

The dream of a Greater Kruger

The Kruger National Park Western Boundary Fence Story



TREVOR JORDAN

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the African wilderness – in this case the Bushveld of the Kruger National Park (KNP) area – on the mind of a mere six-year old can be life-changing. From that day in 1954, I would never again be free of its allure. That was when I first visited my uncle's farm, Buffelshoek, in the north of what is today the Sabi Sand Game Reserve adjoining the Park.

There were no fences on the boundary between the Park and the private farms to the west, just sawn off tree stumps demarcating the divide. The earth reverberated beneath one's feet as thousands of stampeding wildebeest and zebra left tell-tale clouds of dust in their wake as they migrated east-west. They were oblivious to notions of boundaries between state and private property. Private landowners would lure game from KNP onto their properties for many reasons; to conduct a private hunt, a zoo sale, or just to make biltong in their bush kitchens that dotted the landscape.

Traps were used to capture lions and leopards; I remember catching a ride on the back of a 1950 Chevrolet bakkie with a very unhappy and disgruntled lion probably on its way to San Diego Zoo.



Chevrolet Bakkie Mate

A few years later, I guess I was about twelve; a shiny new fence was erected in place of the sawn-off tree stumps. At the time, around 1960, the reason for the fence was of no significance to me; my naïve young mind probably believed it signalled progress. Little did anyone know what a calamity to conservation this fence would turn out to be, setting in motion ego-driven politics as well as a terrible impact on wildlife, especially the dynamics of the zebra and wildebeest herds. I now know that a mere 10% of the wildebeest and 15% of the zebra population are left in the KNP today. I have also come to learn of the negative impact on the habitat and resultant carrying-capacity of the entire Lowveld.

The fence stopped the seasonal east-west game migration between the Kruger National Park, the Klaserie River and the winter grazing areas at the foothills of the escarpment. More

fences started going up between private land-owners. My uncle in due course sold his property, then a fenced cattle and game farm, and for the next ten years I was deprived of visits to the bush. Then, in 1978, the old enchantment drove me to buy a share in Vygeboom, a game farm near Gravelotte in the Lowveld. This rekindled my love affair with the Lowveld and I have not stopped developing bush properties since then.

For the past forty years, I have witnessed degradation of the habitat due in main to the erection of fences and the proliferation of waterholes within game conservation areas. The fenced areas result in non-selective overgrazing, causing soil erosion and unproductive bush encroachment, which in turn reduces the overall game carrying capacities.

Man's manipulation also contributed to habitat destruction. Pressure from the game breeders, as well as the competitive commercial entities who require decent game viewing, have forced an overpopulation of game in unnatural, enclosed areas where they are unable to feed selectively. Whilst there have been many cases of positive intervention by man, such as properly conducted bush-clearing, the cancer he introduced by erecting fences between neighbours was evident for all who would see. Consensus is emerging that the fences should be removed wherever feasible in order to create as large as possible game conservation areas. We are witnessing a positive turnaround, with more and more areas opening up to expand habitats.

BACK TO THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK FENCE

The fence was initially erected in the erroneous belief that it would control the scourge of foot and mouth disease. Constructed and owned by the Department of Veterinary Services, it never served the intended purpose for the simple reason that it obviously could have no effect on the movement of birds and many other species for which the fence was no hindrance. Instead, it created an expensive and time-consuming management problem. The department of veterinary services employed a permanent fence maintenance team for 30 years, never succeeding in stopping elephants from breaking in and out at will, with other animals taking the gap created.

This fence became very much part of my life as I developed two neighbouring properties in the Umbabat Nature Reserve: Ntsiri in 1980 and Ingwelala in 1983, sharing approximately a ten kilometre boundary with the Kruger. Daily we witnessed game getting snared up and elephant wandering through it as if it didn't exist.

I spent the next 17 years trying to get the fence removed, as all the veterinary experts I spoke to agreed that it was a futile exercise from a veterinary control point of view. However the KNP officials believed otherwise and would not hear of the removal of "their" fence. Perhaps this was seen as some kind of loss of sovereign control; Prevailing was the mind-set that the KNP

belonged to those who managed it. Tampering with the fence meant interfering in the control of “their” park. It was only years later that I learnt from Dr. Bosman, the head of SA Veterinary Services, that the fence did not even belong to the KNP but to the Department of Veterinary Services.

A FORTUITIOUS MEETING

Our big break-through came as a result of a conversation I had with philanthropist, conservationist and co-founder of the SA Nature Foundation (predecessor of WWF SA) Dr. Anton Rupert. He had called on me for advice and assistance relating to the donation of land by his friend Mr Hans Hoheisen. Hoheisen had donated to the SA Nature Foundation approximately 14000 hectares in the southern Timbavati Nature Reserve, which was to be managed by the KNP. This included the land on which the Wildlife College is situated today.

The process had however been halted by the owners' of the adjoining property, Ngala Lodge, who stood in the way of the donation because of an alleged long term traversing right they claimed they had in favour of Ngala Lodge over the Hoheisen land. My advice to Dr. Rupert was simple; go to court or buy Ngala, as I knew it was for sale. He chose the latter option, saying: “I do not want to see my friend Mr Hoheisen fighting a court case as a result of a generous donation” believing his dignity and his health could be compromised.

Dr. Rupert and I agreed on a price and I was to front for the KNP, but before any purchase agreement could be drawn up; the Chief Warden of Kruger blew my cover as the purchaser. Overly impatient and enthusiastic, he arrived in the KNP branded helicopter, landing on the front lawn of Ngala Lodge causing much embarrassment all around. Nevertheless we still managed to secure the deal.

Although all this information may seem irrelevant today, this transaction allowed me the opportunity to get to know the key individuals at KNP and in the National Parks Board, today known as San Parks.

Dr. Rupert was keen to support the idea of the KNP western fence removal, in line with his Peace Parks initiative. After discussing my idea of a larger area incorporating private land into the greater KNP, he organised a meeting for me with the chairman of the Parks Board, Mr. Naas Steenkamp, and the CEO, Dr. Robbie Robinson. Top of the agenda was the NGALA transaction, but more importantly, discussion turned to my plan for removal of the KNP western fence line, thus incorporating all private land to the west with the ultimate vision of including the private land up to the escarpment.

This idea appealed to both of them, even more so after I had flown them over the area from Kruger to the Drakensberg. They asked me to propagate the initiative with the private sector and

to come up with ideas to resolve the stumbling block represented by populated areas such as the village of Hoedspruit and the pockets of commercial fruit farms. I suggested these areas become fenced-off islands in the midst of the greater conservation area. As for the R40 and the railway line, our spontaneous idea was to construct underground tunnels or bridges over the road for the passage of game. We were mindful however of various game parks in Africa with major national roads and railways passing through them. All of these are simply managed by cattle grids at ingress and exit points with stringent speed controls. This could be the interim measure.

ACTION PLAN

Mr. Naas Steenkamp and Dr. Robinson asked me to initiate and motivate the plan and to gauge the interest of the various private stakeholders and other participants. They would assist with the process and seek the support of the Transvaal Department of Nature Conservation, then under the directorship of Dr. Piet Mulder and Lampies Lamprecht. The Administrator of the Transvaal, Danie Hough, was to play a catalytic role in the process. Their support was critically important to the project, as all private game areas of the Transvaal fell under their jurisdiction. I knew they would be enthusiastic about the idea in itself, but that they might see it as loss of control. I had suggested the idea with the administrator two years earlier on a 1989 blue-train trip to Dullstroom to commemorate the launch of Millstream.

At the time, I was also working regularly with Lampies Lamprecht on projects in Thornybush and the Waterberg. Armed as I was with a verbal mandate from the two main participants as well as from the private landowners outside of the formal reserves, I was in a strong position to negotiate.

After many meetings and consultations with all the interested parties, we set aside 10 and 11 August 1991 for what was to become known as The Thornybush Conference, officially “Die bewarings toekomst van die Laeveld” – The Conservation Future of the Lowveld.

THORNYBUSH CONFERENCE (TBC) – 10 & 11 AUGUST 1991

The conference, staged in our brand-new conference facility at Thornybush, was attended by 47 delegates, 27 private and 20 from the public sector. Led by the chairman of the Parks Board and also president of the Wildlife Society (and a trustee of Dr. Rupert's South African Nature Foundation (SANF)), Mr. Naas Steenkamp, a wide range of subjects were covered, in main the proposed KNP western boundary fence removal and the incorporation of private land, followed by how and under whose authority the area would be managed. The main spheres of interest represented were:

1. The private sector, which was under the authority of the Transvaal Department of Nature Conservation.
2. The fence, being the property of the SA Department of Veterinary Services.
3. The independent private reserves, represented by their respective chairpersons and representatives:

 Klaserie– Mr. Daantjie du Preez

 Timbavati– Dr. Dawid Griesel

 Umbabat– Mr. Brian Thompson.

The Sabi Sand withdrew, stating that although they wished us luck, they had no interest in our region and would conduct their own negotiations down south.

After a full day of robust discussions, delegates came to the following conclusions:

1. There was a need for a coordinated process involving all interested parties.
2. That a task force be established under the auspices of Association of Lowveld Nature Reserves driven by Dr Piet Mulder (Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) and Mr Naas Steenkamp (KNP). They were furthermore tasked to include participation of all interested parties including private land owners west of Klaserie and Timbavati, agricultural interests, regional service councils, SANF and the Lowveld Lodge Association.
3. The terms of reference in general were to work towards unifying conservation in the region in a way that would

enhance its benefits and relevance to all its inhabitants. In particular, consideration should be given to each of the following critical issues:

1. Natural resources are there for all the region's inhabitants and should be viewed as an asset to all.
2. The disproportionate population increase in region, well in excess of the average birth-rate, poses the prospect of increased deprivation, unemployment and pressure on the land.
3. The need exists for the demonstration of the material and spiritual value of nature conservation to inhabitants and all South Africans in general.
4. The perception exists that historically conservation and the current mode of land usage are elitist and irrelevant to the needs of the various human communities. This needs to be addressed through consultation, participation and optimal economic development.
5. The region's resources, along with the existing forms of economic utilisation such as commercial lodges, hunting and agriculture, constitute a competitive advantage in the national and international tourism market capable of elevating these businesses through increased revenues and job creation.
6. Economic development and in particular tourism expansion need not be inconsistent with nature

conservation as long as the concept of sustainable utilisation is applied.

7. The need for the replacement of the western fence of the KNP and the possibility of it being moved westwards to include privately-owned conservation land should be seen as an opportunity to enhance the conservation status of such land; this could ensure a consistent and sophisticated conservation management regime for the ecosystem and ensure the natural movement of game over a wider area.
8. Acknowledge that alternative models as well as statutory mechanisms exist for the future governance of conservation in the region and that these models are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

It was agreed that all the interested parties would meet in six months time and that the elected task force would then present its findings and reports.

TASK FORCE

- 1) Mr. Naas Steenkamp (Chair NPB)
- 2) Dr. Robbie Robinson (CEO NPB)
- 3) Mr. Danie Hough (Administrator Transvaal)
- 4) Mr. Lampies Lamprecht (Transvaal Department of Nature Conservation)
- 5) Mr. André Cornelissen (Transvaal Department of Nature Conservation)
- 6) Mr. Herman Botha (Secretary, NPB)

Note: A detailed document is available on request: "Verslag van verrigtinge" of the Thornybush conference, 10-11 August 1991, and a list of all delegates who attended.

COMMENCEMENT OF THE PROCESS

It was obvious that all the decision makers were behind the concept, especially when Dr. Bosman informed the meeting that, from a veterinary point of view, the fence had been a failure. The department of veterinary services were to withdraw their fence maintenance team and encourage the removal of the fence. This was a positive conclusion to the meeting and big progressive step for conservation.

A major negative, however, was the attitude and mission of the Timbavati chairman, Dr. Griesel, who informed the meeting that the private reserves already had a formal association; Association of Private Nature Reserves (APNR) and that most of the conferences main points were already under discussion in that forum. Furthermore, he stated that they had had previous discussions with most of the affected parties. The administrator said that he was not aware of this group. All at the meeting accepted that they would be the forum representing the private landowners.

In my opinion, a regrettable weakness was the absence of all the private landowners west of the reserves, with no representation at the Thornybush meeting. This would prove to be a major problem, as it was clear that the private reserves intended theirs to be an exclusive club; if any adjoining landowners wished to be part of the greater area, they would have to apply to the adjoining reserve, obviously at a cost and subject to a lengthy process.

This was a huge setback as I had envisaged incorporating all landowners who wanted to be included outside of the private reserves, adding approximately a further 110 000 hectares and, more importantly, restoring the westward migration route.

I recorded my concern to the NPB and TPA Nature Conservation, who assured me that the private landowners would not be excluded and that I should form an independent association with

its own constitution. I was not happy about this and lodged a "stern objection" to the process as the APNR would seriously slow down the process and hold the big-picture KNP-escarpment incorporation process to ransom. The three private reserves would be incorporated initially and once the process was complete, then the private landowners could apply.

In spite of the enthusiasm displayed by most of the parties, the Klaserie and Timbavati reserves were anti-commercialisation. As an example; when the 1750 hectare Thornybush Nature Reserve applied to be incorporated, the Timbavati insisted on a R2 million joining fee (an exorbitant amount in 1991) with a further restriction, being no commercialisation. We would also have been forced to close down one of South Africa's oldest game lodges.

I had several meetings and correspondence with the National Parks Board (NPB) and Transvaal Nature Conservation (TNC) on the subject and warned that the negativity of the Klaserie and Timbavati would impede the process. This is still the case today, as most western private properties including Kapama and Thornybush remain outside the KNP. Both NPB and TPA assured me they would willingly speed up the process, as they had structures in place to avoid cumbersome dealings with so many landowners. I was assured that if I formed an association of private landowners, they would recognise us. We duly formed the Independent Landowners Association (ILA) on 19 October 1991.

THE INDEPENDENT LANDOWNERS ASSOCIATION (ILA)

Immediately after the August Thornybush Conference we went about organising game farm owners outside of the APNR. At a breakaway meeting we elected a temporary committee: Mr. Piet Otto, Mr. Albert Mostert, Mr Abie Venter and myself as chairman. The meeting was attended by the Administrator, Mr. Danie Hough, Lampies Lamprecht (TPA) and Herman Botha (NPB).

Our biggest issue was that the Timbavati and Klaserie reserves would keep their western boundary fence up, even after the KNP had removed theirs. "Holding a gun to their heads" we were assured this would never happen.

On 21 September 1991, a further meeting of the ILA was held at Thornybush with the main objective to prepare an agenda for a public meeting with as many of the private landowners as possible. This was to take place in Hoedspruit on 19 October 1991.

MEETING OF THE NON-RESERVE LANDOWNERS AT FORT COPIEBA

MOTEL, 19 OCTOBER 1991

The meeting was attended by a very large group of people representing 70 properties spanning 110 000 hectares. KNP, TPA and Veterinary Service representatives were also present. The previously elected committee members were confirmed with the addition of Mr. Tim Ham and Mr. P.E Geldenhuis.

Once again the main concern of most delegates was the control that Timbavati and Klaserie wanted to maintain over their western boundaries.

A letter was addressed to Dr. Robinson expressing our concerns in this regard on 24 October 1991. Again we reiterated that the first phase objective should be to reposition the fence up to the R40, with Phase 2 taking it west of the R40. Phase 2 would be more complicated, due to Foot & Mouth controls, commercial citrus farming and the R40 railway line barrier. The meeting closed with support from all parties.

Correspondence between all the parties continued, but it became increasingly apparent that Timbavati and Klaserie were resisting any external control of their western boundary. I wrote Dr. Robinson on 20 January 1992 urging him not to succumb to their demands. Mr. Herman Botha (NPB secretary) responded on 27 January 1992 assuring us that they were supporting our initiative and were keeping us "in mind".

The ILA soldiered on with many meetings and much lobbying in all quarters. Although it was becoming clear that the ILA was seen as being too individualistic and fragmented, I continued to believe that between Dr. Robinson and Mr. Naas Steenkamp, a solution would be found. However, it was also easier to "close the deal" with the APNR excluding the ILA. Additionally time was not on our side as the political climate was changing fast and this would

have a detrimental effect on the incorporation process of private land into the KNP domain.

It was now very clear to me that the ILA was being left out. On 19 September 1992, the ILA committee met for the last time, where it was reported that I as chairman had not been invited to the Administrators' "CODESA" where the KNP, TPA and the four private nature reserves were present.

At this meeting, Dr. Robinson requested that the three APNR members' cooperate in the spirit of continuing to expand to the west following similar ecological management principles, subject to consultancy with the KNP.

Thus a "gentlemen's agreement" had wound up in disappointment. The KNP's retraction was most likely caused by political pressure from the TPA (as they would lose a large constituency) and the prevailing political state in the country, meaning top management would change, potentially creating a major delay in the process.

The ILA was disbanded at the end of September 1992 and with it a missed opportunity of extending the greater KNP to the R40 in the west, the Orpen road in the south and up to Gravelotte in the north.

Almost twenty five years have passed since the KNP fence removal initiative and I ask the question; from an environmental

point of view, how has the expansion plan to restore the region to pre-1960 progressed?

- In the south; Thornybush and Kapama are both still unincorporated, along with many other properties in the area.
- In the north, the 40 000 hectare Balule area adjoining the Klaserie is now part of the KNP.

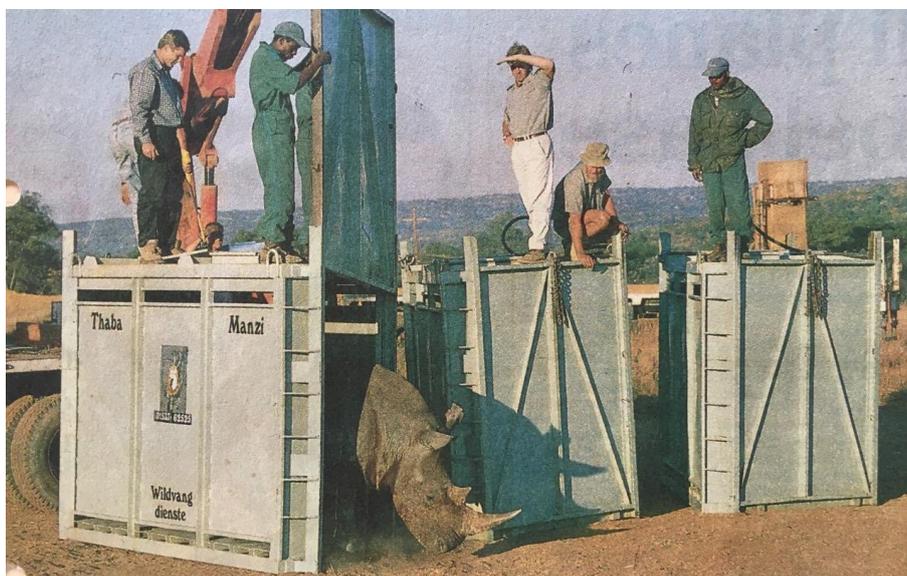
There are some positive initiatives on the go at present and hopefully in the not too distant future, the dream of a Kruger western boundary beyond the escarpment will be realised.

Although my main objective was not completely attained, from a personal point of view, all was not lost. The time I spent on this project allowed me to get to know the decision makers, including many influential people who helped realise other incredible conservation projects. One of these was the first KNP private-public participation; the capture and translocation of adult elephant groups in the KNP in 1994. Under the directorship of Clem Coetzee and veterinarians; Dr. Kobus Du Toit from the private sector and Dr. Kobus Rath from the Kruger National Park, 158 adult and juvenile elephants were relocated to other areas in South Africa, including our own Thornybush and Welgevonden Reserves. This in turn resulted in an invitation to me to address the Africa Sub-committee in the House of Lords on the elephant population explosion in the KNP. (An initiative supported by Dr.

Robinson). Rhino relocation followed shortly after the elephant initiative.



Now, once again, the vibe is right and energy abounds to restart our 1991 initiative and get the fences down. This will give our wildlife their deserved roam space. I believe capital; both loan and donor, will be abundantly available for this project, arguably the most ambitious conservation initiative on African soil. It also presents an opportunity for a younger generation of dynamic and visionary conservationists to etch their names into the annals of South Africa's history books, as the afore-mentioned role-players have done.



International participation at a very high level should not be discarded, as more and more celebrities, including the Royals now support the cause of conservation in Africa.

I am throwing out a challenge to the younger generation reading this recital to participate and make this dream become a reality!

Trevor Jordan

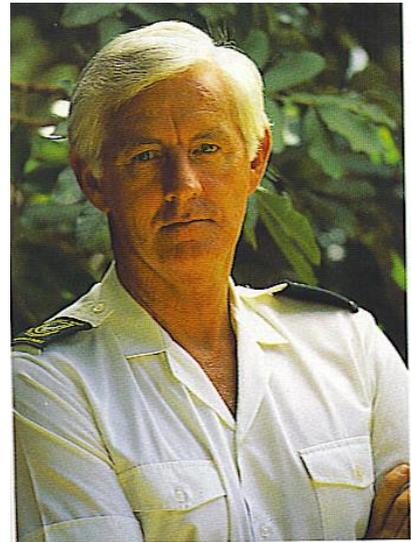
The Pioneers



Naas Steenkamp



Trevor Jordan



Robbie Robinson

Date: 7 December 2016

1. Any documents relating to the contents herein are available on request.
2. News articles – (print format) *Financial Mail*, 17 July 1992
Finance Week, 19 December 1991.