

# WILDERNESS SAFARIS

## Building sustainable conservation economies



**Biodiversity: the variety of plant and animal life in the world or in a particular habitat (a contraction of 'biological diversity')**  
Oxford English Dictionary

**W**ilderness Safaris is first and foremost a conservation organisation. The reason we exist is to protect pristine wilderness areas and the flora and fauna – or biodiversity – that they support. We believe that in protecting these areas, and including the local communities in this process, we will make a difference to Africa and ultimately the world. In short, we believe that the world's wilderness areas will save mankind.

We need wilderness ... not only for the value it brings to the human psyche, but also for the role it plays as a carbon sink in mitigating global warming and climate change. It is well known that wilderness areas throughout Africa are under immense strain. Rampant development, extractive industries, population growth and other spectres threaten the integrity of ecosystems across the continent. It is extraordinarily difficult in the face of these pressures to maintain conservation for conservation's sake; areas under protection must provide viable alternatives to proposed development. Conservation, after all, is as much about people as it is about the environment.

Recognising this, the single most important achievement by Wilderness Safaris to date has been the building of a sustainable business model that does not compromise its environmental principles and which, through jobs, training, skills, careers, adjusted horizons and hope, provides a realistic alternative to less sustainable industries. The fact that we have been able to achieve success in our business while remaining environmentally responsible over the past 25 years is a boon.

We believe that what we have done as a business is to build sustainable conservation economies in and around the areas that we manage.

As Wilderness Safaris and Safari & Adventure Co., we operate more than 60 luxury tented camps in seven southern African countries and employ 2 500 people. No fewer than 1 600 staff members are employed in our camps. Of these, 85% come from rural communities surrounding the protected areas in which we work. In many cases, these communities are also our landlords or equity partners.

We are extremely proud that the area to which we have been able to add financial

sustainability, and to which our guests have access, extends to 2.8 million hectares of prime wilderness. It is an area that, were it not for the involvement of a company like Wilderness Safaris, might not be as secure as it is today. We believe (and hope) that our success will inspire imitators. As others espouse our philosophy, wilderness areas will increasingly be entrenched under wildlife, and this, in turn, will motivate more land custodians to follow suit.

In order to achieve our conservation goals, our tourism business creates journeys and experiences for discerning travellers. These people choose to travel with us not only because we offer access to the best wilderness areas, but because they also know that support for our business translates into support for conservation and communities across southern Africa. Hence, our maxim – 'our journeys change people's lives' – applies not only to our guests, but also to our staff and our stakeholders, be they shareholders or neighbouring rural communities, who partner us in achieving this ideal.

### The Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust



**F**or 20 years, the Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust has supported a wide variety of wildlife management, research and education projects across southern Africa. These projects address the needs of existing wild animal populations, seek solutions to save threatened species and provide education and training for local people and their communities. All these initiatives endeavour to make a difference to Africa, its wildlife and people, and various methods are used to achieve this goal.

Some projects study and monitor particular species in their natural environment and, in so doing, contribute to their protec-

tion. The long-running Maputland Turtle Project in South Africa, the Namib Brown Hyaena Project and the Namibian Desert Elephant and Giraffe Project are examples. Moving beyond research into hands-on management is another variation on this theme.

The study of a single species may sound like a purely academic pursuit, but within such investigations lie the seeds for the animal's protection and survival. The better we understand a species and its environment, the more efficiently we'll be able to protect it in a world where the struggle for space is paramount and human-animal interactions become increasingly conflicted.

Most of the Trust's projects have this as an ultimate objective, and some remarkable headway has been made. The Lake Ngami Bird Monitoring Project, for example, brought the lake and this Important Bird Area (IBA) to the attention of the Botswana government, and resulted in it being declared a 'no-hunting' area.

The Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust is involved financially in a number of such projects, focusing on research, habitat management and practical conservation measures, such as anti-poaching efforts

and translocation exercises. Wilderness Safaris contributes logistically, with human resources and equipment.

But the conservation of flora and fauna is limited as long as the people who live in the vicinity are unconvinced of their importance or left out of the process. Financial and educational empowerment of local communities is vital so that they benefit from the wildlife on their doorsteps, and broad-based and comprehensive initiatives form the bedrock of the Trust. These provide the skills, knowledge and education necessary for communities to value and manage their wildlife populations.

Thanks to its innovative formal and informal education projects, supported by the Trust in the form of grants and bursaries, Wilderness Safaris is acknowledged as a leader in the educational process. Other aspects of rural community empowerment orchestrated through the Trust include the funding of projects that specifically address rural capacity development.



## Children in the Wilderness



Children in the Wilderness (CITW) began as a result of discussions with actor Paul Newman in Botswana in August 2001. The premise was that his children's organisation, The Association of Hole in the Wall Camps, would combine with Wilderness Safaris to create a new rural African children's environmental and life-skills programme.

In December 2001, the first CITW camp was held in Botswana. During the past eight years, the programme has expanded into all our areas of operation, and annual camps are now run at Wilderness Safaris camps in Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, the Seychelles, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Nearly 500 children participate every year and innovative fund-raising programmes, such as the annual Tour de Kruger and Tour de Zambezi cycle rides, aim to introduce the programme to even more.

Through a carefully designed educational programme that uses the healing power of nature to inspire its young participants, CITW focuses on the next generation of rural decision makers. Some of the camps are closed for a week (incurring an opportunity cost of over US\$1.2-million per annum) and groups of 16 to 45 children between the ages of 10 and 17 are given the opportunity to experience the wilderness areas and their wildlife.

Using a curriculum covering environmental education, HIV/Aids and nutrition, and life skills, CITW camps teach the children the importance of conservation and strive to instil a passion for the environment to equip them to become the custodians of these areas in the future. The children take part in wildlife activities, game drives, boating and nature walks; they attend and participate in interactive workshops about the wildlife they

have seen, environmental management, the geography and geology of the area, HIV/Aids, nutrition and the importance of wilderness areas to their communities and the country.

No less important than the camps is the follow-up programme. Depending on the specific needs of the children, this takes place in schools that have environmental clubs, in the villages where mentors visit the children at school and at home, or through scholarships that help students to gain a secondary and even tertiary education.

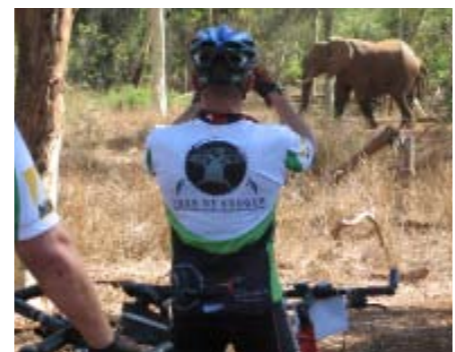
By bridging the divide that exists between communities and wildlife — added to the engagement of the rural communities as partners — the CITW programme ultimately contributes to the long-term sustainability of Wilderness Safaris' integrated ecotourism business model.

The Children in the Wilderness programme and curriculum:

- Practises and teaches sustainable environmental education.
- Exposes the children to new experiences and friends.
- Uses team-building and other educational tools to help build self-esteem and life skills.
- Inspires the children to continue with their education.
- Teaches the youngsters new skills, crafts and sports.
- Increases awareness and knowledge of HIV/Aids and overall health and nutrition.



[www.childreninthewilderness.com](http://www.childreninthewilderness.com)



## HIV and ecotourism



Operating throughout southern Africa, with approximately 2 500 employees in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and the Seychelles, Wilderness Safaris has long recognised the challenge presented by the HIV epidemic to the company and the risk imposed to its employees.

Since 2003, together with Clive Evian, author of several books on Aids, and a community and primary health-care specialist, we have developed a programme to manage the impacts of this epidemic on the business and the affected individuals. Dr Clive, as he is popularly known, has steadily expanded and consolidated this high-priority project and has taken the company on an ambitious road in dealing with HIV and Aids.

With permission from our employees and the assistance of certain key individuals, we carried out anonymous, unlinked HIV-prevalence surveillance across the entire workforce in our camps and regional offices in southern Africa. As a result, we established the HIV prevalence by country operation, age band and job category. The process of gaining employee cooperation, carrying out the survey and feeding back the results to all was a huge educational experience, and, most importantly, it revealed that the vast majority of employees were HIV-negative.

We were also able to show that the disease is present in all age and job categories, and in both the least and the most educated staff members. The survey also provided critical epidemiological information, such as where HIV education efforts need special focus (in the comparatively higher prevalence groups and situations), how many employees will need HIV care and a means to cost and provide this.

By projecting potential employee illness and health-care needs as well as possible employee losses, we can prepare and manage the disease more systematically and proactively. Most of all, the surveys injected a new sense of urgency among employees and management.

Our subsequent approach has been as follows:

1. To produce an HIV policy document that commits the company to addressing the epidemic in its broadest sense, to provide support and care to infected employees, to prevent the spread of HIV among the workforce via awareness and risk-reduction education, and to outlaw any form of discrimination or unfair treatment of employees.

2. To assist those that are HIV-positive to lead a normal life — which is entirely possible, given the right environment that includes supervised antiretroviral therapy (ART).
3. To use the results of an HIV prevalence survey to raise awareness within the company. This will also help us to address the issue by encouraging people to know their status.

Sex and HIV education have already been integrated into our Children in the Wilderness initiative and we are exploring options to make Voluntary Counselling and Testing and ART more accessible to all staff. Since the inception of the programme, Voluntary Counselling and Testing uptake has improved considerably and, in Botswana, we have successfully persuaded the Ministry of Health to supply ART for periods of three months at a time, to facilitate improved drug access and adherence for employees who are based in remote camps.

Wilderness Safaris is under no illusions about this difficult and demanding programme, one which needs both human and financial resources. It is a long-term project that needs the highest priority and commitment. All the problems may not yet be solved, but we do recognise, and are facing up to, the challenge. We have no doubt that in the long term we will manage to control this threat and, ultimately, through these efforts and work, become a better organisation. ■

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Our Journeys Change People's Lives



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