

From New York to Zululand with love

A pair of American corporates walk away from their careers, but with each other, to ensure a Wild Tomorrow for one of our country's biodiversity hotspots

WORDS ANDREA ABBOTT PICTURES ANDREA ABBOTT, WILD TOMORROW FUND AND SUPPLIED

When New York advertising executive John Stewart travelled to Zululand on a volunteer trip with the conservation and volunteer organisation Wildlife ACT in 2012, he had no idea that his journey not only would change his life, but would lead to a unique bond between his sophisticated home city and that far-flung region of northern KwaZulu-Natal.

The month-long experience entailed monitoring endangered and priority species like wild dog and leopard in Tembe Elephant Park and Mkhuze Game Reserve, but John also saw how under-resourced KZN Wildlife rangers and conservation managers were, and the personal sacrifices they made to protect wildlife.

A discussion with ecologist Clinton Wright, then based at Tembe and considering ways to help solve those problems, planted a seed. Three years later, John, Wendy Hapgood (at the time a banker in New

York), Clinton, and a second ecologist, Axel Hunicutt, working at Phinda Private Game Reserve at the time, launched a conservation charity, Wild Tomorrow Fund (WTF).

To concentrate fully on the project, John and Wendy, who have since married, gave up their careers and poured into the new charity the skills and creative energy that made them so successful in the corporate world. "It was a big decision for us to walk away from good jobs and easy lives," Wendy says. "We didn't pay ourselves salaries for the first two and a half years and used all of our savings."

As John points out, it's no fun struggling to pay the bills but the couple has no regrets. "We realised that material things weren't bringing us the happiness we wanted. And in many ways we felt we had no choice – the natural world needed our help and attention more than we needed another watch or pair of shoes."

The fund's initial focus was on supplying rangers and conservation managers in KZN reserves with equipment they needed to keep

wildlife safe. Those needs ranged from boots and uniforms to the wherewithal to dehorn rhinos. Far away in New York, John and Wendy worked tirelessly to attract donors. As time went by, the objective expanded to include the protection of threatened and endangered species and their habitats. "When we started out, habitat conservation seemed too large an issue for us to tackle, although we all knew that habitat loss is one of the biggest threats to wildlife, not just in KZN but around the world," says Wendy.

However, when a 500-hectare property in the Hluhluwe area came up for sale and attracted bids from pineapple farmers, the Wild Tomorrow team knew that a lot was at stake. The property lies on the southern bank of the Mzinene River that flows into iSimangaliso Wetland Park World Heritage Site, and is also across the river from Phinda that's within the wider Munyawana Conservancy.

In such company, a pineapple farm would be a misfit, particularly as the region is in



the Maputaland Centre of Endemism, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. "Our hearts ached at the thought of the land being destroyed and the wildlife run off or sold," says Wendy. "We knew we had to save it and had hope and faith in the generosity of New Yorkers to somehow help make it happen."

Their hope was rewarded in 2017, and WTF bought the property. "The owner, a Mrs Wessels, loved the idea of her family farm being pieced back together again," Wendy recalls. "We asked her to name it, and she chose the name, 'Ukuwela'." This is the Zulu word for 'crossing over', which speaks to a vision the WTF team has for fences to be dropped, giving wildlife more space.

That dream came a step closer to reality when, two years later, WTF secured a major

share of another property, this one further along the Mzinene River. The former owner, Norman Baggaley, wanted it to be conserved and had retained a third as his contribution to conservation. Named 'Mfuleni' – Zulu for 'at the river' – the 480-hectare property borders the False Bay section of iSimangaliso, providing a buffer for the park. It also contains a patch of sand forest, a highly threatened forest type that, in South Africa, occurs only in Maputaland.

"We didn't buy just fields, we bought biodiversity and saved the potential for creating huge protected areas," Clinton emphasises, when I visit Ukuwela and Mfuleni with John and Wendy during one of their visits from New York. (They manage to spend about three or four weeks a year

here.) Clinton now lives on Ukuwela, and his fellow ecologist Axel at Mfuleni, and they're guiding the rewilding and ecological management of both properties.

This includes reintroducing suitable wildlife. Among species brought in so far are giraffe, zebra, waterbuck, bushbuck and wildebeest, a costly exercise funded by donors who are given the opportunity to name the animals. In some circles, naming of wildlife is criticised as being overly sentimental but, John points out, apart from bringing in money, it's an effective way of connecting people to the bush.

Those new wild residents aside, animals such as leopard, cheetah, hippos and crocodiles, and two rare species, suni antelope and the four-toed sengi, have been picked up on camera traps. To ensure the safety of the animals, a team of rangers patrols the fence lines and also carries out snare sweeps. Already, more than 100 wire snares have been removed. And, like just about everywhere in South Africa, invasive alien plants are a problem and so an eradication programme is headed up by land manager Sizwe Dladla.

The next step on this inspiring journey is to have the properties declared a nature reserve. "We're well on track. The reserve will be a combination of land owned by our charity and four other private landowners, enabling us to increase space for wildlife," says Wendy.

One snag, though, is a blanket land claim



OPPOSITE: Zebra are set free from the truck delivering them to their new home. ABOVE LEFT: Wendy Haggood and John Steward at the Mzinene River in Ukuwela, a day before their wedding at Bayala Lodge in the Mnyawana Conservancy. ABOVE RIGHT: Ecologist and Wild Tomorrow Fund (WTF) co-founder Axel Hunicutt prepares to launch a drone at Ukuwela. LEFT: Ecologist and co-founder of WTF Clinton Wright at Ukuwela.

“How can we imagine a future when these animals no longer exist in the wild? These people are ambassadors for our last wild places and all that lies within

for the area that was lodged during the process of purchasing Mfuleni. “It was a big shock,” says John, “and many funders dropped out. We had to urgently find other individuals to help us secure the land.” Even if the claim succeeds (it’s said to be a weak one) WTF’s team is committed to following the model of Phinda and their neighbours at Munyawana, who have partnered with communities and, through lease agreements, are managing the land for conservation. As it is, WTF has already reached out in many ways to local communities. “We’ve built a school, we support an orphanage and crèche, and employ local people on our reserves,” Clinton says, adding that 90 per cent of the community is supportive of conserving the properties.

WTF’s achievements in less than five years are impressive by any standard, and provide encouragement in a time when the natural environment seems to be constantly under threat from human activity. Also heartening is the potential contained in Ukuwela and Mfuleni to catalyse the restoration of wildlife corridors, and perhaps even the ancient migratory route of elephants.

At this stage it’s just a dream, but dreams sometimes come true, just like the dream to help equip rangers and reserves has come true. But none of these successes could have happened without the donors, most of whom are from the US, in particular New York. You’d think it would have been difficult to encourage people living on the other side of the planet from Zululand, a place many might not even have heard of, to donate to a conservation project there. But, says John, “Americans are extremely philanthropic. Our hope of attracting US donors has been exceeded tenfold. I would say that their love for African wildlife is as deep as in any African country.”



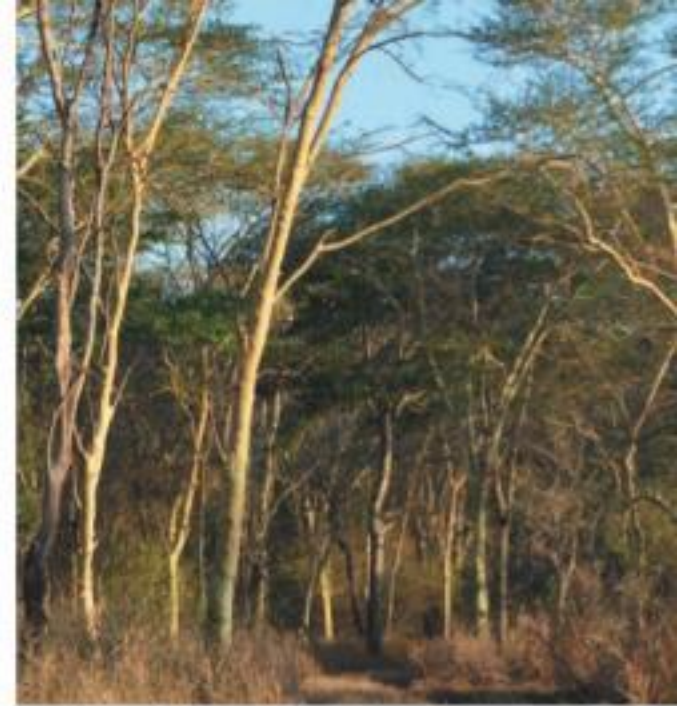
ABOVE: John Steward meets a Southern Boubou during a bird-ringing exercise at Ukuwela. (Picture Wendy Haggood) BELOW: WTF land manager, Sizwe Dladla (centre) with nature conservation students (from left to right) Thobile Ntuli, Balungile Mthembu, Nosipho Zikhali, Samkelisiwe Thethwayo, Philile Mdluli and Nomcebo Ngubane, who worked as an intern for WTF for three months. (Picture Nadja Rutkowski) BOTTOM: Giraffes arrive at their new home in Ukuwela.



Wendy adds another perspective. “We believe it’s the international community’s responsibility to help protect African wildlife. As children, we all grew up reading storybooks about elephants and lions, rhinos and hyenas, and watching *The Lion King*. How can we imagine a future when these animals no

longer exist in the wild? These people are ambassadors for our last wild places and all that lies within those ecosystems, down to the humble termites, ants and the soil. It’s a moral calling to help save our planet’s threatened biodiversity.” ■

Map reference C9 see inside back cover



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The location of Ukuwela and Mfuleni shows their proximity to significant protected areas. It is WTF's hope that one day an agreement can be reached between reserves so that wildlife can greatly extend their range. ● This fever tree forest at Ukuwela is a classic Maputaland scene. (Picture Jenn London) ● Snub-nosed termites at one of the WTF conservancies. The hand belongs to Barbara Wright, Clinton's wife and WTF's enthusiastic entomologist, who recently discovered a new species of button spider in the sand forest at Phinda Private Game Reserve. (Picture Wendy Haggood) ● At Mfuleni, Axel Hunicutt and a volunteer group of photographers from the US admire a giant *Newtonia hildebrandtii*, a key species of the sand forest, one of the most endangered forest types in the world. (Picture Heidi Andersen) ● A volunteer at the edge of the Mzinene River in Mfuleni. Perhaps elephants will stroll along that water corridor one day. (Picture Nadja Rutkowski)



Wild Tomorrow Fund

- **Volunteers** WTF runs a volunteer programme that generates funds and that, Wendy says, "gives international guests the opportunity to be a part of conservation, experience the beauty of the region, while working hands-on in its protection." A variation of the programme offers photographers the opportunity to document behind-the-scenes conservation work.
- **Karma** A significant boost to WTF's coffers came from New York State as a result of a number of major ivory prosecutions after the tightening of ivory laws across the state. The revised law included 'mammoth' in the definition of illegal ivory. Prior to the amendment, dealers sold elephant ivory under the guise of mammoth. The change in law allowed wildlife enforcement officers to crack down on stores and this resulted in many prosecutions.
- **Awards** At WTF's annual gala in New York every November, the Umvikeli ("protector") Wildlife Protector Award is presented to an individual or organisation making an outstanding contribution to protecting endangered and threatened wildlife and their habitat. The recipient in 2018 was one of South Africa's top wildlife veterinarians, Dr Dave Cooper, and in 2019, Les Carlisle, one of the founders of Phinda and also the project manager at Rhinos without Borders.
- **What's in a name?** When asked if he realised that WTF is the acronym for something else, John replies, "We do. When we came up with our name we realised that quickly. But instead of shying away from it, we embraced it, because that's how we feel when faced with shocking wildlife statistics."
- **wildtomorrowfund.org**