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Another milestone reached as the team kayaks into Zambia

After kayaking almost 350 kilometres down the waterways of northern Botswana, dodging hippos and crocs, walking 125 kilometres through the Chobe National Park from Savuti Marsh to Goha Gate, and then kayaking another 232 kilometres on the mighty Zambezi River, the Tracks of Giants team reached the waterfront on the edge of Livingstone, Zambia on Wednesday, July 11. This marked the end of the second kayak leg as well as the 2,500 kilometre half-way mark for the entire Tracks of Giants journey.

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 joined by a backup team, and various sponsors and supporters along the way in this epic 5,000 kilometre journey to raise international awareness of the importance of corridor and transfrontier park conservation and the understanding of the human-animal interface in southern Africa.

They are travelling along ancient elephant migration routes, and are carrying an elephant collar donated by conservation organisation, Elephants Without Borders (EWB). "It is a symbol of how we've learned from monitoring elephants and how that knowledge has become our path, leading us towards positive conservation efforts," says Kelly Landen of EWB. Landen and Dr Mike Chase, also from EWB guided the Tracks of Giants team through Chobe and the Linyanti Floodplain in Botswana. This elephant collar will be deployed onto an elephant in the Chobe area after the expedition has been completed.

According to Michler, "The last few days of the kayak leg in Botswana ended in a multitude of magnificent elephant sightings – family herds or groups of bulls around almost every bend!"

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. Guided by EWB, the team were impressed by Botswana's low impact tourism policies and the fact that up to 40% of the country is maintained under some form of environmental protection. "This gives the country the template to become the best managed and most impressive wilderness region on the continent in years to come," says Michler.

He also pointed out that the country is taking steps to phasing out consumptive utilization land-use options such as trophy hunting. "I'm a firm supporter of non-consumptive options, or what is generally known as photographic ecotourism, being a more effective and sustainable way of managing wildlife resources. However, the end of trophy hunting provides the government, large conservation agencies and the photographic sector with a new challenge – possibly their greatest at the moment – how to fill the void left in what will be the old hunting concessions. In the long

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term, the viability of any business plan will depend on the ecological health of the greater region, and if this is not recognised, the risk is that in time, the ecological integrity of the prime areas will become compromised.”

In stark contrast to the prolific wildlife sightings whilst kayaking in Botswana, the Zambezi river trip has been filled with “scene after scene brimming with village life,” according to Michler. However, the vast floodplains are packed with birdlife including open-billed storks, black herons, various species of egrets, ducks and geese. “The lack of big game sightings is likely due to decades of hunting in the region,” says Michler.

The team met with Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta, traditional ruler of the Shisheke Chiefdom in the Western Province of Zambia. According to Michler, “his knowledge of transfrontier conservation, and the manner in which he is attempting to re-empower his 70,000 or so constituents was both refreshing and exemplary. To have leaders of this calibre so deeply involved in the process gives us much hope.”

They have also met with two other chiefs from the area, and attended a meeting on transfrontier conservation hosted by Solly Tevera of Wilderness Safaris. The meeting was attended by members of the Zambia Wildlife Authority, Wild Horizons Wildlife Trust and the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife.

After a night at the Painted Dog Sanctuary headed by renowned conservationist Dr Greg Rasmussen, the team is currently in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe, in the Wilderness Safaris concession of Makololo where they will spend two days clover leaf hiking. They will then cycle north through the Park to reach the Pandamatenga Border Post with Botswana on July 21.

At this second entry into Botswana at Pandamatenga, they will be met by family and friends for a week’s cycle southwards via the Makadikadi Pans and Kubu Island to the Khama Rhino Sanctuary outside Serowe.

Quotes from the backup crew:

We have gathered some quotes from the backup crew on their experiences of the journey so far. Here is what Anton Kruyshaar, the youngest member of the team has to say about his journey so far:

Knowing what a privilege it is for me to be on an expedition like this, I jumped at the opportunity... nevertheless I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that I was in for lots of work and a whole lot of adventure.

Being Mr Everything (cameraman, cook, backup driver, bicycle mechanic and, and, and) was initially very stressful, but with time I realized that I was part of a team and that the others are more than willing to help. And once we had all found our place everything ran extremely smooth. Even though we all come from different backgrounds, ages and phases of life, we all get on very well and over the whole trip there have been surprisingly no fall outs; no one has thrown their toys out of the cot. Adding to this, all logistics, bikes and cars are running well. So, what began for me as an epic adventure has grown into a great learning experience.”

Follow the Tracks of Giants on:

Twitter: www.twitter.com/tracksofgiants

Facebook: www.facebook.com/tracksofgiants

Website: www.tracksofgiants.org – read the personal stories of the trailists via their blogs on Tracksofgiants.org

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

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Notes:**A quick update on the first half of the Tracks of Giants journey:**

The 5000 kilometre, 20 week journey through six 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.

Tracks of Giants' goals are: to promote a greater awareness of corridor and transfrontier park conservation; to advocate a greater understanding of the human-animal interface; to highlight sustainable human-animal relationships across Southern Africa; to encourage a review of education and research perceptions concerning current environmental issues; to provide an ongoing platform to feature southern African conservation challenges, potential long term solutions, and the ecological leadership required to address them.

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. His feature articles, diaries and blogs documenting the major conservation challenges facing Africa are well known to readers of the award winning magazines, Africa Geographic and Africa Birds and Birding. He is also the author of seven natural history and travel books on various African countries, does ecotourism consultancy work for both the private and government sectors, and has worked as a researcher and field coordinator on various natural history television documentaries for international broadcasters. Prior to his life in the wilderness, he spent almost eight years practicing as a stockbroker in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Ian is presently based along the Garden Route in South Africa where he is co-owner and manager of Invent Africa www.inventafrica.com, a specialist safari company that runs trips to 15 countries across Africa.

Ian McCallum: Ian McCallum is a medical doctor, psychiatrist, writer and a specialist wilderness guide. A co-founder of the Wilderness Leadership School in the Cape of Good Hope in 1983, he has subsequently written two anthologies of wilderness poems, Wild Gifts (1999) and Untamed (2012), a novel – Thorns to Kilimanjaro (2000) and more recently, the award winning Ecological Intelligence – Rediscovering Ourselves in Nature (2005). An adjunct professor at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, he is the writer/poet for the Dylan Lewis Untamed Exhibition currently on display at the National Botanical Gardens in Cape Town. He is presently a director of the Wilderness Foundation where he heads up the Academic and Leadership projects portfolio. He is a former rugby Springbok fullback.

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.

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