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Tracks of Giants team reaches one-third milestone

Tracks of Giants is a five month, field-based nature conservation expedition – by foot, mountain bike, and kayak – 5000 Km following the tracks of ancient elephant migration routes through six countries across southern Africa.

The Tracks of Giants team passed the 1700 kilometre milestone on June 01, 2012 at Guma Lagoon in Botswana, which marked one third of the journey successfully completed. The team of ‘Trackers’ includes conservationists, media, a backup team, and various sponsors and supporters who join the core team along the way.

One of the aims of Tracks of Giants is to rekindle the rapidly declining indigenous knowledge base of the human-animal interface, and indigenous solutions to conservation challenges and issues.

Specialist wilderness guide, photojournalist and naturalist Ian Michler, and medical doctor, psychiatrist, writer and conservationist, Ian McCallum, are two of the core members of the Tracks team. They are undertaking the entire journey without the use of mechanical transportation. In order to track the journey via GPS, the backup team is carrying an elephant collar which is linked to a tracking device. The collar acts as a symbol for the Tracks of Giants journey as well as a valuable part of the backup team’s equipment. At the end of the expedition the collar will be deployed on an elephant and its movements monitored for 3 years by Elephants Without Borders.

The 5000 kilometre, 20 week journey through five countries kicked off in Namibia on May 01, with the core team and Wilderness Leadership School guides travelling on foot through the Skeleton Coast National Park facing temperatures of up to 45 degrees Celsius in the shade. Switching to bicycles at the end of the first leg, the team cycled from Puros to the Botswana border post which was reached on Tuesday, May 29. From the dunes and spectacular desert landscapes of Namibia to the more wooded flora-filled region of western Botswana, the team has encountered wildlife and nature at its most wild. Sightings of desert elephant, oryx and springbok were not uncommon in Namibia, while the Botswana leg has included encounters with hippo and crocodile.

Along the way, the team is investigating various examples of corridor and transfrontier park conservation, and are amassing a large video library as they document successful and challenging human-animal relationships within communities across Southern Africa. To date, they have been impressed by Namibia’s Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) policies which, together with the work of local NGOs, have led to the establishment of over 70 conservancies in the area covering 135 000 square kilometres and home to nearly a quarter of a million people. According to “tracker” Ian Michler, the three San-managed conservancies around Tsumkwe are notable success stories. “Given the global recognition and praise for these policies, Namibia’s approach must surely hold something for other states across Africa grappling with similar issues,” says Michler.

A Voice for Wilderness

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According to Frank Raimondo, director of the Peace Parks Foundation and member of the backup team, there is evidence of an enormous amount of good work being done in Botswana. “We have seen great efforts by many people including poorly funded NGOs.”

One of the major threats to the conservation of the area is the invasion of unscrupulous mining companies. “It is imperative that a coordinated approach be adopted to tackle these problems as soon as possible,” says Raimondo.

On June 04, the team reached the Okavango Delta and traded in their well-travelled bicycles for traditional dugout canoes called mekoros. “Of all stages, these next few weeks are undoubtedly going to be the most adventurous,” says Michler. “The terrain is isolated and filled with wildlife of all shapes and sizes.” Michler lived in the Okavango Delta from 1990 to 2004, and felt a certain sense of “homecoming” upon arriving in the region. “Some of my life’s most special memories and work experiences come from here.”

To date, the team has encountered crocodiles, hippos, and plenty of elephant, but all remain in good health and good spirits. Throughout the journey they have documented the age-old conflicts that exist between humans and wild animals including accounts of harvestable crops trampled by elephants, baboons devastating newly planted seedbeds, and humans being killed by predators, elephants or hippo. “There is a wide range of opinion as to how best these conflicts should be managed. While removing the offending animals remains a popular option, it was heartening to hear many conservancy members and farmers reject this option on the basis that the wildlife should not always bear the direct blame,” says Michler.

They switched to Kayaks at Seronga and are heading down the Savuti Channel. The team is expected to reach the public Savuti Camp site on June 24, 2012.

On reaching the one-third landmark, Ian McCallum says that thoughts of his wife, children and grandchildren fuel his sense of purpose, as well as the efforts of the backup team. “I am very grateful for these men who range in age from twenty to seventy one. Things are working well between us because of one important reason – we all know what this journey is about, and it is not about us.”

Follow the Tracks of Giants:

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

Twitter: www.twitter.com/tracksofgiants

Facebook: www.facebook.com/tracksofgiants

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

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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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