

2022 - Another interesting year for *Big5* protection!

Author Simon Leak - founder and director.

Where did that year go? I was right to be optimistic in my 2021 summing up. It was a busy year for us all, but as usual the year was marred with some tragic events. I mentioned the build up of Islamic terrorism across Africa but particularly in the west, in and around Burkino Faso. Tragedy struck in January when an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) killed three rangers in La Pendjari National Park and again in February, when a team of rangers in W National Park were ambushed by terrorists in a complex attack involving further IEDs. Two follow up teams were also attacked, leading to the deaths of 8 individuals, including African Parks Francophone Chief Instructor, Jerome, our good friend, fellow trainer and coordinator for our work in the two Benin parks.

It's at times like this that we pause to reflect, not only on the dangers and the bravery of the individuals at the forward edge of conservation, but also that we as trainers often walk the same pathways. We must never be complacent, neither when we train (preparing our students for the dangers they face) but also when we are accompanying them deep in the bush where danger may be lying in wait, lurking amongst the dappled shadows.

At least, thank goodness, we saw the gradual decline of the dreaded covid restrictions...

MOZAMBIQUE January - March 2022

After a very quiet and rather lonely Christmas on Bazaruto Island, I was looking forward to getting stuck into some leadership training, but first I'd drawn up a list of kit and equipment that would be needed to further develop the maritime skills and operational capabilities of the marine rangers. I had a brief trip to Jo'Burg to do the purchasing and returned like a belated Father Christmas with bags full of goodies. However, there were some administration issues as well, as with it being the monsoon period, high winds and stormy seas meant the two courses I was due to run would be delayed. Happily, the best solution was for me to head home for a few weeks, and what a welcome decision that was and what a great time I had.

By mid February, I was heading back out and by now well rehearsed in the processes and procedures of entering this corner of Africa and having made a few friends in Vilanculos, it was a pleasure, rather than the usual headache to navigate my way back to Bazaruto Island.

The two leadership courses went really well. It's always amazing to see how individuals develop with the right training and support and there are always surprises when some

suddenly and unexpectedly rise up like dormant volcanoes, erupting with confidence, surprising even themselves at their ability to plan operations, then stand and give a comprehensive and authoritative brief. These are the hidden stars who otherwise may never be discovered.

I was delighted when my partner, Fenella, joined me for the second course. As a surprise, we ran an exercise where her boat from the mainland was intercepted and she was duly arrested for being in possession of some offensive sunglasses. Bazaruto is certainly a special place. Swimming in the warm Indian Ocean as the sun sets and visits to the ghost resort of Paradise Island is what dreams are made of...

While we were dreaming, the news filtered through of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

RWANDA March - June 2022

Whilst Fenella and I made the most of some much needed down time in our rural Herefordshire cottage, making and playing around in a coracle and doing some major landscaping, not to mention making wine, Paul T was out in Rwanda's Nyungwe National Park, training in total 68 rangers in two Basic Field Ranger courses. This was our first time in the park and of course, it was a total contrast to Bazaruto in every way. Paul loved the mountainous jungle terrain in the park and was impressed by the level of cleanliness and general order throughout the country. Roads without potholes and all the new buildings and quality infrastructure that you seldom expect to see in Africa.

The courses went well and the local instructors gained considerable experience under Paul's guidance and mentorship.

ZAMBIA May - June 2022

Tracking was the theme for North Luangwa. I ran three courses; 2 x Level 3 (Basic) and a Level 4 (Intermediate) and, significantly, mentored four of the developing tracking instructors, effectively assisting them in running the courses. We focussed on crime scene investigation, particularly on the Level 4 course, where the local instructors went the extra mile in constructing a dead rhino made from tables and tents and whatever else was to hand. Good lessons were learned and procedures honed. This kind of training is great for highlighting the realities of the sudden discovery of such a carcass. Speed of response is vital if the perpetrators are to be brought to justice. Trackers are key to this process.

It was timely that just after the crime scene training, we were able to respond to a hippo carcass which, although a few days old by the time it was discovered, was a great target to respond to, to practice the drills. A load of good information was found, including the locations and sequence of events of the shooting and carving up of the animal and the food that the poachers were eating during the meat drying process. All the information pointed to a particular community for the subsequent investigation to focus on.

ZAMBIA June - July 2022

The tracking theme continued, this time it was Paul running a further three courses in Nsumbu National Park. It was great that North Luangwa agreed to allow two of their own tracking trainers, who had assisted me, to gain further experience by assisting Paul. These two must be the most experienced and capable ranger tracking instructors anywhere in Africa.

Nsumbu NP is now well on its way to building an extensive tracking capability and we are in discussions for more training next year. The training we deliver does not only develop the individual tracking ability of students, but also develops leadership, fieldcraft and patrolling skills as well as navigation and crime scene search drills. During the courses, we always identify those who show that extra bit of spark and this series of courses was no exception. Paul was able to highlight several rangers to the management and recommend they be singled out for further leadership or instructor training.

BORNEO August - November 2022

This had been a long time coming. It all started in 2017 when I was contacted by the director of a Field Centre, affiliated with the National Wildlife Department. He wanted to raise a new anti-poaching unit to help protect the remaining pockets of tropical rainforest. It's all a long story but captured in a diary I made during my visit in November of that year. Now, 5 years later, we were on.

This was a two part training program. Our specialist LE trainer Chris, plus an assistant trainer, concentrated on delivering an intelligence and undercover operators' course in one location and Paul and myself were training and forming a new counter-poaching unit at another venue. Our new unit was to be named the Rapid Response Team (RRT).

Both courses were successful and achieved their aims. Both experienced similar hurdles, but we achieved what we could in the time frames and with the resources allocated. What's important - and exciting, is that there is now the nucleus of a very potent anti-poaching/crime organisation in this part of Borneo. As I usually do, I kept a daily diary of the RRT course to look back on as a reference and to remind myself in future years.

It was during this trip that we learned of more tragic shootings in Africa. One ranger was shot in the face in Banguelu National Park in Zambia; he survived. Another ranger was shot and killed in the pursuit of poachers in Majete National Park in Malawi. Both of these parks are familiar training grounds for us.

ZAMBIA September - November 2022

From mid-September to mid-November, our former Royal Marine instructor, Paul W, was tasked to head to another National Park in Zambia - Kafue. His aim was to run a series of six 10-day assessments for the currently employed rangers. In total, 190 rangers ranging in

ages from 23 to 59 years old were assessed. Paul elected to drive to Zambia from his home in South Africa; a journey of 5 days each way, although he stopped off in Zambia's tourist town, Livingstone, on his return journey for a break with his wife.

Kafue, under new management from 'African Parks', can now move forward with the development of the park's anti-poaching units.

RWANDA November - December 2022

With only a few short days to repack after Borneo, Paul T jetted off back to Rwanda, this time to run a large Basic Field Ranger (BFR) course for around 60 students in Akagera National park. We'd been planning this during the Borneo trip. Paul needed a competent assistant instructor and, after some negotiation, we managed to secure one of our highly graded Level 5 tracking instructors from Nkotakota National Park in Malawi. One of the rising stars amongst Africa's rangers, Fiskani stepped into the breach with great confidence and he and Paul made a formidable team.

This has to be what our role is ultimately about. It's not just training anti-poaching capabilities to those on the front line, but identifying and developing those from within the ranks of the scouts and rangers, who can pick up the training baton and run with it. We consider this as our training legacy.

Paul's BFR took us up to the new year and to the point we could peek into 2023 and wonder what it might hold. For him, it is only half the BFR done as he'll be back out in Akagera to run phase 2 of the training up to and into February.

IN SUMMARY.....

2022 was another none-stop year of adventures. When we look back, we tend to recall the highlights; the amazing sights, amazing people, the laughter, new friendships made and old friendships rekindled. However, there are always barriers to progress and frustrations along the way, but, like everyone in this line of business, you just get your head down and keep going. The personalities we meet, of all races, backgrounds and in many different roles, are inspirational. Our biggest frustrations are from the news we monitor from back home, where an increasing number of individuals find reason to be hurt, offended or depressed at what, in the bigger picture of world events, are insignificant, *meaningless* reasons. What's happening to our world? Come to Africa and we'll introduce you to people who know the meaning of true hardship and how to deal with it.

I was delighted to have done a podcast in early August with H-Hour's Hugh Keir, which gave me a chance to talk about and promote Big5Protection and our work. Prior to that, in July, I gave a talk to our village in the hall, which was a good exercise in piecing everything together in one presentation and that I can now add to, as we move forward. I've been a bit of a stranger in the village since I bought my cottage there in 2013.

AND FOR NEXT YEAR...?

Already it's filling up - just when I declared that I at least, would be slowing down; but this is really interesting stuff, and I can't wait to get stuck in with the B5P team.

While Paul heads back out to Rwanda to finish the BFR, I'll nip to Kenya to assess the security and training needs for the resurrection of a park made famous decades ago by several books and a film but which ended in tragedy. All fingers crossed for this one...

We're gearing up now to run more Long Range Patrol Group courses. This means the manufacture of packs and belt kit webbing in the UK, to be shipped out to the park involved. It will involve training to convert and enable rangers to operate very differently. For those curious to see what the LRPG concept and courses are all about, we have details on our website.

We're also working with some new developments with drones and sensors, which may well be game-changing in counter-poaching and which will connect and meld nicely with the LRPG units.

Finally, the success of the Covert Intelligence training in Borneo has raised further interest throughout Africa. This is such good news because having a credible informer and intelligence network around the parks, along with the ability to respond quickly and effectively, is the real key to success.

We're all looking forward to 2023...

