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1000 km done, 4000 to go: First leg of Tracks of Giants expedition successfully completed

Three weeks into this epic 5-month-long, 5000 km expedition, the conservation results are already beginning to accumulate...and the team is getting accustomed to the physical demands of the course as well as the harsh Namibian environment.

The Tracks of Giants expedition kicked off on Namibia's Skeleton Coast (Atlantic Ocean) of Southern Africa in Namibia on Tuesday, 1 May 2012. The team will traverse Southern Africa to finish their journey on the Indian Ocean in KwaZulu Natal on 5 September, 2012. Following the ancient migration routes of elephants, they will travel through formal protected areas and ecological corridors--highlighting the importance of "transfrontier conservation" and the need to connect these areas to allow wildlife to roam freely and human communities to prosper.

Expedition leaders Ian McCallum and Ian Michler lead a small, multi-generational, multi-racial, and gender diverse team, including at times two wilderness rangers from the Wilderness Foundation's Wilderness Leadership School (South Africa) : Lihle Mbokazi and Mandla Mbekezeli Buthelezi. They are joined on all sectors by "conservation giants," people working and succeeding at ground level on local and regional conservation challenges. Another important aspect of the journey is to daily document the challenges and accomplishments of these dedicated "conservation giants" to show that conservation is working in Southern Africa.

First milestone reached! The team reached the 1,000 km milestone on Saturday, May 19 -- one fifth of the journey!

The toughest part of the journey so far has been dealing with the extremely high daytime temperatures which have forced the team to travel in the early hours of the morning, rest during the heat of the day, and continue their travels in the early evening. The average daytime temperature has ranged between 38 and 42 degrees Celsius.

The first five days following the launch on May 1, eleven trekkers hiked 86 km on foot from Rocky Point on the Skeleton Coast of Namibia to the desert village of Puros. The group was a unique collection of Namibian and international conservation giants : Chris Bakkes and Festus Mbinga from Wilderness Safaris; Mandla Buthelezi from the Wilderness Leadership School (who led the group); Vance Martin of The WILD Foundation (US-based, international conservation organization); John Kasaona and Boas Hambo from the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC); Jerome Mukuyu, a university student from Windhoek; and Robin Uatokuuta also of IRDNC.

According to Ian Michler, highlights of the first leg included wildlife sightings - "a close-up sighting of an elephant, plenty of oryx and springbok, and the occasional jackal and ostrich" - and daily video interviews with conservationists and local leaders.

A Voice for Wilderness

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Founders of IRDNC, Garth Owen-Smith and Dr Margie Jacobsohn, joined the core team for the second leg of the Namibian section. IRDNC is an influential community-based conservation organisation that has been instrumental in the success of northern Namibia's conservancy policy. Their early work laid the foundation for the now national communal conservancy movement which covers nearly 17% of Namibia.

"We were delighted to join the TRACKS team when they visited a number of the remote north western conservancies," says Dr Jacobsohn. "Namibia's considerable conservation successes are directly due to the partnership our government has formed with the 71 communities who have registered conservancies and manage their wildlife sustainably. Our community conservation experiences are thus relevant to some of the other countries TRACKS will visit."

Michler notes that although the journey has just begun, it has already highlighted a number of conservation issues and documented many innovative solutions to land-use competition, tender and stakeholder disputes, human-animal conflicts and the vital need for ecological corridors for both wildlife and the rural nomadic Himba people. "Our challenge is recording these disputes, challenges and successes as accurately and authentically as possible," he says.

On 17 May, the core team, cyclists and the back-up team arrived for a day's rest at Ongava (Namibia, on the border of the legendary Etosha National Park). They are currently heading towards the Botswana border, with a stop-off at Tsumkwe on May 28. From there they will head towards the Botswana border which they hope to reach by May 27.

The Tracks of Giants expedition is a project of The Wilderness Foundation and The WILD Foundation. It is also an initiative of Nature Needs Half, a global conservation movement emphasizing the importance of protecting and interconnecting large land and seascapes, to address UN Millennium Development goals by supporting human communities and all life on earth.

The trip is closely monitored on dedicated social media sites, all drawing from the TRACKS Media Centre (www.tracksofgiants.org), where there is also background on all the participants and sponsors.



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Follow the Tracks of Giants:

Blogs, personal stories, updates: www.tracksofgiants.org

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/tracksofgiants](https://twitter.com/tracksofgiants)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/tracksofgiants

Photos: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/thewildfoundation/collections/72157629651533630/>

The expedition is lead by:

Ian Michler: Ian Michler is a top specialist wilderness guide, photojournalist and naturalist, and has lived and worked across Africa for the last 22 years. Learn more: <http://tracksofgiants.org/key-people-partners>

Ian McCallum: Ian McCallum is a medical doctor, psychiatrist, writer and a specialist wilderness guide. Learn more: <http://tracksofgiants.org/key-people-partners>

TRACKS is a project of:

The Wilderness Foundation: The Wilderness Foundation believes in sustainable social intervention projects, and the power of the wilderness to dissolve ethnic and economic inequalities and forge one path toward social and environmental sustainability. The Foundation is a project-driven conservation and leadership organisation, which aims to encourage, plan and protect wild lands and wilderness, uplift the knowledge and lives of citizens and stimulate an environmental ethos among current and future leaders. The Wilderness Foundation envisages a world that has sufficient intact natural ecosystems and wilderness areas that are valued and effectively protected for the benefit of all species. www.wildernessfoundation.co.za

The WILD Foundation: an international conservation organization that started in Southern Africa in the 1960s and has been based in the US since 1974. Through **Nature Needs Half**, it works to create a social and professional movement to protect and interconnect half of the Earth's lands and seas in order that human communities and all life on Earth can prosper. With field projects and policy initiatives in many countries, its flagship project is the **World Wilderness Congress (WWC)**, the world's longest running, international, public conservation project. "WILD10" is underway in Europe and will culminate in the 10th WWC in Salamanca, Spain, October 2013. www.wild.org

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