

Coal Mine Shatters Dreams of Wilderness Icon

Recent article which originally appeared in daily newspaper, The Witness (Durban, South Africa)



Recent news of the proposed Ibutho Coal's Fuleni opencast coal mine, sited a mere 40 to 70 metres from the southern boundary fence of the historic iMfolozi wilderness area, sent shockwaves felt worldwide that this historic reserve could be lost to mining. Already there is Somkhele mine, a few kilometres from the eastern boundary of the wilderness area, and, on the west, the Zululand Anthracite Colliery's coal mines. A coal mine on the southern boundary would be the final straw.

One man who received the news as a crushing blow is Dr Ian Player, the 87 years old legendary conservationist, whose name is synonymous with wilderness, rhinos, the iMfolozi, and pioneering the Dusi Canoe Marathon. He has dedicated 62 years of

his life to conservation and protecting small pockets of wilderness as havens for wildlife so that future generations can enjoy the opportunities and experiences that enriched his life. Might all of this have been in vain?

Less than 1% of South Africa is designated wilderness - a mere handful of unspoiled nature to bequeath to future generations. Game reserves and national parks amount to 6.4% - hardly an arm and a leg!

Ann Player, his wife, comments: "It's heartbreaking to see the destruction of what is most dear to Ian." She is referring to ongoing pollution of the uMngeni and Umsundusi rivers, rhino poaching, and now, the Fuleni coal mine that threatens the integrity of the iMfolozi wilderness. It will be a sad indictment to trade our natural heritage and future well-being for immediate short term profits. At our peril we ignore the truth of Chief Seattle's words: All things are connected. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Fifty-six years ago, in 1958, Ian Player fought to set aside the iMfolozi Wilderness as a natural area, devoid of modern civilization, where people from all walks of life could escape from the noise and pressures of contemporary society to enjoy the rhythm, beauty, solitude and sacredness of nature. Evidence of Stone Age settlements and the connection of the area to the Zulu people, including King Shaka, confirms its significance for previous generations of Africans. Magqubu Ntombela, Player's mentor and friend, rekindled this connection whenever he took Zulu-speaking youngsters on trail.

The iMfolozi Wilderness has the distinction of being the first wilderness area in Africa. It is situated in the first area to be formally protected in Africa - the Umfolozi Game Reserve - established in 1895 as a refuge for white rhino, believed to be extinct, until a hunter shot two and discovered a small population in the area.

Player, stationed in Umfolozi in 1952, vividly recalls his first sighting of a rhino emerging from the early morning mist: “In that moment I knew these animals were inextricably linked to my life.”

An aerial survey in 1953 produced a count of only 437 rhino, raising fears that an outbreak of anthrax could wipe out the entire herd. Compare this with 1004 rhinos poached in 2013 and one has a sense of the vulnerability of such a small population in one locality. These fears were amplified after a visit to Uganda had opened Player’s eyes to the wanton carnage of poachers who eventually wiped the northern rhino from Africa’s plains. He was determined the same would not happen in South Africa. And so, Operation Rhino was launched in 1962 in a bid to spread the risk. This involved darting and relocating rhinos to parks, reserves and game farms throughout southern Africa, and shipping them to zoos and parks overseas. The result was the white rhino population exploded to peak at an estimated 18000 in 2006. Player believed his dream to secure their future in South Africa had been realised.

Then, in 2007, the year Player turned 80, the poachers arrived and the brutal slaughter of these innocent beasts began. Currently, on average, three rhinos are killed every day, and the numbers are rising. Carcasses are left to rot in the veld, while the rhino horns, more valuable than gold, are smuggled to China and Vietnam and sold for huge profits to satisfy the insatiable medicine trade.

Now, seven years later, Player’s wilderness dreams are also at risk of being shattered by the Fuleni mine that proposes to export coal to China and India and destroy the wilderness Player fought so hard to establish. He also fears the mine will also make it easier for rhino poachers to enter the park. It is unbearable for him to imagine the peace of the wilderness being shattered by blasting, vibrations, dust, roaring engines of drag-lines and trucks, light pollution interminably lighting up the night sky. There is also water pollution and water shortages extending as far as the miraculous iSimangaliso World Heritage site as the mine’s demand for water receives priority. Promises of jobs and wealth for Fuleni communities are more likely to result in another boom-and-bust disaster, where high expectations of local communities shatter into a heritage of dust and land unfit to support man or beast, let alone future generations of women and children!

Available evidence shows mining enriches a small group of already super-wealthy directors, shareholders and other beneficiaries, many located overseas, but ordinary South Africans are left poorer. A World Bank study shows African countries that base their economies on mining fail to reduce poverty significantly and the ‘benefits’ from mining do not reach the poor.

On hearing the devastating news of the proposed mine, Player rose to the challenge and the formidable war horse who headed the Save the St. Lucia campaign more than 20 years ago is back in action. Player is not alone in his stand to protect the integrity of the iMfolozi wilderness. Almost 7000 champions of wilderness have signed a local Avaaz petition to Save Our iMfolozi Wilderness and hundreds have registered with IDM Consultants and submitted comments and objections to the proposed mine. For more information visit www.saveourwilderness.wordpress.com

Sheila Berry
26 May 2014

** Photo of Ian & Ann Player*