

Ten Years of the Spirit of the Wild

Text by Heather Dugmore Pictures Bergplaas



Time spent at Bergplaas Nature Reserve is a life-changing experience. It's an over-used expression but at Bergplaas many lives *have* significantly changed in this remote, mountainous 5000ha nature reserve that neighbours the Compassberg in the Sneeuwberg Mountains of the Great Karoo.

Ranging in altitude from 1400m to 1800m, it was created from three farms in 1998 when the livestock and internal fences were removed and game that historically occurred in this region was reintroduced.

Bergplaas today is a proclaimed nature reserve with a population of more than 900 large mammals, including Eland, Kudu, Red Hartebeest, Plains Zebra, Springbuck and Black Wildebeest. Approximately 25 small mammals have been recorded. Small carnivores include Caracal, Black-backed Jackal, Small-spotted Genet, Bat-eared Fox, African Clawless Otter and the Cape-, Grey- and Marsh Mongoose. There are 133 bird species, including the Secretary Bird, Black Harrier, Lanner Falcon and Blue Crane.

Veld rehabilitation as the basis of restoring biodiversity and a vibrant ecology is a key focus for Bergplaas' team, led by Cindy and Wayne Maspero. They have been with Bergplaas since 2006 and have extensive experience in skills development and wildlife management. They manage the reserve in addition to facilitating *Spirit of the Wild Certificate Programme*.

FGASA-endorsed Spirit of the Wild

The owner of Bergplaas, Irene van Lippe-Biesterfeld, Princess of the Netherlands, conceived and launched Bergplaas' unique *Spirit of the Wild Certificate Programme* in 2006, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, and which has been facilitated by Cindy and Wayne since 2007.

Into the wild in a different deeper way

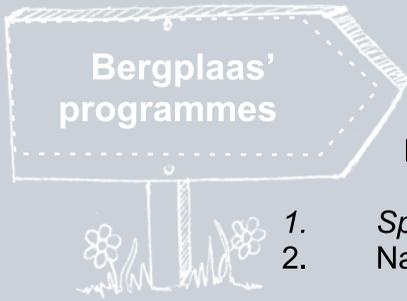
“The opportunity to participate in environmental education and to lead people into the wild in a different, deeper way strongly appealed to us,” says Wayne who has a National Diploma in Nature Conservation from the then Pretoria Technikon. His early career was as a field guide at Londolozi in the Sabi Sands, followed by the then Natal Parks Board where he was a wilderness trails officer and was also involved in black rhino monitoring. Thereafter he led walking trails in the Masai Mara at Governors’ Camp before taking up the post at Garonga as head ranger.

“Traditionally you are trained to guide from a knowledge-based experience, and coming to Bergplaas revealed the importance of combining this with personal development, including reconnecting with intrinsic qualities such as space and silence for which the Karoo is renowned. In the beginning I didn’t know the Karoo at all but over time I really connected with its unique qualities and wildlife.”

Cindy and Wayne’s commitment to the now renowned *Spirit of the Wild* programme and to managing Bergplaas has greatly contributed to the growth of this innovative programme, as well as Bergplaas’ significant contribution to environmental skills development in a wide range of partnerships, including formal partnerships with Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, the South African College for Tourism and the Tracker Academy, Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA) and the Indalo Group of Eastern Cape game/nature reserves.

“This year is our tenth year here and one of the things we repeatedly say is how much we learn from facilitating the diverse range of people who participate in our programmes,” says Cindy. “They are from such different backgrounds and cultures, locally and internationally, and they express themselves in so many different ways.” Many participants have written to them expressing how time spent on Bergplaas has changed their lives. “It is deeply rewarding,” comments Cindy, adding: “It has also been life-changing for us, and continues to be so every day.”





Bergplaas' two wildlife and environment programmes include:

1. *Spirit of the Wild*
2. Nature Conservation Student Experiential Training

1. Spirit of the Wild

Bergplaas' *Spirit of the Wild Programme* is a wildlife, guiding and leadership programme that accommodates groups of up to 18 participants at a time, either for the one-week programme or for the three-week certificate programme, completed in three one-week sessions over the course of a year.

The diverse range of *Spirit of the Wild* participants includes:

- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa's urban and rural areas;
- Young people from the South African government's job creation initiatives in the conservation sector;
- University and College Students;
- MBA students from Europe;
- Citizens and Eco-Tourists from all walks of life; and
- Global Business Leaders.

The wildlife and personal development skills that participants gain through the programme, include:

- A deepening of their understanding of wildlife and wilderness;
- Growth in their awareness of being part of the natural environment;
- Advancement of their communication and guiding skills; and
- An awakening of their vital force and life purpose.

"Bergplaas is a place where we should all go. Since my first visit several years ago when I participated in the Spirit of the Wild programme, I experienced a new reality and realisation of being tangibly part of the holism of life; connected through the natural environment. The catalyst for me was Spirit of the Wild and it helped to significantly change my life and career for the better. I have since been back five times." - Kevin Moore, General Manager of Visitor Manager and Interpretation SANParks

"What I experienced at Bergplaas helped me to deal with my anger issues, showed me how to deal with the storms of life. I thank nature for that. I am thankful for Spirit of the Wild for bringing change in my life and helping me to deal with my past." – Ayanda Madlwabinga, Umzi Wethu, Wilderness Foundation, *Spirit of the Wild* participant



2. Nature Conservation Student Experiential Training

Bergplaas offers short courses and one-year internships for Nature Conservation students from Nelson Mandela University, the Tracker Academy, the SA College for Tourism and other partner institutions

Tracker Academy & SA College for Tourism

The *Spirit of the Wild* Programme annually hosts two groups of eight students from the Tracker Academy for a one-week *Spirit of the Wild* training programme on Bergplaas. In addition, Bergplaas annually hosts two hospitality graduates from the SA College for Tourism, and one tracker graduate from the Tracker Academy respectively, for a one-year internship.

The SA College for Tourism is based in Graaff-Reinet in the Great Karoo. It offers a one-year Tracker Academy Certificate Programme and a one-year Tourism and Hospitality Certificate Programme. Both are for disadvantaged, unemployed, young South African men and women.

The Tracker Academy, which operates under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation, trains young men in the traditional skills of tracking. More than 94% of Tracker Academy graduates are permanently employed in the nature-based tourism industry in South Africa.

“For the last three years Bergplaas has offered our tracker students the opportunity to spend a week on the Spirit of the Wild programme. They always return from Bergplaas feeling fresh, re-connected to nature and inspired to contribute meaningfully to conservation.” – Alex van den Heever, co-founder of the Tracker Academy

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU)

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) is the largest University in the Eastern Cape, the province in which Bergplaas is situated. Many of the students at NMMU are from financially impoverished backgrounds.

Bergplaas and the School of Natural Resource Management, NMMU George Campus, have developed a strong partnership since 2011 that was formalised into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2016.

In addition to the short courses and internships for NMMU Nature Conservation students, Bergplaas annually awards the *Princess Irene Spirit of the Wild Bursary* to two NMMU Nature Conservation students for their second year of tuition fees.

The aim of the partnership between Bergplaas and NMMU is:

- ❑ To grow the number of Nature Conservation graduates and postgraduates;
- ❑ To boost environmental leadership and sustainability in South Africa; and
- ❑ To advance research in the high altitude Sneeuberg Mountains of the Great Karoo.



The Bergplaas Team

Cindy and Wayne Maspero are constantly growing and advancing their team.

They also contract freelance guides with many years of experience, including:



Ian Read, who has over 20 years of guiding experience. He has been a Spirit of the Wild facilitator since 2008.

Roy Ashton, who has extensive experience in the United States and South Africa. He has been a Spirit of the Wild facilitator since 2014.

Vuyani Mbuzwa, who graduated from the Tracker Academy several years back. He later joined the Wilderness Leadership School as a wilderness trails guide and is currently training to become a facilitator of the *Spirit of the Wild* Programme on Bergplaas.

In 2015, with support from one of Bergplaas' partners, the team was able to offer a one-year internship to Ntlahla Nomsobo during the final year of his three-year Nature Conservation diploma at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). Ntlahla is currently training to become a facilitator of the *Spirit of the Wild* Programme.

"I gained a lot of experience during my practical year on Bergplaas and the *Spirit of the Wild* programme really helped me to develop as a person and as a facilitator. I learnt to give presentations and lectures with confidence, which I couldn't do before," says Ntlahla.

"When I first arrived at Bergplaas nothing clicked in my mind because the driving forces behind the biodiversity of the Karoo are very different to the coastal area where I studied. I have since come to know it and I really enjoy being in the field. The animal that really fascinates me here is the the eland; it is one of South Africa's sacred animals and it has an incredible ability to survive in this harsh environment."



Ntlahla Nomsobo



Vuyani Mbuzwa



Cindy and Wayne Maspero

Range of partners

In addition to its formal partnerships, Bergplaas also partners with:

- The Wilderness Foundation's Umzi Wethu Conservation Academy, Pride of Table Mountain Programme and Wilderness Leadership School;
- Maharishi Ezemvelo Rural University (MERU);
- Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, Netherlands MBA Degree;
- Quadia Social and Environmental Impact Investment Group.

Groups and workshops

In addition to the *Spirit of the Wild Programme*, Bergplaas hosts cycling, groups and workshops.

We can accommodate up to 18 people (sharing) or 9 people (single) in comfortable double rooms. Bathrooms are shared, as are the common rooms, dining rooms, lounges, library, bomas and conference/workshop room. Delicious catering can be arranged and costed according to the group's needs. A self-catering cottage is also available.

There is no cellphone reception or wifi, which appeals to groups wanting peace and serenity or requiring everyone's focused attention!

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Additional quotes from Bergplaas

"I have always loved the wilderness and I spend a lot of time in nature walking through beautiful areas. My time and experience at Bergplaas made me realise that all along I had been a spectator of the beauty in front of me, rather than a part of it. The visit to- and learnings at Bergplaas now allow me to feel a part of nature, which heightens the experience and also makes me aware of the delicate symbiosis we are all part of. It is a beautiful gift that I will always carry with me." - Tord Dyrssen, International Businessperson, Europe:

"My first visit to Bergplaas in 2013 was a stepping stone that enabled me to better understand the role of the natural environment in our lives and life in general. My ongoing engagement with Bergplaas has allowed me to see the wild, natural world in a whole new dimension, and this has enriched my capacity as a professional to understand value and to better grasp the major sustainability challenges we face and how to tackle them more effectively." – Guillaume Taylor, Managing Partner of Quadia and Trustee of Bergplaas Private Nature Reserve

The Indalo Group of Reserves in the Eastern Cape - All FGASA members



In September 2016 Bergplaas Nature Reserve became the latest member of Indalo, a group of eleven leading private nature reserves/game reserves in the Eastern Cape that are committed to socially and environmentally responsible practices through the biodiversity stewardship programme of the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Association (ECPTA).

Indalo was formed in 2002 after the Wilderness Foundation facilitated a series of meetings between the owners and general managers of key reserves in the Eastern Cape, and formalised the association, with a constitution and membership criteria. The Wilderness Foundation contributes a secretariat and advisory function for Indalo today.

The reserves include: Shamwari, Kwandwe, Amakhala, Lalibela, Pumba, Sibuya, Kariega, Oceana, Bergplaas, Hopewell Private Game Reserve and Hopewell Conservation Estate. The reserves collectively cover over 100 000 hectares, ranging from wetlands to sub-tropical thicket, fynbos and Karoo escarpment grasslands. A biodiversity assessment had been done on all the reserves, which include several critical biodiversity areas.

All the reserves are committed to achieving formal protected environment or nature reserve status through the ECPTA, and are in the process being proclaimed. Bergplaas is already a proclaimed nature reserve. Once all the reserves are proclaimed (hopefully by April 2017) Indalo will act as the management authority for all its members.

“The aim of Indalo is for likeminded reserves to discuss conservation and social issues, learn from each other and agree on standards and processes that advance Indalo’s reputation as a socially conscious wildlife group that sets the standard in responsible conservation tourism and commitment to advancing our rural communities,” says Dr John O’Brien, the Chairperson of Indalo and the Group Ecologist for the Shamwari Group. He has a Master’s degree in terrestrial ecology and a PhD in integrated predator ecology.

“The Indalo members run their businesses separately but collaborate to market Indalo and the Eastern Cape as a magnificent, malaria-free wildlife destination. The more that Indalo and the Eastern Cape is recognised for this, the better for all of us.”

Indalo reserves are non-hunting, and focus on photographic safaris, for which many tourists have a preference. Indalo has completed a conservation plan for all the member reserves, and it will be developing a responsible tourism model for conservation.

Since 2004 Indalo has commissioned four socio-economic reports undertaken by leading researchers at two Eastern Cape universities, namely the Centre for African Conservation Ecology at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and the Department of Economics and Economic History at Rhodes University. A key focus of the reports is the employment and career advancement opportunities that member reserves contribute to their communities and to the Eastern Cape province.

The reports concur that as a land-use, eco-tourism-based game farming, as practised by the Indalo members, is an economically and ecologically desirable alternative to other land uses in their region, including mohair and dairy farming. It generates more income per unit area, and creates more jobs that are better paid.

Through the preferential recruitment and training of local people, social upliftment and poverty alleviation is achieved by raising literacy and numeracy levels, and providing skills to previously unskilled individuals. Private nature/game reserves also benefit the regional tourism sector by diversifying the tourism product in the Eastern Cape, thereby encouraging tourists from the Garden Route to stay in the area longer, to the benefit of the local economy.

“Landowners in South Africa have a very important role to play in the upliftment of the rural areas, the provinces where they are situated and ultimately the national economy,” says Dr O’Brien. Indalo reserves focus on job advancement, environmental education and skills development programmes.

“One of the biggest problems in South Africa is rural unemployment. Collectively our reserves employ thousands of people, most are from the communities in our areas, and we offer skills advancement for our staff,

including qualifications with the Field Guide Association of Southern Africa (FGASA). All Indalo reserves are members of FGASA.”

Bergplaas has focused on environmental skills development for the past ten years through its unique *Spirit of the Wild Programme* and through the internships and training it provides to students from the School of Natural Resource Management at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), the South African College for Tourism and the Tracker Academy.

<http://www.bergplaas.com/>

<http://indaloconservation.co.za/>