Swaziland showing Africa how to save rhinos – Interview with Ted Reilly – Part 1

March 26, 2014 By Scott Ramsay

If you're concerned about the calamitous state of rhinos – and wildlife – in Africa, then consider what Ted Reilly has to say.

Now 75 years old, Ted has worked his whole adult life for the protection of the Kingdom of Swaziland's wildlife and its natural habitat.

With support from King Sobhuza II, Reilly pioneered and implemented the establishment of the kingdom's protected areas.

In 1960 Reilly turned the small family farm of Mlilwane near the capital Mbabane into a wildlife sanctuary, after the British colonial powers denied him land elsewhere to establish a national park. Mlilwane was then proclaimed in 1964 as the first formal conservation area in Swaziland. The 'farm' was then donated to a non-profit Trust to perpetuate it as a refuge for Swaziland's beleaguered wild animals.

Ted Reilly

Ted Reilly and his team also successfully reintroduced 22 large wild animal species into the country, including lion, elephant, rhino and hippo, after hunters had exterminated almost all wildlife by the 1960s.

White and black rhino were reintroduced in 1965 and 1986 respectively. **Since 1992, just three rhinos have been killed by poachers in Swaziland (two in 2011, and one recently in 2014).** As a percentage of the total rhino population in Swaziland, this is a fraction of the rhinos lost in South Africa. **According to the**

International Union for Conservation of Nature, Swaziland's rhino protection is unmatched by any other country.

This came about largely as a result of the Game Act, a highly effective piece of conservation legislation that was initiated and drafted by Ted Reilly, approved by King Mswati III and passed into law by Parliament.

From nothing, Swaziland now boasts several formal protected areas, including Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary (4600 ha), Hlane Royal National Park (25 000ha), Mkhaya Game Reserve (10 000 ha), Malalotja (18 200ha), Mlawula Mbuluzi (2400ha) .

Today Reilly and his team of 300 staff run **Big Game Parks**, a trust which operates Hlane Royal National Park on behalf of King Mswati III, and also manages Mkhaya and Mlilwane.

This year is Big Game Park's 50th anniversary. Like the central campfire at Milwane which has burnt continuously night and day for 50 years – and continues to burn – Reilly and his team have kept the flames of conservation shining brightly in the small kingdom, often against great odds.

I recently travelled to Mlilwane to interview the softly-spoken conservationist at Reilly's Rock, a beautiful guesthouse which once served as the family home, and in which Ted Reilly was born in 1938.

SCOTT RAMSAY:

How has Swaziland – and in particular Big Game Parks – been so successful with conservation of rhinos – and other wildlife?

TED REILLY:

Swaziland's Game Act is a very powerful piece of government legislation.

If you poach or attempt to poach one of the specially protected species (white or black rhino, elephant or lion), **you will go to jail**. There's a minimum of five years imprisonment, which could be increased to 15 years. **There is no option of paying a fine to get off your jail sentence**.

On top of your jail sentence, the prescribed value of the rhino poached must be paid back to the owner of the animal. And if you can't, then an additional 2 years is added to your jail term. So if a female adult rhino is worth E200 000, then this must be paid back to the owner of the rhino. (*E=Emalangeni, the Swazi currency, fixed at 1:1 to the South African Rand*).

In South Africa, if you poach a rhino, you don't necessarily go to jail, but are given the option to pay a fine and walk free. It is much easier to pay a fine than it is to go to jail

Our laws in Swaziland don't provide for a reduction of a sentence, or a suspension of a sentence. The court is mandatorily bound to impose a fine to the value of the animal poached. **This legislation has worked for more than 20 years in Swaziland. Since then, we've only lost three rhinos to poaching.**

Our anti-poaching legislation in Swaziland is preventative legislation – not remedial legislation. We prefer not to put people in jail and we want to keep our rhinos alive. **People say our law is draconian, but it's worked. The Game Act has kept people out of jail, and it's kept our rhinos alive, so everyone wins.**

Of course, just like any other crime, you can never eliminate rhino poaching completely, but the Game Act provenly reduces this crime.

The Game Act also enables the rangers to do their job effectively. **They have a right to carry arms**, whereas before they only carried spears and knobsticks against poachers using AK47s. Now we can match them in weaponry. **Our rangers have effective powers of arrest, and they are able to search anyone, anywhere in the country** – not just in the parks – without a search warrant.

The Game Act has worked so well in Swaziland that Prince Bernhard of Netherlands wanted a copy of our legislation to present to President Moi of Kenya, to suggest that they adopt similar legislation, but unfortunately nothing has come of it.

Finally, we also have excellent intelligence in the communities, and we are almost always aware of where the poachers are, and what they are doing. **We have a standing public offer of E50 000 reward for any information that leads to the conviction of a poacher, and this has been very effective**.

SCOTT RAMSAY:

What's your opinion on the current rhino situation, especially in South Africa, including Kruger National Park?

TED REILLY:

The Kruger Park is currently the most active coalface of rhino poaching. Rhinos are being plundered at the rate of at least two animals per day, which is where Swaziland was at the end of the first rhino war of 1998-92 when our Game Act was amended.

It is a sad indictment on society that the results of a recent analysis conclude that the single most dangerous threat to the men and women at the poaching coalface is the threat of being charged with murder for performing their duty for society.

It is not the threat of bodily harm or sudden death, but the threat of being charged with murder. Can you imagine how constraining this must be in extremely dangerous circumstances? Rangers and all other law enforcers need encouragement and protection – not threats of reprisal. **This is war we are talking about!**

Additionally, the number of rhino deaths is probably understated. The government of South Africa says about one thousand rhinos were poached last year in 2013, but they have only counted the recovered carcasses. What about those eaten by carnivores, those that are not found, those orphaned calves that died as a result of their mothers dying, or the in-utero calves? Kruger is huge, and there's no way that all dead rhinos can be found. So no doubt the actual number of deaths is more than quoted.

It's a tragedy that there's such a difference in approach between genuine, well-meaning people in their proposed solutions to the rhino poaching issue. You'll never get consensus on the solution to the problem. It takes real, determined national leadership to devise and implement the solutions, and at the moment, there is no leadership.

The evidence of this is in the number of rhino NGOs. Ian Player was telling me the other day that there are 280 registered NGOs that are involved in raising money for rhinos. Imagine the cost of administering 280 separate NGOs! And very little of the money probably reaches the actual rhinos. And of course each NGO is effectively competing with each other.

If there was national leadership, and an effective national government organisation for rhino anti-poaching, there wouldn't be 280 NGOs running around.

Finally, the first place you ever look when you have poaching is internally. You look at the people in the parks, the rangers, the managers and the military. Poaching of rhinos cannot happen without local knowledge. And I'm sure that some rangers, military and conservation staff are complicit in the rhino poaching.

The biggest crime-supporting device ever invented was the cell phone, and it's enabling poaching within the parks. A ranger, soldier or park staff member can spot a rhino, send a text message across the border to someone in Mozambique, or to a soldier on the South African side, and an hour later the rhino is dead.

SCOTT RAMSAY:

What would you suggest is done to stop the poaching in Kruger?

TED REILLY:

Every protected area requires nuanced solutions. There is no single solution that can be applied as a panacea to all of Africa.

But for Kruger, **we have to revisit the politically-incorrect concept of fortress conservation**. To help combat rhino poaching, South Africa must put the fence back up between Kruger and Mozambique. Hard borders are imperative. Soft borders are just a nice idea.

There's still a widespread misconception that soft borders will garner support of the communities, but in Kruger's case, the concept of a transfrontier park with no fences between the countries is not working. We have to consider our wildlife – our rhinos – to be national assets of immense value, which of course they are. And we have to protect them as such.

The global solution involves the reduction of demand overseas in Vietnam and China, **but here, on the ground, we have to protect our wildlife with proper security, proper legislation and effective enforcement by well-armed, well-trained, well-protected and well-supported anti-poaching staff who are committed to the cause.**

SCOTT RAMSAY:

It is Big Game Parks 50th anniversary. Mlilwane was proclaimed as Swaziland's first formal protected area in 1964, followed by Hlane Royal National Park in 1967 and Mkhaya Game Reserve in 1982. For you, what are the highlights of the past 50 years?

TED REILLY:

There are three main highlights for me.

First, the re-establishment of 22 species into Swaziland, including elephant, lion, buffalo, giraffe, blue duiker, suni, black and white rhino.

Swaziland was a British Protectorate up until independence in 1968, but it was the chosen hunting ground of the Transvaal during the early 1900s. Wildebeest were so plentiful that they were declared vermin.

People were invited to hunt with reckless abandon. Some even used Vickers machine guns to shoot wildlife. Waterholes were poisoned, and this probably killed more animals than bullets. The people of the British Colonial Government at the time wanted to tame the country so they could convert land into farm.

Hundreds of thousands of wild animals were killed. In the 1930s and 1940s, about a thousand impalas were shot each week and trucked up to Johannesburg to the weekly market. Incredibly, so many antelope were shot that it was impossible to sell all of it, so the meat was boiled down, minced and fed to pigs.

By the 1950s while I was growing up here, there were still plenty of wild animals left. But by the early 1960s, almost all of it had disappeared. The roan antelope was once plentiful, but the last one was found snared in 1961 near what is today Hlane Royal National Park.

It wasn't until it became scarce that people woke up. So the reintroduction of those 22 species is a major achievement. The only species we haven't yet managed to reintroduce – which was found here – is the Sharp's grysbok.

The lion and the elephant are particularly important to Swaziland, because they are the symbols of the king and queen mother, who are known as Ngwenyama (Lion) and Ndlovukazi (Elephant) respectively. Today both species can be found at Hlane Royal National Park, while there is also elephant at Mkhaya Game Reserve.

Secondly, the economic viability and self-sustainability of our parks on self-generated revenues is a major highlight. Conservation is not cheap, and is enormously expensive. All our parks independently have attained their financial self-sufficiency. And together they can afford to pay levies to Big Game Parks to administer them.

BGP is economically viable notwithstanding that it provides for the lower end of the market with affordable prices to accommodate all Swazis. And school children are given subsidised rates. We purposely keep our rates down to allow all markets and all Swazis to visit our parks. More than 50% of our visitors are locals. We are very proud of this. And it's a remarkable achievement given what's happening elsewhere in Africa.

Overall, we have achieved self-sufficiency for all three parks without government subsidies from the public. At Hlane Royal National Park, the government pays for the salaries of the employees, but we pay for everything else, including food, accommodation, health care, uniforms and training.

BGP employs 300 people, each of which has ten to 40 dependents, so it is directly supporting at least 4 000 Swazis in the country. We also pay for all our own security measures, which are very expensive indeed.

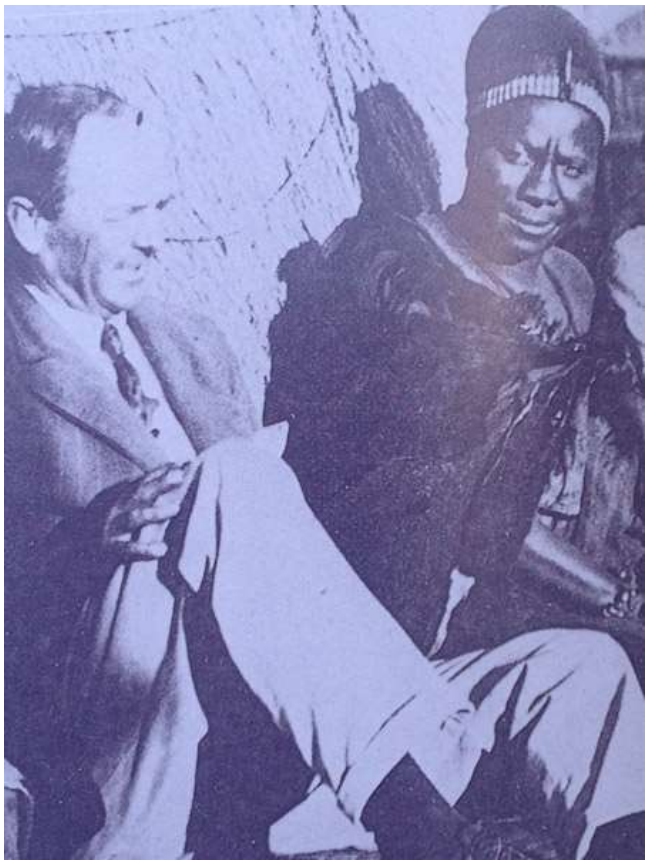
Thirdly, we have attracted and kept the confidence of successive heads of state. This started in the early 1960s with King Sobhuza II, who was a personal friend of my father Mickey and who donated wild animals to Mlilwane.

And the current head of state, King Mswati III, continues to entrust BGP with the management of Hlane Royal National Park on his behalf, and is deeply committed to the cause of conservation. So we have established the trust and confidence of each king and Queen Mother, and regard that as a greatly satisfying achievement.

King Mswati III, who continues to support Big Game Parks' conservation efforts in Swaziland

After being hunted to local extinction in the mid 1900s, the lion is back...in Swaziland, it is the symbol of the king. This photo taken at Hlane Royal National Park.

King Sobhuza II, who was a personal friend of Ted Reilly's father Mickey. The king asked Ted to spearhead conservation efforts in Swaziland.



Ted's father Mickey with Queen Regent Lomawa, the mother of King Sobhuza II

The photo that changed a nation's perceptions of wildlife. Ted's son Mickey with white rhino, taken in the early 1970s. Far from being dangerous and violent animals, as some hunters would have people believe, white rhinos are actually docile - and with protection they are quite trusting of humans. In Swaziland, most of the rhinos are highly habituated to people and vehicles, because they have been spared hunting - and poaching - for several decades.

Up close...at Mkhaya Game Reserve and Hlane Royal National Park, it's possible to get up close to white rhino, which in Swaziland are habituated to vehicles and the rangers.

Guide Bongani Mbatha at Mkhaya Game Reserve with guests and white rhinos.

Black rhino and red-billed oxpecker at Mkhaya

Thousands of snares were collected from the veld in Mlilwane, Hlane and Mkhaya. At one stage, these snares outnumbered the total number of wild animals several times over. These snares are on display at Mlilwane.

The last roan in Swaziland was shot long ago by hunters. Today Ted Reilly has reintroduced a small but growing population of these rare antelope at Mlilwane...

At the Mlilwane campfire that has been burning for 50 years, since the start of conservation in Swaziland: Bheki Knwanyana, Ntsikie Giwindza and Nhlanhla Giwindza, three of the 300 staff that work directly for Big Game Parks.

Ted Reilly and his family continue to actively lead conservation efforts in Swaziland. In this photo Ted's daughter Ann is looking out over Mlilwane from the top of Nyonyane Mountain

Reilly's Rock, the guesthouse at Mlilwane, and where Ted was born in 1938. Big Game Parks (Mlilwane, Mkhaya and Hlane) have well-developed accommodation and activities for visitors.

Swaziland was once a hunting mecca for colonial hunters from the Transvaal. Then it was almost all wiped out, and most natural habitat was transformated into agriculture. Today Swaziland's protected areas are tiny pockets of what remained, but Big Game Parks are stringent and passionate in their conservation efforts, and wildlife always has right of way in the parks.

Impala were the first wild animals which Ted and his rangers translocated into Mlilwane...

A blue duiker at Mlilwane...the second-smallest antelope in Africa

A suni antelope, another rare species found only in the forest regions of the south-eastern parts of Southern Africa

Trading rhino horn, and hunting – Interview with Ted Reilly – Part 2

March 26, 2014 By Scott Ramsay

SCOTT RAMSAY:

What's your opinion on the proposed trading of rhino horn?

TED REILLY:

Nothing will ever stop the poaching. There is no magic wand that will absolutely solve the problem.

But if trade is to be tried, then it must be done very soon, so we can cushion the losses that surely will come. If trade doesn't work, then we have enough rhinos left to pull the plug on trade and save what's left. If we wait until there are only a few thousand rhino left, then they will become extinct. Already, though, we have just a few thousand rhinos left, so our window of opportunity to trade is running out quickly. Everything else has been tried and we will never know until we make the effort of doing it.

SCOTT RAMSAY:

What's your opinion on trophy hunting?

TED REILLY:

Personally I have no stomach for killing wild life and less so killing wildlife for sport or fun, but hunting has to be accommodated in the conservation matrix. That's the reality.

As a boy I hunted, but as an adult I lost interest in it. However, I'm the first to say that the need has to be accommodated.

It's very lucrative. And that persuades private landowners to save habitat, to provide for the hunting of wild animals, instead of converting that habitat to agriculture or livestock. Without habitat, the wildlife can't exist. The protection and expansion of areas under natural habitat must be conservation's first and most important goal.

I have no problem if someone shoots an endangered animal like a rhino if they bought it and own it. I don't think ownership should be interfered with, because ownership is the reason habitat is being privately protected. It is easy to replace game to natural habitat if it is available, but once you have destroyed habitat, it cannot easily be replaced, so everything that helps to conserve habitat – including hunting – has to be considered, validated and accommodated.

Look at South Africa. In the 1960s, game was very scarce. Since private ownership of wildlife was allowed in SA, there is now more game on private land in South Africa than in all the of the national and provincial parks combined, and there is three times more natural habitat being conserved on private than public land.

Compare this with Kenya, where they stopped hunting, and since then there has been a 80% decline in natural habitat. Wildlife in Kenya is totally dependent on government and NGO funds, and it doesn't nearly cover the costs of conservation.

As an aside, there are lots of good people who support Kenya's approach, but lots of those people are not conversant with the realities on the ground.

Ownership is key. If you allow private ownership of animals, and allow the owner to manage his own animals, there is inevitably a remarkable expansion of habitat. If you're sitting on a piece of ground, and you can't make money out of it from wildlife, and you can make money out of it from farming and livestock…then of course you're going to do the latter. Money is the source of all evil, but you can't eat without it, and you can't conserve without it.

We've got to be pragmatic, and unless we are, we have far less chance of success. So financial independence is essential. It is the only window to withstanding corruptive influences in the face of threats to survival. And hunting is one way to achieve that financial independence.

Big Game Parks is fortunate to be self-sufficient without hunting. Over my dead body will we ever start hunting here. All our costs are met from funding from tourism, live game sales and harvesting surplus game for protein affordable to the lower end of the market.

Finally, hunting and game viewing areas cannot mix and ideally should not border each other. It just doesn't work. Animals soon catch on and become very shy and skittish, making for poor viewing for tourists.

SCOTT RAMSAY:

What would you say to those who claim that trophy hunting removes the best and biggest genes, because hunters always target the biggest and most impressive of the species?

TED REILLY:

Big Game Parks, in its harvesting, selects against trophy removal – it is the only selection we do, but it is more for aesthetic purposes than for genetic purposes because trophy animals often leave their genes behind before being taken.

If an owner of a property decides to destroy or hunt his prize trophy, then let him do it, because he alone will bear the cost. He has to conserve his own gene pool and ensure that he has more trophies for more hunters to hunt. We believe in not interfering with the sovereignty of ownership or the management integrity of game ranchers. So we have to be careful about too much regulation.

Let's leave it up to the owners of wildlife to decide how best to use it. **There's nothing like ownership to inspire effective management of your wildlife assets.** Let those who fail fall by the wayside and support those who are successful. The latter will provide for those who fail with jobs and other benefits within economic parameters. It is something akin to triage. It's futile supporting basket cases!

SCOTT RAMSAY:

What about Botswana's recent decision to ban all hunting?

TED REILLY:

It's Botswana's choice. Only Botswana can make that choice, and only Botswana will pay for it if it fails.

As noble as that idea may seem, ownership as a concept must be linked to reward. And if the owners of wildlife aren't allowed to decide for themselves what they do with that wildlife, then there is no reward, and no incentive to conserve wildlife. Conservation land use will then give way for something that will pay.

For part 3 of my interview with Ted Reilly – click here. He talks about his own life in conservation, and the future of protected areas in Africa.

According to Ted Reilly, the preservation of natural habitat that results from the lucrative hunting industry has allowed wild megafauna like lions and elephants - which need large areas - to survive.

Lion cub in Hlane Royal National Park

On the prowl...a lioness leads the way on a hunt in Hlane Royal National Park

A male lion in Hlane Royal National Park

Ranger Sdumo Ndzinisa outside Hlane Royal National Park's entrance, where thousands of snares are on display. All of these snares were collected from the veld over several

years...without independent financial sustainability, parks in Africa are increasingly threatened by a lack of public money subsidies, and there is increasing pressure to convert natural habitat into land that pays for itself. Eco tourism and hunting are the only two ways to make money from natural habitat.

Would you be able to get this close to white rhinos if hunting was allowed? Although hunting is important in conservation, says Ted Reilly, eco-tourism and hunting areas cannot be mixed, as wild animals soon become fearful of humans in hunting areas, and will run away quickly. Where there is no hunting, wild animals are often remarkably trusting of humans.

Guide Bongani Mbatha with black rhino at Mkhaya Game Reserve

Buffalo and red-billed oxpeckers at Mkhaya Game Reserve...

Chilling by the pool...white rhinos laze about near the waterhole at Hlane Royal National Park

A beautiful male nyala antelope in Mkhaya Game Reserve