

Wilderness and the Environment

IN THE reprint of John Bird's excellent article (*Natalia* Volume 1, No. 1) there is a vivid phrase which illustrates the local change of scene between 1846 and 1972. He wrote referring to Natal, 'the new country was almost a desert; and it may be well to advert at the outset to the first thing noticed by a new comer — the paucity or absence of population . . .' Now, having experienced a great population explosion, Natal has less wilderness than the Highlands of Scotland.

The effects of this growth are plain to see: cities, highways and beaches, all congested and noisy; smog and soil erosion. The Umsunduzi, the Umgeni and their tributaries once ran clear, many within the memory of our fathers. Fortunately a climate and soils not dissimilar to Europe enabled some of our forefathers in Natal to farm along conservation lines, though the reverse is true of the more brittle ecological conditions in the drier parts of South Africa. Nevertheless the population build up and the policy of placing blacks in the most hilly parts of the province where farming, as it always does in such regions, demanded a great deal of scientific knowledge, together with the poor farming methods of many whites, has led and is leading to the silting and destruction of many rivers. It is estimated that during the summer rains a fifteen acre farm flows down the Tugela river and into the sea every day. Gone are the days when big fish came up the river and could be caught below the Ultimatum Tree. Silt is choking our rivers and hardly a stream between the Portuguese border and the Cape is not polluted in some way.

The game herds that John Bird saw have all but vanished. It is only in the wilderness areas of Giant's Castle, Hluhluwe, Umfolozi, Ndumu, Mkuze and Lake St. Lucia that any are left. It is true that many farmers appreciate that game can play a part in farm economics and slowly farms are being restocked with the help of the Natal Parks Board, but very few of the farms are over a thousand acres in extent, and the animals lead an almost artificial existence. The full natural beauty of most of Natal is a thing of the past.

Humanity is involved in a tremendous struggle for survival. Sir George Stapledon in his book *Human Ecology* says that considerable unbalance exists in our way of life. Man's adaptability is the key to his progress, but it also enables him to create an environment that threatens to engulf him. Natal, like California, is a clear example of expansion outstripping planning, leading to environmental decline and impoverishment of the quality of life.

Aldo Leopold, the great American forester and wild life biologist, preached the necessity of having an ecological conscience. Today the need for this conscience is urgent. We need a conscience about the continued destruction of our Natal landscape. The once beautiful view from Signal Hill to Maritzburg and beyond to Table Mountain is being savaged. A little landscape planning such as that practised by Sylvia Crowe in the Scottish Highlands, could have obviated many eyesores. We need a conscience about litter. Soil erosion should be looked upon as cutting deep wounds in the earth. We desperately need to

protect and nurture the remaining wilderness areas. These are the temples of silence and places for the rejuvenation of our people.

There are many organizations dedicated to the protection of wildlife, or birds, or historical buildings, and they all constitute a part of the struggle for the environment¹. The Wilderness Leadership School is one such organization. I happen to know this one well, because I was the founder. Its philosophy is simple: man to God, man to man, man to the soil. To achieve this, boys, girls and young adults who have proven leadership qualities or who have leadership potential are taken on a course in the wilderness areas of Natal and are subjected to the spiritual impact of wilderness.

It all began in 1957 when I was stationed at Lake St. Lucia and a group of boys from my old school came to visit me. I took them out onto the lake, showed them the dune forests on the eastern shores and how hippo going out to graze at night on the grasslands wore furrows which led fresh water into the lake. I took them to Otoneni, the crocodile nesting grounds, and to Bird Island where pelican, sacred ibis, Caspian terns and grey-headed gulls nested. I showed them the dark waters of Lake Bangazi and the then wild beaches where the sea was crystal clear. They saw a mullet migration and heard the fish eagles calling from a clear sky. When they returned they all wrote saying how the experience had 'changed their lives', a phrase I was to hear frequently.

Their reaction gave me the idea of forming the Wilderness Leadership School. In 1958 I was transferred to Umfolozi Game Reserve and initiated and conducted the first Wilderness Trails. The daily exposure to wilderness and contact with the kind of people who wanted to experience it reinforced the idea and I became convinced of the need for the Wilderness Leadership School.

The concept of wilderness goes back a long way into history. Jesus Christ went into the wilderness and so did many of the prophets. The experience gave them strength to face the daily issues and lead mankind along the proper path.

So it is today. It is a proportion of the people concerned in creative human professions — teachers, doctors, lawyers, architects and so on — who want spiritual recreation. The Wilderness Leadership School seeks to provide this. Over two thousand boys, girls, men and women have been through the school and they constitute a powerful force in the conservation battle. Although the school was started, has its headquarters in Natal and concentrates on Natal wilderness areas, it is now an international organization. For the past two years American boys and girls have been on courses, and it is anticipated that eventually fifty a year will participate, and the same number of adults. There have been applications from Britain, Germany and Spain as well. The school receives financial support from Game Conservation International in Texas and from the Mzuri Safari Club in San Francisco. The main financial support in South Africa comes from the Sugar Association.

The school has a Board of Governors headed by South Africa's most famous conservationist, T. C. Robertson. Trustees include the Hon. Justice Broome, Dr. W. J. Busschau and Chris Saunders. The school's staff consists of two senior field officers, Barry Clements and Hugh Dent, both former game rangers with many years' experience in the bush. It is an interesting fact that most people associated with the school come from families which go back to the 1820 settlers or have made a contribution to Natal.

The headquarters of the school are at Stainbank Nature Reserve in Durban. Kenneth Stainbank kindly lent an old stable which has been converted into an

office which retains all the characteristics of the fine old stone building built so many years ago. The school operates in the game reserves by courtesy of the Natal Parks Board. Negotiations with the Department of Forestry are progressing well and it is hoped that large areas of the Drakensberg wilderness will be available to the school.

A course begins in Durban, goes to Ian Garland's farm at Mtunzini, then into the wilderness areas of Umfolozi Game Reserve where the participants walk amongst white rhino, lion, leopard, and antelope. Nights are spent in the open and each person has to spend an hour at the fire alone. From Umfolozi they go to Lake St. Lucia and canoe along the eastern shores of the lake. They are shown the role of the hippo in keeping channels open, the fish migrations, pelican and flamingo migrations, the balance between fresh water and salt water and the vegetation depending upon it all. Finally they have a thirty mile walk down the beach. Here they experience beach wilderness and have the opportunity to see a coastline that has not been ruined by masses of concrete and commercialization.

Few people have not gone away inspired. The majority know nothing of conservation or what it really means, but they have had a spiritual experience which they will never forget. It is true that not all participants are impressed. I realized in the beginning that there was little hope of getting the wilderness concept across to everyone, but the ones who do benefit become determined to do something positive. In the last year Indians and Africans have gone on course and their response has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

At the end of each course an *indaba* is held. It is an emotional experience listening to the young leaders of every race speaking about the impact of the course and of their determination to do something positive for conservation. Adults in the thirty to forty-five age group are applying to go on course and many of them are inspired to take action.

The time is ripe for the formation of a Wilderness Society, for which the Wilderness Leadership School will provide recruits. The Wilderness Society should become the mouthpiece of all those who want to preserve and maintain the wilderness areas in the knowledge that it is here that the human spirit is uplifted.

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Note:

1. Many of these are listed in the 'Register of Societies and Institutions', pp 39 below.

Further reading:

PLAYER, Ian. *Men, Rivers and Canoes*, 1964.

STEELE, Nick. *Game Ranger on Horseback*, 1968.
Take a Horse to the Wilderness, 1971.

WICHT, Hein. *To Hide and to Seek*, 1971.