

Great Plains Conservation and Wilderness Safaris (WS) lodge and tour operators are synonymous with the best of Botswana safaris. There are others, of course, but these two stand out for their demonstrable commitment to the goals of ensuring both people and wildlife benefit from commercial tourism in fragile, African safari areas.

The differences between them are subtle. On one hand, Great Plains is first and foremost a conservation organisation that uses low-volume, low-impact, high-worth tourism to sustain its protection and management of stressed and threatened environments. The emotional value this offers its guests should not be underestimated and has informed the company's success and inspired customer loyalty.

Wilderness Safaris, on the other hand,

began with the desire to sensitively share the African wilderness with caring travellers and the organisation has always put people at the heart of the business. For over 34 years its robust eco-tourism model – building conservation economies – has withstood adverse financial cycles. This big-picture mentality has enabled the company to negotiate protection for the more than two million hectares of precious wilderness it operates in and the upliftment of the rural communities from which the majority of its workforce comes.

When a company's conscience is driven by unshakable ethical conviction, it forges a path that others are willing to follow. In Botswana this means effecting a "tread lightly" approach, involving energy-saving, recycling and removable structures. In rural communities it's about jobs, cultural exchanges, education, health benefits and joint venture infrastructure improvements.

SAFARIS THAT GIVE BACK

2017 IS THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FOR DEVELOPMENT, SO CARRIE HAMPTON JOURNEYED TO BOTSWANA TO FIND SOME INSPIRING EXAMPLES OF HOW IT SHOULD BE DONE



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© Beverly Joubert National Geographic Rhinos Without Borders Feb 2015. Photo courtesy Great Plains Conservation.

TOURISM AND JOB CREATION

Over 75 500 jobs in the country are directly and indirectly associated with travel and tourism (in a population of a little over two million), accounting for 11,6% of GDP (2015). Obonye Baitseng estimates that as many as 60% of her fellow Eretsha villagers are employed in tourism in the Okavango Delta. She's Head of Housekeeping at Wilderness Xigera Camp and has ambitions to become a lodge General Manager. "Even now I can become this because Wilderness Safaris gives everyone the opportunity to realise their potential," she says.

She's after a job like Gideon Kgalemang's, Xigera's Camp Manager. From Francistown, the first time he encountered lions in the bush he wanted to run straight back home. He chuckles: "I learnt to stand strong and appreciate the wilderness and now I teach others to do the same."

"The Botswana government is very proactive in protecting its wildlife, and through compulsory environmental education at every school and at Wildlife Clubs, it bridges the gap from learning to real nature experiences." The Botswana know that protecting wildlife protects the country.

EVEN VILLAGERS WHO USED TO TURN A BLIND EYE NO LONGER ACCEPT POACHING. THIS GRADUAL SHIFT IN CONSCIOUSNESS AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL HAS MADE BOTSWANA THE SAFEST PLACE IN AFRICA FOR WILDLIFE TO LIVE FREELY.



Photo courtesy Wilderness Safaris.

A SAFE HAVEN

It's a credit to Botswana's enduring integrity that its stance on poaching is one of zero-tolerance, shoot-to-kill. Even villagers who used to turn a blind eye no longer accept poaching. This gradual shift in consciousness at grassroots level has made Botswana the safest place in Africa for wildlife to live freely.

It's also considered the safest place in southern Africa for rhino to thrive. For this reason, the translocation of 100 rhino from South Africa (where they are definitely not safe) to Botswana, through the Rhino Without Borders initiative, has begun. It's a groundbreaking, fundraising collaboration between Great Plains Conservation and the &Beyond safari company.

Village youngsters, in particular, are beneficiaries of projects like the Great Plains' Explorers Camp, which invites Gudigwa Village Primary School children to an annual, fun, educational camp to learn conservation values. Children in the Wilderness, a non-profit organisation started by WS, facilitates leadership development and conservation education for rural children in its areas of operation.

Gudigwa village (on the outskirts of the Okavango) is too remote for lodge guests to access, but tourists certainly become aware of how integral the community is in their experience. Camp guides and

COMMUNITY FOCUS

But what does all this mean for rural communities? Many families are sustained by direct tourism employment, but also indirectly through schemes like the Great Plains' Craft Development Programme. Rural women are mentored to develop small craft enterprises and their creations, which include basketry, jewellery and beaded souvenirs, are in demand at safari lodge shops. The income helps sustain families and keeps cultural traditions alive, even though the products are sometimes tailored for international tastes.

Of more mutual benefit are the significant lease fees paid by safari companies into community trusts. The Okavango Community Trust, for example, represents five villages and manages the flow of funds from two Wilderness Safaris concessions in the Okavango Delta.



Photo courtesy Wilderness Safaris.

Clockwise, from top left: The Rhino relocation programme. • A Xigera Camp fire. • A happy participant in the Children in the Wilderness programme. **Opposite:** Guests at Xigera Camp on a mokoro trip.

SUSTAINABILITY

well-informed staff share stories of how they pass on environmental consciousness to their small communities. Through these conversations, guests better understand the part they play in sustaining the business that employs the staff and preserves the land. This cycle of awareness invisibly connects guests and these communities.

TRAVEL WITH A PURPOSE

San Franciscans Celsea and Wyatt Jenkins chose to visit Great Plains' Selinda Camp specifically because they care how their tourist dollar is spent. "I want my holiday spend to make a difference, not just to me," says Celsea. Their travel agent wasn't very informed, so they did their own research and instructed the agent to include Great Plains because of the organisation's policy of wildlife protection and social upliftment.



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Photo courtesy of Great Plains Conservation.

Sharon Gilbert Rivett of Fair Trade Tourism wants international tour operators to assemble Fair Trade packages for Africa, where at least 50% of the accommodation and activities are certified as sustainable. In Botswana that accreditation comes from their Eco Certification System, which is designed to encourage and support responsible environmental, social and cultural behaviour by tourism businesses.

With more and more African and Indian Ocean countries offering Fair Trade or related eco and sustainable tourism accreditation, the 50% goal should be attainable.

Enlightened travellers choose with a conscience and their hearts and no-one raises the emotional stakes more than the bushwhacking founders of Great Plains Conservation – Dereck and Beverly Joubert. They're admired for their tear-jerking Botswana wildlife documentaries that make viewers long for the African plains. Staff recall

the night the Jouberts and Robert Redford sat around the Zarafa camp fire, while a pride of lions settled down just metres away.

As Dereck points out: "It's wild out there!" And while that's what a Botswana safari is all about, we know it's so much more. It's about how high-end tourism is driving sustainable conservation initiatives, empowering communities and generating mass employment. It's about a government having impeccable conservation ethics and tourism organisations exceeding expectations while doing the right thing. 🦋

- *Carrie Hampton was a guest of Wilderness Safaris, Great Plains Conservation, Fair Trade Tourism and Mackair.*

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Left: Celsea and Wyatt Jenkins, guests at Great Plains' Selinda Camp. **Above:** A map of the Selinda Reserve.

TECHNOLOGY TAKES CONSERVATION BY THE HORNS

In the Department of Environmental Affairs' Report 2015, it was revealed that 1 215 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2014. In 2015, the number decreased slightly to 1 175, but the department estimated that if the decimation of these creatures continued at this frightening rate, rhinos will be extinct by 2025.

In a private game reserve adjacent to the Kruger National Park, the onslaught of rhino poaching was unexpected and the owners had little knowledge of how to fight back.

"We were nowhere near equipped to deal with the highly organised crime that hit us out of nowhere. It was a tsunami. We lost 50 animals in the first year [2011]. 2012 was something of a disaster when we realised we had to form anti-poaching units and

develop a more military approach to address this problem," says John Robertson*, owner of the family-owned game reserve. Four years later, the reserve has achieved a 96% success rate.

In a war such as the one on poaching, protection teams have often been tasked with protecting animals by working closely with them on the ground. Connected Conservation, a collaboration between Dimension Data and Cisco Systems which started 18 months ago, has created a proactive technological solution to put protection in place without interacting with or disturbing any of the animals.

"We believe in solving critical environmental challenges with transformative technology," says Bruce Watson, Group Executive of

Dimension Data/Cisco Alliance.

A lack of infrastructure hampered progress initially, but by the completion of phase one at the end of February 2016, a local database had been created with a link to the national database.

All people entering the reserve (including staff) have to provide their vehicle registration details, as well as their identification number. Rangers stay connected with each other and the control room with iPads and mobile devices, a helicopter is on stand-by for armed response and alerts warn of any tampering along the 72km of fencing. At each gate CCTV cameras monitor every vehicle and pedestrian, and every person must submit to biometric scanning.

More impressive features will be added in the second and third

phases, such as seismic sensors, thermal imaging and drone cameras.

The private game reserve's success won't end in that little part of the Kruger National Park. The tech companies are working to replicate their successful Connected Conservation project model to protect all endangered species

"We're setting up a system that is a replica model. While we're protecting rhino now with our solution, we want to extend that. We want to put this solution into all national parks and private reserves in South Africa. Then we want to take it north of our border into places like Kenya, Zambia, Uganda and Zimbabwe – wherever there is a national park or reserve."

– **Jabulile Ngwenya**

* Name has been changed.