

# The man from Down Under

Tony Park may be an Australian, but he has a great fondness for the African wilderness. For this first article in a new interview series, Scott Ramsay sat down with the popular author and spoke to him about his relationship with Africa

**Text and photography:** Scott Ramsay

**I first met** Australian author Tony Park and his wife, Nicola, about eight years ago at the Pretoriuskop campsite in the Kruger National Park.

Tony had seen me in passing earlier in the day, and that evening he wandered across to my campsite and said cheerfully, “Hey mate, come over for a beer later.”

With that typically Australian invitation, and a few cold Windhoek lagers, I began a long association and friendship with Tony and Nicola.

I had no idea at the time that Tony was one of the biggest selling novelists in Australia. His books about the African wilderness, wildlife and associated fictional characters have sold hundreds of thousands of copies across the world.

The couple travel extensively in their Land Rover through the parks and reserves of Africa, researching and writing. Tony’s knowledge and experience in many different parks make him an informed, independent expert on African conservation and travel.

**Tony, which are your three favourite parks or wilderness regions in Africa?**

**1** The Kruger National Park. This was the first wildlife area I ever visited, back in 1995, and for that reason it will always have a special place in my heart. Yes, Kruger is very busy, but there are good reasons why so many people visit SA’s national parks every year – they are the best run, best value for money, and have

the best conservation record in Africa.

**2** Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. Hwange, like Kruger, is one of Africa’s grand old dames. Although she’s fallen on hard times these last few years because of the terrible state of affairs in Zimbabwe, Hwange can still deliver the goods when it comes to wonderful wildlife experiences.

**3** Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe. Without doubt, this is the most beautiful and wildest place I visit. Every time I return to the lower Zambezi River I’m amazed all over again by how stunning it is.

**If, for some hypothetical reason, you were about to leave Africa and never return, which three specific spots would you choose in which to spend your last three weeks on the continent?**

**1** Pretoriuskop, in Kruger. Not for nothing is it known as the friendly camp. It is the first camp I ever stayed in and became pivotal to my writing career. Nicola and I travelled on a very tight budget for many years and we would spend up to six weeks at a time living in our tent in Pretoriuskop. We came to know

many of the staff and we are still warmly greeted on our return. I’d see out my days among friends, and far more animals than most people expect to find in this south-eastern corner of Kruger.

**2** Deteema Dam, Hwange. Like most of the other picnic sites and hides in Hwange, you can book the hide at the Deteema Dam wall for camping. Only one group is allowed to stay at a time. Elephant herds take a path to the dam just a couple of metres from the hide, and I’ve had some incredible sightings here.

**3** My home. We own a house in a wildlife estate on the edge of the Kruger Park (I’ll keep the precise spot to myself!). I’ve grown to consider it more my home than our apartment in Sydney. I’d hate to have to leave Africa, but if I did, I would want to spend it among the bushbuck, zebra, kudu, giraffe, birds – and the occasional leopard – I’ve called my neighbours for the past three years.

**What have been your most memorable wildlife sightings or wilderness experiences so far?**

Nicola and I have taken part in the Hwange annual game count, organised by Wildlife and Environment Zimbabwe, for the past 16 years. One of the most memorable things I’ve witnessed on a count was a leopard stalking an impala down to a spring in Reedbuck Vlei.

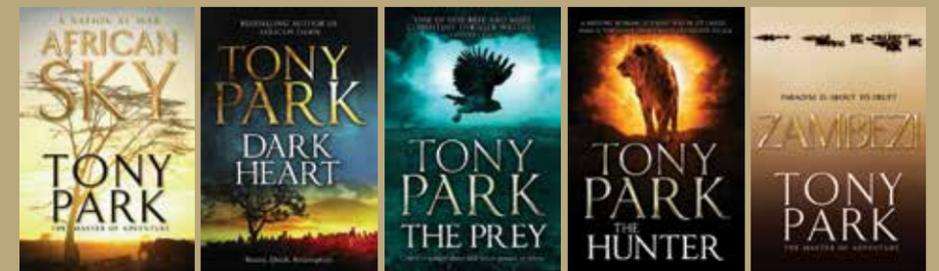
The amazing thing about this stalk was that the leopard walked in the shadow of a big male roan antelope, using the buck as cover. The roan kept glancing at the leopard, and vice versa, but otherwise paid no mind to him at all. The leopard eventually sprinted for the impala, but missed it.

On an early trip to Kruger, we came across a female cheetah which had caught a baby impala and let it live in order to teach her three cubs how to hunt. We watched the mother and cubs toying with the impala, catching and losing it in turn. It was heart wrenching, fascinating, exciting and tragic all at the same time.

In Hwange, a black rhino once chased us in our Land Rover for 5km at speeds of up to 40 km/h! We were terrified at the time, but later learned that the female rhino, named Chewore, had been orphaned as a baby, hand reared by rangers, and associated every green Land Rover she saw with the food truck!

**You’ve met some fascinating people in African conservation and tourism. Which two or three people have inspired you the most, and why?**

Top of the list is the late CK (he always referred to himself as Charlie Kilo) Moyo, a ranger at Robins Camp in Hwange National



Park. Always smiling, always friendly, always with a cigarette rolled out of newspaper in his mouth, and his ancient but lovingly cared for AK47 in his hands, CK was on patrol, hunting poachers, until his death at 60-something. No one seemed to know his exact age, and if they did they kept it a secret when the government tried to pension off everyone over the age of 55!

Next up is Roger, manager of Tsendze Rustic Camp in the Kruger Park. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so happy in his job as Roger. He must meet thousands of people every year but he seems to remember most by name and is quick to offer help in setting up camp and unloading, or to point out the resident owls. If every person employed in a national park had the same love of their work and for the environment as Roger, Africa’s parks would be even better than they are.

Thirdly, Michele Hofmeyr, manager of the Skukuza plant nursery in Kruger. So much of our attention is focused (and rightly so) on the plight of threatened animal species such as rhino, elephant and wild dog that we can lose sight of the fact that much more of our environment is in trouble. As well as running a truly beautiful garden in Kruger, Michele fights a one-woman battle to conserve endangered plants and works with local communities to ensure that flora as well as fauna are not pillaged to extinction for use in traditional medicines.

**What does African wilderness and wildlife mean to you, personally? Why do you love it so much? What do you miss most about it when you leave?**

I came to Africa for the first time as a tourist in 1995 at the age of 31 and I was totally unprepared for everything that assailed my senses on that trip. I’d never given wildlife or the environment or conservation a thought before then.

Africa has taught me the value of nature and the need to protect it. I have loved the process of learning that man and wildlife can live in harmony if there is respect and common sense – we needn’t be mutually exclusive.

I miss going to sleep to the roar of a lion, or waking to the cluck of a purple crested

touraco. I miss going for a drive and not knowing what’s going to be around the next corner. The rest of the world is so predictable.

**The populations of many large animals have plummeted in the last 50 years. What must be done to ensure that Africa’s wildlife survives and thrives?**

From what I’ve learned, human behaviour and habitat destruction are the two biggest threats to wildlife. People may think I’m crazy, but it is possible to change both.

People in Vietnam and the other countries that use rhino horn, lion bones, vulture’s heads and other animal parts in traditional medicine have to stop the practice. We have to look at educational, communications-based campaigns to influence and change behaviour.

The sceptics say I’m naïve, but my answer is that it wasn’t that long ago that people in Europe, the US and Australia were making piano keys and billiard balls out of ivory, and cosmetics out of whales, and shooting rhinos as trophies.

Behaviour can be changed, given consistency of the message and effort. Co-ordination and a single, unified voice are what is missing at the moment.

I applaud initiatives such as those of the Peace Parks Foundation that are focused on opening up migration routes and more land for animals, and people. I think it’s important to point out that in the time I’ve been travelling to Africa, just coming up to 20 years, the South African government has proclaimed several new national parks and restocked them with game. That is a little recognised but absolutely crucial step in the process of reversing habitat destruction and returning land to wildlife.

**What do you think of the proposed legalised trade in rhino horn? Yes? No? Maybe?**

No. I’ve heard the argument in favour, but I can’t support trade in a so-called medicine that doesn’t work. The demand for horn can be nullified through campaigns aimed at changing behaviour. The demand is limited to pockets of the wealthy elite in Vietnam and some other markets.

Seriously, if rhino horn really was valued in

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Chinese medicine in mainland China (as opposed to being a must-have commodity for a few rich idiots) would there be any rhinos left at all? This is a finite market with complex artificial forces driving demand. We can target these people and their suppliers, and we must.

I think talk of legalising the trade sends all the wrong messages to the user countries, which we are asking to step up policing of the illegal trade. Moves to legalise the trade also undermine and overlook the value of the work that rangers, police and military people are doing on the ground.

This is a war, not a get rich quick scheme for governments and a few individuals. Let's fight it – on the battlefield, and in the minds of the people who are driving the bloodshed.

### **And what about hunting. Does it fit into your conservation matrix? If yes, then with what conditions?**

I've served in the Australian Army off and on for 33 years. I've been to war and I've carried a gun and learned to shoot, but I've never killed anything or anyone. OK, there was a scorpion once, and I'm sorry about that. But seriously, while I would never hunt, some of the most ardent conservationists I know are also hunters.

I am a hypocrite because I love kudu fillet and have no problem with hunting for the pot, but I would never shoot one of those beautiful creatures.

If well managed, truly sustainable hunting can genuinely support local communities, provide a buffer zone around national parks, and help prevent or combat poaching, then I don't have a problem with it.

The question is, can all of these criteria be met and enforced?

### **Which are your three favourite books (fiction or non-fiction) about African wilderness and wildlife?**

I am currently reading a delightful book called *Never a Dull Moment*, by a friend of mine, Paddy Hagelthorn, who manages a lodge in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve. It is shaping up to be one of my favourite wildlife books because it's a unique combination – from what I've seen – of a beautiful coffee table book mixed with lots of good text about conservation and Paddy's anecdotes as a guide. Fiction-wise I'm a huge fan of John Gordon-Davis who sadly passed away recently. His best book was *Hold My Hand I'm Dying*, which mixes wildlife, history and politics during the Rhodesian bush war. Another excellent novel of his was *Taller Than Trees*, a short but very moving book about a game ranger who has to track down and shoot a problem elephant.

### **Finally, your favourite wild spot to watch the sun rise or set in Africa, and your favourite person to share it with?**

You can catch a great sunrise or sunset anywhere in Africa, but the sunsets from a houseboat on Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe, are the most spectacular I've seen. There's nothing like sitting with my wife, Nicola, and maybe a few friends, sipping a chilled Zambezi Lager on the lake. 

For more information on Tony, go to [TonyPark.net](http://TonyPark.net).



### **K-Way gear review**

## **Backpacks for hiking**

Recently I hiked in the Drakensberg for six days. I used a K-Way Venture 70 litre backpack. I've used this backpack on several long hikes now, and I've been disappointed with a few of its features.

Let me preface my criticism by saying that I was carrying a lot of gear, probably close to 30kg, including several camera lenses in a small camera bag attached to the back of the backpack. This extra weight and imbalance may have affected the comfort of the Venture.

After two or three days, my lower back was rubbed raw by the constant friction of the metal frame. No matter how much I tried to adjust the backpack's centre of gravity, the blistering continued. Even though there is some padding over the metal frame, it wasn't helping. It seems as if the padding is just not thick or robust enough to deal with the weight of the pack.

When I compared my Venture to the Deuter backpacks which my friends were using, I could see that there was much less padding on my Venture. The Deuters were heavily padded, and my friends really enjoyed using them.

I swapped packs for a day with one of my companions, and he also found the Venture uncomfortable. On the other hand, I was impressed by how comfortable his Deuter was. It made hiking such a pleasure. Granted, my pack was probably a good five or six kgs heavier, but still, the Deuter sat on my back much more comfortably.

The K-Way Venture seems to be okay for a two-day hike, but if you're hiking for any longer than that, get a Deuter.

For more information, go to [www.capeunionmart.com](http://www.capeunionmart.com).



### **Scott Ramsay**

Scott Ramsay is a photo-journalist focusing on national parks and nature reserves in southern Africa. He is supported by Cape Union Mart as a K-Way ambassador, and also by Ford, Goodyear Wrangler, Safari Centre Cape Town, Hetzner and Tracks4Africa.

For more information, check out [www.LoveWildAfrica.com](http://www.LoveWildAfrica.com), or [www.facebook.com/LoveWildAfrica](http://www.facebook.com/LoveWildAfrica) and @love\_wild\_africa on Instagram.

