distance showing no reaction to the

safety pin I have just jabbed into his upper arm while a concerned Hugh looks on. The instructing sister, a formidable starched figure with a reptilian eye for detail, pounced, declaring loudly with a hint of malice that our work reminded her of a food parcel received at the front lines burst from its wrappings. Ian in the brief silence that followed, defused a tense situation with a disarming response: “Sister is there any chance of us being transferred to the stretcher bearer course – we think we might be better suited there!”

So I must start with this conquest of the Dusi /uMngeni river and not with Zululand and the White Rhino. Why? – because that experience on a wild river produced Ian’s Damascus Moment, his sense of destiny, an inner compass-bearing, which channelled his energies from then on like a DNA-fuelled trajectory. The experience, in turn, also undoubtedly planted the seed of his embrace of the wilderness as a spiritual underpinning for human existence. This seed, nourished by his friend Maqubu Ntombela, was to germinate later in Zululand and became a driving commitment throughout a long and productive life.

His conquest of the Dusi accomplished, he went on to become employed in the NPB by Colonel Jack Vincent, a man Ian came to admire as a great leader.

We need to pause here to examine those special human attributes Ian brought to the organisation:

**Challenge** – if no one throws down a gauntlet for you, throw one down yourself.

**Adversity** – don’t just face hardship, overcome it.

**Vision** – project a clear sense of purpose, spiritual and material, linked to a



*Ian Player – canoeist*

set of firmly held convictions, and keep faith with them.

**Soul** – always add compassion and a human touch to all you do. Zulu-speaking people call it *ubuntu*.

Ian had them all in abundance. Welded together, they represent the essence of natural leadership.

Given this backdrop, his arrival in iMfolozi after a series of relief postings to the remote Zululand stations of Ndumu, St Lucia and Richard’s Bay in the early 50s, should come as no real surprise. The small band of field rangers staffing the embryonic NPB in those days comprised, in the main, rugged idealists, all imbued with a common addiction to the great African outdoors. All, at some stage or other, fell under the spell of Ian’s special leadership abilities and the inspirational energy he brought to his self-appointed priority – saving iMfolozi Game Reserve and its remnant population of Southern White Rhino, confined to their last stronghold between the White and Black uMfolozi

rivers and staring into the abyss of extinction. For Ian it was akin to another trip into the unknown – only this time the sense of destiny acquired on the Dusi had honed his instincts.

Picture the moment in history. An organisation, the Natal Parks Board, barely out of its cot and facing formidable odds in the form of a hostile farming community; a largely indifferent political class grappling with land-hungry white farmers; a wildlife system in Zululand shot to pieces and poisoned in a succession of tsetse-fly campaigns and, to cap it all, militant challenges posed by angry, dispossessed tribal people and their domestic livestock. IMfolozi Game Reserve was, at that time, but one in a nascent network of game reserves dating back to 1895. These reserves, demarcated by mere lines drawn on a map, were barely able to live up to their legal designation.

Once the integrity of the iMfolozi Reserve had been secured, Ian's next priority in 1957 was to ensure that the white rhino received preferential management treatment in order to maximise its recovery – a decision involving interventions, many of which would be frowned upon in today's holistic conservation world. A ranger and his game guards had but three basic tools to carry out their duties; a keen pair of eyes coupled with a naturalist's logic, a box of matches and a rifle. Science-based management as we know it today simply did not exist.

Facilitating Ian's efforts was the fact that once a major policy decision was made, he and his staff were authorised to get to work and implement management as they saw fit, unquestioned. This may all seem somewhat *laissez faire*. But it is precisely this type of demanding environment in which problems

became rapidly magnified, and required decisive action, that helped to spawn many very innovative management practices – not rhino capture alone.

Operation Rhino, under Ian's authority in the field, was initiated in response to a very real threat to the survival of the Southern White Rhino. The entire world population of 453 animals counted by Ian in an aerial survey in 1953 was confined to a mere 72 000 acres, an environment especially prone to disease such as anthrax, spread by local domestic livestock. The Board sensed that action had to be taken to avoid a catastrophe – and quickly. The record shows that it backed Ian in his assertion that a solution lay in the then relatively untested method of immobilising rhino using drugs and then translocating them to safer parts of their former range as well as into overseas zoos as an insurance against extinction.

Yes, it is true Ian was but one member of a determined crew of fellow rangers, a veterinary drug researcher and a supportive Head Office in Colonel Jack Vincent the Director, and John Geddes-Page. But it was Ian's dynamic leadership and determination in the field that overcame a host of failures and many, many trials and tribulations – accompanied by a number of very humorous incidents – which eventually led to the correct capture technique and drug cocktails being perfected.

It is not always appreciated that this world-acclaimed operation not only rescued the White Rhino from the brink, but also anchored its recovery in extraordinary abundance throughout its former range. The operation also acted as a lightning rod to what is today an unparalleled expansion of biodiversity, boasting more wildlife than was present in South Africa 150 years ago.

This is an opportune point at which to reflect on Ian's pragmatic approach to wildlife conservation. Saving an iconic species, the rhino, doing what was necessary in that sense – not simply saving individual animals – became his primary focus. Accordingly, alongside his passion for wilderness, the gold standard in conservation, he was reconciled to actively promoting the capture and sale of rhino into captivity in overseas safari parks in order to gain financial leverage for domestic translocations of wild rhino to repopulate parts of its former once vast range.

And in another vein, while he himself personally abhorred hunting for pleasure, he nonetheless later became a firm champion of the hunting industry. Why? Because he recognised hunting as an important vehicle for advancing the status of the species and, as a by-product, biodiversity. And in the case of legalising the sale of rhino horn, harvesting horn from living animals did not appeal to him but he agreed that if a harvested horn could save the life of wild rhinos in iMfolozi or Kruger National Park, then he was fully supportive of the concept.

Overshadowed at the time was another highly significant outcome. Operation Rhino injected political legitimacy into the fragile Zululand formally-protected area network, ensuring its continued existence. On the back of this new found respect, the NPB, a Cinderella statutory body hardly worthy of the odd comment in the press, suddenly gained enormous prestige amid dazzling media attention. In an otherwise bleak period in South Africa's news space, the NPB was touted as the world leader in its field. Operation Rhino was a turning point, the likes of which has never been repeated in the

annals of conservation history.

All the world loves a hero and to Ian deservedly fell that distinction – instant celebrity status. Locally, to the public, media and major wildlife NGOs, he became the very face of the NPB, while at the international level his reputation soared. Locally, his column "A Game Ranger's Notebook", published weekly in a local newspaper, was a stroke of genius as it brought game ranging into the living rooms of ordinary city folk in a very personalised manner. Suddenly, a visit to a game reserve to see rhino in the wild became a popular pastime for South Africans after decades of a becalmed public interest in its wildlife heritage.

Alongside the by now refined rhino capture operation, Ian had also by 1965 opened another crucially important game management front. Spotting a glimmer of interest by the private sector, 1967 found him encouraging a local livestock farmer in the Ntabamyama district to set aside an area for wildlife and to practise commercial wildlife management. It bore fruit and more and more farmers took up the challenge taking advantage of a new NPB dispensation – private ownership of wildlife. All that was missing was a sustainable source of game to fuel this promising new movement and, once again, Ian was up for the challenge.

Rhino capture may well have stolen much of the thunder, but the establishment of a specialist team, concentrating on the capture of surplus plains game species proved a prophetic decision. Ian, his canny instincts again to the fore, found the experts he needed to develop revolutionary techniques, now standard wildlife management practice.

A second challenge to the future of white rhino came in 1972; paradoxically

from a completely different quarter – this time from having too many rhino! Transferred, reluctantly, to Head Office on promotion in 1969 amid rising tensions within the organisation and squabbles over the Board’s strategic mandate, Ian turned to exploring options to overcome this new challenge. The Board now faced the embarrassing problem of a rate of rhino removal well short of the number necessary to maintain numbers within the safe biological carrying capacity of iMfolozi. This disturbing trend had occurred in spite of a streamlined capture and translocation programme involving the sale of viable breeding groups. Rhino fecundity under enhanced protection proved unstoppable, while the rising costs of moving rhino to domestic locations had begun to develop serious budget implications.

Inevitably, elements within the Board itself along with others seeking to end the Player centre-stage dominance, began to hint that the time had come to invoke the unthinkable – culling excess rhino in the iMfolozi. Ian’s response was his famous “over my dead body” statement. Instead he focused on a compromise solution – essentially utilitarian. After much debate he persuaded the Board to relegate the rhino’s legal status from untouchable (Specially Protected) to protected. No sooner had that been done than a new outlet for surplus rhino emerged – an invaluable one so it turns out – as white rhino entered the private sector. History will show that the 5 000 white rhino in private hands today and the 20 million hectares the species helped contribute to the wildlife estate in RSA, evolved from a simple legislative amendment.

Of all his accomplishments, though, his embrace of wilderness, a concept new to South Africa in the early 1960s,

and the role he played as its architect, in the face of considerable resistance to its establishment in iMfolozi and St. Lucia, must rank as one of Ian’s greatest achievements. It found a more altruistic expression early on in the 1960s in his special brainchild, The Wilderness Leadership School, which has seen thousands upon thousands of people from all walks of life, young and old, poor, rich and famous, benefitting from that same experience he himself had undergone – a re-affirmation of man’s humble place in the greater scheme of things. On trail in the iMfolozi wilderness with his friend and mentor Maqubu Ntombela, a very powerful duo was formed bringing home this message to a wide spectrum of highly influential people over many years.

In 1974 he took leave of the NPB. His style cramped, coupled with persistent differences of opinion at a senior level, and with sights set on wider horizons, he resigned. His special project envisaging a worldwide network for wilderness conservation beckoned. His departure left a huge void in the ranks of the Board and looking back, I am in no doubt that this triggered a major setback for the fortunes of nature conservation in the province. One only has to look at the trail of bureaucratically inspired events which followed his leaving. The culmination was the absurd spectacle of two separate conservation organisations, divided along the fault lines of apartheid political ideology, each competing for control of the province’s natural assets in a gross mismatch of capacity. Had Ian and his wider vision around wilderness been accommodated in 1974 by the Board in an expanded portfolio of responsibilities, making full use of his talents and statesmanship, this anomaly and all its ensuing rancour would never

have occurred. Neither would the opportunity have been lost of making headway in a number of what are today critically important areas of policy.

His contribution to wilderness, added to his past achievements in the field of wildlife management, brought deserved recognition and reward from academia, international institutions, civil society and in prestigious government honours lists, awards that continued to grow in number. A humble man, he rarely spoke of them. Worthy of note is the respect with which he was held abroad. On many occasions Ian was being welcomed overseas with open arms at a time when South Africa was an ugly smudge on the face of world affairs.

At home he went on to serve both the NPB and SANParks as a board member, one of very few men to rise from the ranks of humble ranger to high office in the controlling institutions.

Judged from afar, Ian could be described as a complex human being. He frequently and vehemently crossed swords with interests he considered threatening to the natural environment. His capacity for driving hidebound civil servants to distraction was legendary. He possessed a prescient sense of judgment and timing. He influenced and gained for the Board and conservation the sympathetic ear of many senior statesmen, powerful men and women, at a difficult time in history. He was never found wanting in supporting a worthy cause. He formed incredibly loyal personal friendships, was rarely dismissive of opposing viewpoints but unwavering

and decisive once his convictions had cured. People of different persuasions from all over the world continued to beat a path to his door seeking advice. This open door attitude continued even when ill health had fastened its grip on his energies. To my knowledge he never refused anyone an audience nor failed to respond to an email, nor did he belittle or hold grudges against those with whom he differed.

A word about the unsung hero in Ian's life. The NPB was admittedly one dominated by men, but in Ian's case always there for him was Ann, his wife and soulmate of 57 years. Ann is a very private, perceptive person always in the background but very much to the fore in her role as Ian's wise primary counsellor and, of course, the pillar of the family support base, often in very trying circumstances. Ann has played an indispensable role. We salute her for all she did for Ian and for conservation.

So I have come to the end of my thesis around Ian Player. I am more proud than words can describe to have been a colleague, close friend, and in recent years, collaborator over the need to once again apply our wits intelligently to the rhino poaching crisis. This unnecessary slaughter was so hurtful to Ian who had done so much to save them over 50 years ago.

I will miss him, you too will miss him, and the world will surely miss Ian Player, conservation statesman and universal defender of our natural world.

DAVID COOK