

Portrait of my friend *Magqubu Ntombela*

Magqubu Ntombela's first memory is of being carried on his mother's shoulders to watch the troops go by on their way to capture Dinizulu in the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906. His father had been in the inGobamakhosi Regiment in the Zulu War of 1879 and fought against the British at Isandhlawana. His grandfather had served Shaka and his great-grandfather had served Senzangakona. Although Magqubu cannot read and write his knowledge of history is exact and unflinching. He remembers everything passed down from father to son.

Magqubu's home is at Macibini near the entrance to the Umfolozi Game Reserve. Here he has two wives, lots of grandchildren, a herd of cattle, some goats and sheep. But he has never spent a great deal of time at home. At 14 he was a guide to hunters who came to shoot in the crown lands adjoining Hluhluwe and Umfolozi Game Reserves. He was already a skilled tracker because, like all his Zulu contemporaries, he had to herd the goats, some of which inevitably got lost in the bush and had to be tracked down. Failure to bring the whole herd back meant a severe thrashing. Magqubu also learnt how to set snares for guineafowl and francolin, and what wild fruits were good to eat. It was a life very close to nature. White rhino, black rhino, lion, leopard, cheetah, kudu, impala, reedbuck, were all part of his daily life. He learnt their habits and imitated their calls.

At the age of 16 he was employed as a labourer by Vaughan-Kirby, the first Game Conservator of Zululand. Magqubu used to walk to Nongoma with Mali Mdhletshe, a senior game guard, to collect Vaughan-Kirby's kit, then walk back on patrol with Vaughan-Kirby to the Umfolozi Game Reserve, Hluhluwe and Mkuzi. It is no wonder that at his age of 77 he is still so fit. The capture of poachers was part of his life in the 50 odd years that he spent as a game guard. He has been shot at many times and once had to kill a man in self-defence.

I first met him in 1952 shortly after I had joined the Natal Parks Board. I was immediately struck by the man. There was something very compelling about him. Although small in stature and slightly bandy, he exuded confidence. His smile was warm and in talking to him one soon observed his firmness and tact. A psychic bond held us together and intuitively I knew, 25 years ago, that this man would play a big part in my life.

All young game rangers, if they have any sense, become friendly with a game guard because it is a quick way to learn the bush. The white man's whole thought pattern is different and it takes time to become observant and sensitive to the surroundings.

In 1955 I was transferred to the Umfolozi Game Reserve for a year. Magqubu was still employed by the Veterinary Department but I spent all my spare time with him and we went on patrol together. I was deeply impressed with his knowledge. It did not seem possible that one man could

know so much. He knew Umfolozi Game Reserve intimately and every path, pan, hill, valley or stream meant something to him. I once noticed a strange break in the vegetation on the lower slopes of Dengezeni hill. When I asked Magqubu the reason he explained that in the early days of the tsetse fly campaign R. H. T. P. Harris of Harris Fly Trap fame had erected a hessian fence as an experiment to keep the fly in. Needless to say, it was a hopeless failure. With great hilarity and imitating Harris's lisp, Magqubu told me how Harris had bought some old donkeys, poured insecticide onto sacking then wrapped it round the donkeys' legs and let them go into the fly area. The flies bit into the sacking and immediately died. Harris hopped around in great joy exclaiming that he had found the answer to killing off the fly. Many other schemes were tried including his fly trap, but it was aerial spraying with insecticide that eventually eliminated the fly.

In 1958 I returned to Umfolozi Game Reserve as the senior ranger in charge. Magqubu was the head game guard. Nick Steele was in charge of the southern buffer zone and his senior guard was Masuku Mzwabantu. We faced formidable difficulties: squatter invasions, poaching incursions, cattle straying, political interference and a host of other problems. The only pleasure we had were the long horse patrols to all parts of the Reserve. We sat around the fire at night, listening to Magqubu telling stories of the old days when there were different problems to contend with.

In the same year we started the wilderness trails. When the trails were first mooted by Jim Feely and myself, I spoke to Magqubu. He was immediately enthusiastic and said it was the only proper way to get people to understand the importance of the reserves. 'If people see the game reserves like you have seen them, they will love them like you do.' I believe that wilderness trails have helped to bring about an awareness of the importance of wildlife conservation in a way that nothing else can.

In later years when the Wilderness Leadership School became fully active, Magqubu was again involved. He is a natural teacher and was an instant success with the trailers. We took out Americans, Britons and Europeans as well as South African whites, coloureds, blacks and Indians. No matter who made up the group the old man soon had their measure and they quickly learnt how to identify trees, animals and different sounds. Sometimes a group of schoolboys would become a little obstreperous. Magqubu, with a certain gleam in his eye, would start walking at a pace that did not vary up the hills or along the flats. Soon, the giggles and the horseplay stopped. But the old man had no mercy and kept on walking. When someone lagged behind he would shout in Zulu, 'If the lion or the black rhino gets you it will be your own fault'. Even if the person did not understand the language, the gestures and intonation were enough. A tired group limped into camp and the following day there were no disciplinary problems.

In 1964 I was promoted to Chief Conservator Zululand and moved to Hluhluwe. Magqubu decided to return to his *muzi* at Macibini and when I passed his place I always stopped to say hello and talk about old times. He was as energetic as ever, building new huts, ploughing fields and looking after his cattle. But he was never too busy to help us with place name derivations or other specialized tasks. He was always willing to help in any way he could.

In 1969 I was transferred to head office in Pietermaritzburg, much against

my will but orders are orders. It was a sad and bitter day for me when I had to leave Zululand. Magqubu heard about my going. He appeared one morning at my office to say that he would go with me because he knew I would not be spending too much time at home. So today he spends most of the year on my smallholding in the Karkloof where he has become a well-known figure. Every January he goes to Inanda to the Shembe gathering and returns a rejuvenated man.

I left the Natal Parks Board in 1974 to work full-time with the International Wilderness Leadership Foundation and the Wilderness Leadership School. Since then I have travelled all over the world raising money and making arrangements for young Americans, Britons and other people to walk the wilderness trails. Magqubu lives in a thatched cottage on my property and has a kitchen behind an old stable. He has a knowledge of people as deep as his knowledge of animals, and one of the first things I do on my return is to spend time with the old man. It is a great comfort to listen to his sane, down-to-earth views on the world.

Despite his age he is always ready to go on trail and for me it is a relief to be able to hand over to him the moment we slip into the bush. Everyone is always impressed by Magqubu. One man, a very senior executive in a big company in Johannesburg, said, 'This has been the greatest experience of my life, walking in Umfolozi with this old man. I have learnt more in three days than I ever believed was possible. The whole experience has given me a new perspective on life and a deep understanding of the need for wilderness.'

At indabas after the Wilderness Leadership School trails I have tried to explain that a wilderness experience can be the beginning of a voyage of self-exploration. Some values never change and wilderness is one of them. People have always sought a period of isolation, in the desert, on the mountains, the sea or the bush. The Wilderness Leadership School tries to provide for this need today. Magqubu Ntombela as a guide gives an extra dimension to the trail. Even the most prejudiced of people — and we get our fair share — cannot help but get a glimmer of understanding of the importance of the old knowledge that so-called primitive people can pass on to us. As D. H. Lawrence said, 'In the dust where we have buried the silent races and their abominations, we have buried so much of the delicate magic of life'.

So, while he can still walk and see, Magqubu will lead Wilderness Leadership School trails and, as he says, try to pass on verbally what he has learnt. Although I have known him for 25 years, I learn something new every time I go out with him. Just to be with him and watch him walk through the bush is an experience in itself.

From a lifetime of knowledge he knows where a rhino path begins and ends, where it is possible to ford the river. Intuition gives him warning of danger. The screech of the amaHlalanyati (oxpeckers) puts him instantly on guard against a rhino or buffalo ahead. As he does not drink or smoke his sense of smell tells him if a lion is nearby. A rustle in the grass inaudible to anyone else, indicates to him the presence of a snake. A freshly bitten branch, the sap still oozing, tells him a story. A few feathers lying on a sandbank are sufficient information for him to know and reconstruct how a hawk swept out of the sky and killed a dove drinking. Tracks, weeks,



The 77-year-old game guide Magqubu Ntombela with Mr. Ian Player (rear figure) and a party of American 'trailers' at the Wilderness Leadership School.
(Photo: *Daily News*)



Donald Morris, author of *The Washing of the Spears*, Magqubu Ntombela, game guide, and Ian Player, organiser of the Wilderness Trails.

sometimes months old, tell him other stories of lions or hyena stalking an antelope; a quick rush and there still imprinted on the sand is the outline of the prey. One bone is enough for Magqubu to be able to identify the species. Nothing escapes his attention and his enthusiasm, humour and goodwill are limitless.

Earlier this month the Natal region of the Wilderness Foundation put on a wilderness awareness evening in Durban. Magqubu spoke to a small audience with Hugh Dent, a former trail leader of the Wilderness Leadership School, interpreting. The evening was an experiment and it encouraged us enough to stage another in Johannesburg which was a resounding success. When all the seats had been sold, people sat on the floor or leant against the walls. Magqubu had their rapt attention as he imitated Shaka's lisp, then went on to tell stories of the symbiotic relationship between the ratel and the honey guide, and the significance of the mpafa tree. Although no more than three or four people in the crowd could understand Zulu, Magqubu's presence and his ability to mime held the audience.

It was a remarkable evening: an old Zulu keeping more than 400 sophisticated Johannesburg people entertained and instructed for over two hours. It is also perhaps a sign of our times: we are beginning to search for something beyond the material. I believe that a wilderness experience is the key.

IAN PLAYER