

SPEECH

By Ian Player

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**40TH ANNIVERSARY OF GAME RANGERS ASSOCIATION
AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 2ND MARCH 2010**

Berg en Dal Camp, Kruger National Park, South Africa

1. **IT GIVES ME GREAT PLEASURE AND I AM** honoured to be able to talk with you today in this great National Park. Many of you are close personal friends and some of us worked together in the old Natal Parks Board now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. You will have to forgive me for not mentioning you all by name but I would like to express my thanks to the Chairman of the GRAA, Adrian Botha, and former Chairmen John Forrest, Tim Snow and Arrie Schreiber and the organizers of this 40th celebration. Also to Drummond Densham for helping me get here as well as Mike Behr and his wife Paddy, who fetched us from the airport and kindly fed us as well.

I must also congratulate Don and Muriel Yunnie for all the hard work they put into ensuring that we receive the Cleft Stick. It is good to see so many familiar faces. I would also like to thank the Honorary Rangers who have really worked hard here to make the AGM a success. I particularly want to thank John Turner for the long-standing help that he has given to the GRAA. We all owe him a great debt of thanks.

2. **LET ME BEGIN BY REITERATING THAT THE GRAA**

of Africa is an extremely important organization for a multitude of reasons not the least being that it carries the collective wisdom and experience of people like yourselves, the members are in the front line in the conservation of wildlife and protection of the parks. This applies equally to both serving members of the Parks Service, as well as those of us who are retired. We are bound by our souls as a result of the experience of working in the Parks, and will remain so for the rest of our days. The experiences that we all have had are deeply imprinted on the psyche. I speak frequently to men who have gone to Australia and I can hear from the tone of voice how they miss the great mammals, and appreciate now that Africa is the landscape of the soul.

3. **WHEN I AWOKE THIS MORNING AND LISTENED** to the familiar sounds of the Lowveld, I was filled with a deep nostalgia and as the sun rose slowly over the eastern horizon, I gave my thanks to God for having been able to live and work in some of the great parks of Africa. In veneration, I spoke aloud a few lines from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayamm:

“Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night

Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:

And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught

The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.

Dreaming when Dawn's Left Hand was in the Sky

I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,

"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup

"Before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry."

And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before

The Tavern shouted--"Open then the Door!

"You know how little while we have to stay,

"And, once departed, may return no more."

As I lay in bed, savouring the early light filtering through the trees and the sounds of a grey Lourie and the distant call of a Heuglin Robin, I thought about my 57 years in the involvement with wildlife and wilderness conservation, 22 years with the Natal Parks Board and the remainder with wilderness organizations in South Africa, United States and the United Kingdom, which I founded as a result of my experience in Zululand in Reserves like Indumu, iMfolozi and others. I remember too, working in the mountains of Mindoro in the Philippine Islands, tracking the Tamaraw, a diminutive buffalo. It was these experiences that slowly led me to a deep understanding of the spiritual importance of Wild Land. I can say now that I believe science and law alone will never save wild lands from de-proclamation or over-development.

It is the spiritual connection and the energy that comes from it that will motivate people to higher ideals of conservation. Wilderness areas are critical in this regard.

There is the famous quote of Thoreau who said: *"In wilderness or wildness lies the preservation of mankind."* All the founders of religions - Christianity, Islam and Buddhism - were men who spent time in the wilderness. I firmly believe that wilderness has to be at the core of our work and I know that there are many of you here who have fought long and hard to save the few remnants that we have.

4. I'M SURE I DO NOT HAVE TO TELL YOU THAT THE WORLD is in a constant state of crisis brought on by the serious over-population of our own species. Six billion and still rising, the planetary resources are stretched to their utmost limit, and yet I do not know of a single country where the environment is at the top of the National Agenda. The recent Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen is a classic example of a world in disarray. I quote from a recent paper by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky in a journal from the Jungian Institute of Los Angeles:

"We have committed crimes against nature and humanity for the sake of more land, more energy, more destructive capacity. We have taken too much out of the sea, and put back into it toxic waste, mercury and oil spills. These come back in the fish we eat, and poison us. The majority of humanity has lost its connection to the sacred, the numinous, the mysteries. There is a loss of awe and gratitude for the spirit of the earth. We are soiling our nest. The earth spirit responds with earthquakes, hurricanes,

tornadoes, fires, floods, cyclones, and tsunamis. Every way she can slap us about, wake us up, remind us we are not gods. The earth is not our servant, not our resource – she is our only home.”
(from *Psychological Perspectives*)

I always remember Magqubu Ntombela, that remarkable game ranger and wilderness guide, who said to me one hot October day as we were climbing Nqolothi with a group of wilderness trailists, and I was complaining about the heat and the sweat and the ticks and the flies, then Magqubu said, quietly and politely, “Have you forgotten that we are working for God.”

5. I AM GOING TO TELL YOU A STORY about Professor John Phillips who was probably the greatest ecologist South Africa has produced and who served various presidents of African countries – presidents like Kwame Nkrumah, Nyerere, Kaunda and General Smuts. I had been in the Natal Parks Board for 10 years doing the work that Game Rangers have to do - fighting poaching gangs, battling for extra land, initiating Operation Rhino, Wilderness areas and Wilderness Trails and getting the media on our side. It was a long battle, with internal and external politics, wearying and debilitating.

Every time there was a victory I thought this is it, this is the Waterloo which, as you who know, was the final battle where Napoleon was defeated by the Duke of Wellington in 1815. I soon found that what I thought was a Waterloo and a final victory was just one more battle.

Then in 1961 there was a conference of Game Rangers from all over Africa, held at the then University of Rhodesia in

Salisbury, now Zimbabwe and Harare. On the final night we were addressed by this great old man Professor John Phillips. He came slowly down the stairs very much a Churchillian figure and by the time he reached the podium you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. He stared at us all for a minute or two and waved his arm in a sweep gesture and said, very emphatically,

“ I want to tell you, you young Game Rangers of Africa, that there will never be a Waterloo in wildlife conservation, only a long drawn out guerilla war.”

The impact left me stunned. It was as if I had been dealt a physical blow. So I want to tell you that this remains true today, as it did when I first heard it in 1961.

6. THIS EXPERIENCE SHAPED EVERY confrontation I was involved in, from the internal politics of struggling to persuade the Natal Parks Board of the importance of the Capture and Translocation of the White Rhino from iMfolozi to other parks in South Africa, to another struggle in 1970 to persuade the board of the importance of having genetic pools of no less than 20 Rhino in overseas countries for their safeguard. There are now some 15,000 of the Southern White Rhino whereas, with the exception of a few in Czechoslovakia, the Northern White Rhino is probably extinct – a tragedy of gigantic proportions and an urgent reminder of the current problems in protecting our Southern White Rhino. An unprecedented slaughter is taking place and it behooves all of us to become involved in stopping this killing epidemic. The White and Black Rhino are iconic symbols and need the best possible protection. We must not let any opportunity go by in making sure

that our political leaders become aware of the huge dangers involved to our growing tourist industry. Helicopters dropping out of the sky and shooting and darting, then removing the horns of Rhino in broad daylight is flagrantly illegal, beyond the pale, and borders on conservation anarchy. We can only appeal to the patriotism of those involved, not to besmirch South Africa's good conservation name and record.

It is now well-known that the aphrodisiacal qualities of Rhino horn are a myth, with no substance. We need urgent delegations to visit countries of the Middle and Far East, to counter the prevailing myth and to make them understand that future generations will be deprived. The wildlife of Africa belongs to the world too, and we are the African caretakers. Our generation bears a heavy responsibility.

One can appreciate and sympathize with poverty-stricken inhabitants living on the borders of the Parks, being tempted to poach and this, too, demands huge educational efforts to take leaders and young people of bordering communities to experience the Parks and appreciate that the wild lands play a critical role in an understanding of the soul of our land. We take care of the wild lands of Africa for the world, and all humans will be deprived spiritually if they are destroyed. From my own long experience, I know how the powerful healing spirit of African wild lands can help in the reconciliation of split communities.

Tourism, a vital industry, will suffer grievously if we do not bring this outrageous killing to an end. Concerted action by central, provincial and municipal governments, as well as NGOs, is urgently needed, as well as a comprehensive strategy to combat this assault. Game Rangers have frequent contact with political

leaders and should never lose an opportunity to lobby. It is our job to bring the seriousness of the situation to the attention of our political leaders. South Africa's reputation is at stake.

7. ONE OF THE GREATEST ENVIRONMENTAL BATTLES in South Africa was to save Lake St Lucia from dune mining. The campaign for St Lucia was fought on many levels, politically, and ecologically and what began as a 2% chance of winning ended up with a proclamation of the now iSimangaliso Park as a World Heritage Site, the first in South Africa. A major fact we discovered was how one outside voice was worth 5,000 inside voices. Vance Martin and Bob Cleaves of the USA, and Ulf Doerner of Germany, were three such voices.

I remember during the campaign for St. Lucia, writing and asking my brother, Gary Player, to become one of the patrons. He phoned me and asked what the chances of winning were and I told him, 2%. He laughed, and asked how he could put his name to something that only had a 2% chance of winning. I reminded him that he had spent his honeymoon at Charters Creek on the Lake, and how he and his wife had raved about the birds. I told him, too, that as a young boy of 6 or 7 years old, I had taken him to the boxing school of Jack Eustace to learn how to box, and he had entered the ring to fight a much larger boy, who promptly began to pound him until his face was a bloodied mess. By the third round, I wanted to throw in the towel, but he resisted fiercely and said, "Do you know about David and Goliath?" I replied, "Of course I do!" He then asked if I knew what David said when he saw Goliath, and I said No. Gary said, "David said, "He's so big I can't miss."...watch me now." And he went on to win the fight, as

he has indeed won international golf tournaments which had a low percentage in the chance of winning.

The guerrilla tactics of using the press, television and radio led to an incredible victory. Let me say loud and clear that our victory came in a large part as the result of the involvement of women. They understood in many instances better than men how important this place was to the nation, and that there would never be another opportunity to create a Wetland Park of this magnitude. Their determination, resilience and optimism forced the men along. Women for a long time now have been on the march and have become environmental leaders as well as Game Rangers, like Sandra, who is here today, and Sanmarie in iMfolozi, who are Section Rangers, and Kim Gillings, who led the trails.

8. **LET ME CONCLUDE THAT I BELIEVE** that the environment is by far the most important political issue facing our country today -- the other politics pale into insignificance. The continued existence of our Parks and Game Reserves are critical in the understanding of our place in the environment. The parks lead us not only to ecological imperatives but also the spiritual values that will inspire future generations. The GRAA, along with serving Game Rangers and Wilderness Trails officers are in the frontline in this regard and so are the men and women of the public who accompany them and experience the wilderness in its rawest form. Let me add that generally it is the women who are more emotionally moved by the experience.

We, as men, must also be grateful to our wives, who keep us going. We can never give enough thanks to them.

Finally, there is one major task that still faces the GRAA and that is to continue to lobby worldwide for the establishment of the Green Helmet Brigade. Men and women who will go into countries disrupted by civil war and secure Parks until such time that new Governments and Civil society can adequately protect them. If the Green Helmet Brigade had been in existence the Northern White Rhino would still be here and safe. We must not let the concept of the Green Helmet Brigade disappear. It was our idea and it is our duty to continue lobbying.

SPEECH ENDS

I started with a poem and would like to finish with one written by Roy Campbell as an example of a difference of approach of the sight of some zebra. In semi-scientific terms, we would say *Equus Birchelli anti quorum perambulated through the Themedia triandra in the Umbra of the Acacia Nilotica*. Now listen to how Roy Campbell, the poet, would describe it:

From the dark woods that breathe of fallen showers,

Harnessed with level rays in golden reins,

The zebras draw the dawn across the plains

Wading knee-deep among the scarlet flowers.

The sunlight, zithering their flanks with fire,

Flashes between the shadows as they pass

Barred with electric tremors through the grass.

Roy Campbell, a South African poet of great distinction and a close friend of my friend, Laurens van der Post, in this poem brings to the surface of the mind the spiritual insight of the zebra on the veld.