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End of the road marks the beginning of environmental change...

Tracks of Giants, the epic conservation trek over 5000 kilometres through six southern African countries has come to an end. But the impact of the expedition will have a lasting effect for years to come. The project, initiated by the Wilderness Foundation and the WILD Foundation, highlighted the need to create conservation-related solutions that will assist grass-roots communities in developing a sustainable relationship with their environment.

Starting on the Namibian coastline on May 01, 2012, the journey saw a team of conservationists travel across southern Africa through Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa where the two team leaders Ian McCallum and Ian Michler met with conservation 'giants' in each area. The "two Ians" undertook the entire journey without the use of motorised transportation. They walked, cycled and kayaked in the historical tracks of migrating elephant clusters in order to highlight the need for corridor conservation, transfrontier parks, and promote more understanding about the coexistence of humans with wild animals. They were supported by a backup team, and joined by various sponsors and environmentalists along the way.

"Now that the expedition component, which has been absolutely vital for the gathering of relevant and up-to-date field data, is done, the most significant challenge is about to begin," says specialist wilderness guide, photojournalist and naturalist Ian Michler. "In the months to come we will be processing and laying out all the conservation, wildlife management, community and ecotourism issues we have encountered along the route. We are hoping the final products (a book and documentary film) will be ready in time for the next World Wilderness Congress in October, 2013."

"Africa has conservation issues but, more importantly, also has solutions working at a community level. One of the key objectives of Tracks of Giants is that the team set out to investigate and fully document this... and it has. We'll now work on pulling the stories together," says president of the WILD foundation, Vance Martin. Martin joined the expedition for the first leg through Namibia.

Medical doctor, psychiatrist, writer and conservationist, Ian McCallum, hopes that the expedition has laid the groundwork for building the trust of the local people in each region. "If we do not get the trust of the people on the ground, conservation is doomed. They have been disempowered over the years by government and government departments, but we have to start listening to what they have to say."

At the close of the expedition, the Tracks of Giants team handed over a GPS-linked elephant collar which they carried with them throughout the journey. The collar acted as a constant reminder of the purpose of the journey as well as a valuable part of the backup team's equipment. It was handed over to the Elephants Without Borders (EWB), a Botswana-based non-profit organisation and will become part of the journey's legacy when it is attached to one of the elephants that the organisation tracks in the Chobe region of Botswana.

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International Wilderness Leadership (WILD) Foundation • U.S.A. non-profit #23-7389749
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“The collar is a symbol of what 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.

The twenty week journey culminated on the dunes at Cape Vidal on KwaZulu Natal’s northern coastline on Monday, September 03. Wilderness Foundation CEO, Andrew Muir joined the team for the final week of the journey walking along the shores of St Lucia – a Natural World Heritage Site. They were met by founder of the Wilderness Foundation and Wilderness Leadership School and world-renown conservationist, Dr Ian Player.

“The journey may have come to an end, but the full impact of Tracks of Giants is still to come,” says Muir. “The Wilderness Foundation is extremely grateful to all the environmental organisations, sponsors and supporters that made this journey possible. We are looking forward to seeing the results of the foundation that has been laid.”

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/>

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

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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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