

In conversation with...

A nine-to-five job? The bright lights of city life? Not likely. Home for wildlife film-makers Dereck and Beverly Joubert is Africa's natural spaces, and they have dedicated their lives to recording the continent's wild animals. It's their passion, their work and the reason they spend most of their time in the field or in a tented camp. **Fransje van Riel** caught up with Dereck to find out what the couple has been up to. ▶

TEXT BY FRANSJE VAN RIEL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILDLIFE FILMS





and probably butchering, a quote from environmentalist Aldo Leopold: 'To insist that each hectare of wildlife area pays for itself is like burning the furniture to keep the house warm.' Sure we can hunt a little today or make a park hugely attractive for minibus tourism, but both steps will lead to its eventual collapse.

FvR: Do you approve of trophy hunting, which is part of that doctrine?

DJ: I'm hard on hunting because I've never seen any good come out of it for the animals. It makes no sense to shoot creatures that are in decline.

FvR: So what are your thoughts on canned lion hunting?

DJ: Canned hunting is on a par with the lowest-level prostitution you can imagine. It is ethically bankrupt and breaks every rule for interacting with nature in a respectful way. It attracts greedy hunters and traders who will stop at nothing, including illegally smuggling lions, even cubs, into and bones out of the country, to make money.

The secondary industry, selling lion bones, is hugely damaging to wild predator populations. Lion bones look much like tiger bones and we know that there is a large market for the latter in the East. When lion bones from canned hunts leave South Africa, they feed a 'grey' market, where poachers and traders can fob off their merchandise as legal. So canned lion hunting is a toxic industry ethically, ecologically, from the point of view of trade, as a vehicle for corruption and as an attack against endangered species.

FvR: You have established your own reserve, Selinda Private Concession, in Botswana. What inspired you to do so? Have you realised your goals?

DJ: Yes. We leased prior hunting concessions and converted them into what we call conservation-tourism areas. The ideal scenario from a wildlife perspective is to have huge areas and no people, but this makes the land vulnerable to attack by poachers or by people who see cattle and pastures as a better use for it. So applying a low-impact, high-cost and passive exposure (as is the national policy of Botswana, and one we've borrowed), we can serve many functions: we protect wildlife (our first priority), involve communities, create jobs, increase skills and generate revenues for everyone.

Fransje van Riel: What do you think is the biggest threat facing wildlife in Africa today?

Dereck Joubert: Selfishness. Our interactions with the natural world are increasingly selfish. The pressure of seven billion people combined with high levels of poverty and poor education is killing the planet. In the past 100 years, every time we added a billion people, statistics show that we lost some 50 per cent of the predators and presumably 50 per cent of the wild places as well. At the present rate of decline we will lose wild big cats in 10 to 15 years. Our species has an insatiable desire to kill, to rip into wildlife populations in a way that many of us see as pure insanity. Yet we do it anyway.

FvR: Which conservation measures are working and which aren't?

DJ: Well, at the moment not a lot is working for the long-term [prospects of conservation]. Anti-poaching efforts are short-term solutions, as is erecting fences and walls around the reserves (it's even been suggested we wall the Serengeti). We

have to tackle this in a different way. First we need to identify the core zones of the most precious wilderness areas and fence those off, making them impenetrable. I don't mean real fences; I hate fences. It means we need to allocate 80 per cent of our government-funded resources to these areas, then surround them with private properties that are in the hands of major donors or commercial operations, working hand in hand with community wildlife preserves. The surrounding properties will act as a buffer to protect the wildlife.

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FvR: Sustainable utilisation is a much-used term in southern African conservation. What does it mean to you?

DJ: I don't subscribe to the 'if it pays it stays' philosophy. I think some areas must be preserved because they are necessary to ecosystems, not because they pay. Taking,

At Selinda, we allow about 40 people a day into an area of 140000 hectares. Some of the exclusive reserves in South Africa admit more than 3500 people a day into the same-sized area. The revenues are just enough to protect the reserve. The dream has become a reality.

However, our broader target is to fill a niche role in which we 'bolt on' smaller reserve areas to strategic sanctuaries, which are then protected by their smaller neighbours. The 'bolt on' theory is based on the assumption that governments are doing what they can to protect national parks, and in many cases are doing well. But at the park perimeters they are fighting a losing battle. If we and other private partnerships 'bolt' our protected areas to the parks and work with the communities that threaten them, we can serve as both a buffer and a peacemaker and make it all work.

FvR: Let's talk about your work. When preparing films, books and photographic works, do you deliberately assign individual personalities to animals to create a kinship between them and the public?

DJ: Animals are individuals! So no, we don't do that. I think we look for the character in animals when we first find them, then as we get to know them, their personalities are revealed more fully. We'd be seriously errant if we suppressed the different qualities that make each animal unique. It is scientifically arrogant as well as homocentric to think that only members of our species have personalities.

FvR: Many people think that listing statistics about people or animals has less impact on an audience than focusing on the plight of an individual being. Your documentary *Eye of the Leopard* comes to mind, in which viewers are drawn into the lives of a leopard mother and her cub in the wild.

DJ: Mostly, I think you are right. However, when we talked about individual big cats around the world, no-one really got it. When we told them that lion numbers had dropped from 450000 to 20000 in our lifetime; that leopards fell from 700000 to 50000, we heard a collective gasp. Numbers are important to understand the trends. Add a layer of perspective, as we did in *Eye of the Leopard*, by stating that each year 2000 leopards just like Legadema (the star of the documentary) are allowed to be hunted for sport, and I think the message gets clearer.

FvR: You spent four years with Legadema. How did you balance observing, filming and writing about the cub as a professional with the emotional attachment that you developed with it?

DJ: Legadema worked her way into our lives, 'adopting' us in a way, although she was never tame. She was so comfortable around us that she would lie under our vehicle even though it offered no better shade, no additional protection. She learned to recognise and greet us individually, but we never touched or reached out to her and we were determined to maintain that separation to keep her wild. Today she is still wild, a successful mother and huntress in the area. But we faced difficult mixed emotions every day.

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FvR: Where do you and Beverly draw the line during encounters with wild animals?

DJ: We simply do not interfere in anything. We're often asked how we can stand by and watch animals die, just filming without intervening to save the animal. Someone once accused us of 'not doing God's work' by turning our backs on a baby elephant appealing for help. I believe in the logic of evolution. Lions have evolved to hunt prey, even elephants. Interfering in that process is

ridiculous. It's not our place to judge nature. However, we do intervene if we come across an animal suffering as a direct result of human action. A creature in a poacher's snare deserves help; as does an elephant stuck in the mud at the steep edge of an artificial waterhole, or an animal caught in a fence.

FvR: What motivated you to make *The Last Lions* (released in 2011)?

DJ: We see wildlife on TV all the time, with multiple commercial breaks that make it much easier to witness. If you don't like the footage, you can quickly change channel and go back after the kill. When nature is portrayed on the big screen, as it has been recently, it has been hijacked by Disney and everything is perfect in every way. In *Planet Earth*, the Disney version of the TV series, there was no conflict and most kills were cut short. It was designed to make people feel happy. *March of the Penguins* was the same. We wanted to create a big-screen, real-life drama showing what lions actually go through so that audiences could watch without the interruptions of a Blackberry and ad breaks. I'm desperate for people to see Africa for what it really is. ▶

OPPOSITE Legadema, the leopard whose growth from cub to adult was filmed in *Eye of the Leopard*.

PAGE 27 AND BELOW Dereck and Beverly Joubert doing what they love best - recording Africa's wildlife.



FvR: What is your next project?

DJ: We have a new film about a leopard. Then we are considering flying across Africa to identify all the last remaining lion populations. We'll speak to scientists and communities and try to identify exactly what status lions have and what the problems are, and to find solutions.

FvR: How much time do you spend in the field?

DJ: When we are in full swing on a film, we can spend more than 300 days a year in the bush. But some years we come back to town and edit and edit and edit until we have square eyes and city overload. Now, as Explorers-in-Residence for National Geographic, we fly around the world talking about big cats at least twice a year, and that steals bush time. But the next production will see us back in the wild continuously. We don't work at Selinda much. I see Duba Plains Camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta as our home base.

FvR: If you and Beverly could wave a magic wand, what three changes would you make for wild places?

DJ: 1) Everyone in the world would understand that wild places need to be fiercely protected against our own excesses. 2) Priority would be given to living with predators that potentially threaten us and our livestock, but working wisely to protect ourselves without killing everything. 3) Reducing our population growth to a sustainable level and reducing our consumption of 'stuff'. That's the magic wand bit. We need protected space for the still-intact ecosystems of Africa and an education programme that makes people accept that sanctuary system.

FvR: Are human-wildlife conflict issues increasing around protected areas?

DJ: Definitely. Growing human settlements equal more conflict. Another issue that affects local communities is increased wildlife numbers. As more wild animals provide benefits to communities on a local level, the larger those communities grow and the greater the threat to the resource.

FvR: What is the Big Cat Initiative and why did you start it?

DJ: We looked at our lives and the volume of work we had produced and, as a counter to feeling really smug about



it, I compared it with the graph showing how big cats have fared since we were born to gauge just how great our influence has been. The stats were awful: our effect had been insignificant; numbers had still crashed. So we started the Big Cat Initiative (BCI) to move beyond inspiring people to actually doing something.

We've created a membership component, so people can join up, fund projects or just donate to BCI in general. I estimate it will take US\$50-million to save lions, but in turn the money will protect Africa's wilderness areas. We currently issue grants to big cat programmes in six countries, and as these projects mature they will inform us what works and what doesn't. Then we can scale up.

Children can help by challenging their classes to raise money. Via the website, they can send us drawings or letters that we will publish and take to the presidents of the five countries in Africa that still have lions to let them read what the future generation wants them to know – that if they let lions go, the kids of the world will be very upset. [Find the website at <http://bit.ly/TQrkxL>]

FvR: Lion numbers 450 000 to 20 000; cheetahs 50 000 to 12 000; leopards 700 000 to 50 000. Can these figures be reversed?

Accustomed to the couple's non-interfering presence, Legadema was completely unfazed during filming.

DJ: I am hopeful. Cats breed fast, thankfully, but we need to act now while we still have breeding populations. It is 10 times more expensive to re-introduce a species into an area when it goes extinct. Also, many lion populations in isolated areas may be genetically unique and when we lose them (as has happened in West Africa), we will never be able to recreate them.

FvR: What would you say to people who think it's more important to look after humans than to protect wild animals?

DJ: I think it's important to look after both. In fact, unless we take care of the drivers of animal ecosystems, we will lose natural habitats and threaten every life-form on this planet, ourselves included. More important than population numbers is the proportion of poor people. Poor people are in survival mode, they are not conservationists. So I think one of the higher priorities is to chip away at poverty. There are huge issues facing conservationists today. It's a social, political, ecological and even a spiritual endeavour.