

# 2023 - Onwards and upwards for *Big5protection!*

---

*Simon Leak - founder & director.*

Here we go again, it's the another year done and I'm already writing the end of year review. For me it's been a deliberately slower year but less time at the coal face has meant more time for thinking and planning. It's fair to say that sometimes if you slow down and take a little more time to think things through you might actually achieve more and better, certainly in the long run anyway. I always have a head full of aspirations but this year I've felt more optimistic about the possibility of developing one or two of these ideas. What I've come to realise is that we should be less shy of the media but rather to explore how controlled media can help us to go where we need to go and to start a few new balls rolling that will ensure we can secure some longevity, spread the love and draw in the next generation of trainers who will take the B5P brand onwards and upwards. More of this later...

**PROTECTION**

RWANDA January 2023

2022 had finished with our Paul in Akagera, having had only a few days off from our long stint in Sabah, Borneo. Paul has become the mainstay of training in the two African Parks' reserves and was going to be in great demand for 2023. So, he had unfinished business in Akagera and was straight back, in early January to continue where he'd left off, running the second phase of the Basic Field Ranger (BFR) course.

What was particularly satisfying about the delivery of these BFR courses was that Paul had an assistant instructor from Nkhotakota National Park in Malawi. Fishani has been one of our rising stars since he attended his first basic tracking course in 2017. We identified him then as a potential leader and instructor. Since then he has risen to a grade 1 tracking instructor following which he assisted us to run a course and then ran a foundation course under our supervision. He continued to gain experience to the point where he can be totally relied upon to run courses and he was a great asset to Paul in Rwanda.

KENYA January

In January I headed out to Kenya to fulfil a promise I made to the late, great Tony Fitzjohn; reluctantly (on his part) once dubbed 'the Rockstar of Conservation'. He is best known for his time spent in Kora National Reserve with George Adamson of 'Born Free' fame and his own book, 'Born Wild' detailing his time with George, rehabilitating lions into the wild. Fitz passed away in May 2022 after succumbing to a long battle with cancer.

After the tragic events in Kora in 1989 with the killing of George by Somali bandits, Fitz moved to Mkomazi; a failing game reserve in Tanzania. He, with his wife Lucy and 4 children turned the reserve into a thriving haven for black rhino and wild dogs.

In 2019 he was invited back to Kora, which by now was a neglected, poached-out and rather desolate & sorrowful landscape. He rebuilt the old camp, true to its original form, complete with lion pens and it was at this time that I met with him in London and agreed, when the timing was right to assist by working with him to build the security and train the ranger teams he would need.

Lucy and their son Mukka are now focussed on continuing the legacy to regenerate this iconic reserve, bringing it back to it's former glory and ultimately introducing black rhino along with other key species.

The purpose of this, my second visit was to get an idea of the current situation, the aspirations of Lucy and Mukka and discuss with them the way forward concerning the security development as things progress. It was an amazing 10 days after which I produced a detailed security review with recommendations for future training. This is such a good cause and I consider it a privilege to be able to assist in any way, however small. Currently we have an outline plan to return to Kora in February next year.

#### RWANDA March/April & again in July

Paul returned to Rwanda, this time Nyungwe National Park to deliver refresher training in April followed by leadership training in July. The refresher training kicked off with a period of 'development' training for 12 students who were previously identified as lacking competence in key areas including weapon handling, marksmanship and medics. Paul coached them over 5 days prior to them then going forward onto the following refresher training consisting of 5 x 1 week courses catering for every ranger in the park. During this training Paul had three local assistant instructors and they gained valuable experience delivering lessons and planning and overseeing practical exercises, under Paul's mentorship.

The July training was particularly interesting because this time Paul was joined by B5P's intelligence instructor Chris. The leadership training was broken down into 4 x 1 week courses each for 12 students. During each course the students were given an overview of intelligence and community engagement subjects by Chris along with the general leadership training.

Concurrently an intelligence assessment and training needs analysis was conducted following which an action plan to review some of the existing procedures was designed. From this it was seen that there were many gaps in the processes of gaining and acting on intelligence. Recommendations were made and where these were acted upon during the time the trainers were there, results were immediate and obvious.

## ZAMBIA August

Paul & Simon were back working together in Nsumbu National Park in the northern area of Zambia bordering Lake Tanganyika. This time it was for the delivery of two level 3 (basic) tracking courses.

This was back to the basics of living in tents by a small river which was used for washing, cooking and drinking water. Paul had used this training camp before and warned me of the presence of mosquitos, biting midges and frequent infestations of red & black ants in the tents. I went one better by having a few nightly visitations of a rodent, only slightly smaller than a rat scuttling over and around my mattress on the floor. On the third night of disturbance I was obliged but sad to have to dispatch it with my trainer - not great conservation I know, but sleep is important after long days in the bush.

The courses went well, the terrain was perfect; dry, varying and very difficult in most parts. Really high standards were achieved and moral was high. During the first course, the students were pulled out of the classroom for an emergency situation. There was an angry mob at the local town police station smashing windows and trying to get in. The course disappeared on two pickups to assist in disbursing the crowd and protecting the police.

It transpired that the issue with the locals was that there had been a few unexplained deaths in the community and with the latest, a local lady, the advice of a witch doctor was sought. He immediately identified one of the town dignitaries as the culprit, he was accused of being a witch. What had happened was that the mob had dragged the deceased's body to the police station where it was demanded that the suspect, who had been incarcerated for his own safety, had to eat the flesh of the body which would somehow make amends in a way that wasn't fully explained to us. After dispersal under the threat of our armed rangers, life returned to normal; Africa normal that is...

Before Paul and I left in the light aircraft for Lusaka we heard the satisfying news that a patrol of the first tracking course had already used their tracking skills to great effect by intercepting poacher tracks and following them for 7 hours before making arrests in a poacher camp and recovering the two poachers with rifle and snares and a dog.

## RWANDA yet again - Sept/Oct

Yet again Paul was back in Rwanda taking centre stage, this time in Akagera. It was their turn for refresher training and Paul delivered six 1-week courses for a total of 90 rangers, at the same time identifying the particularly strong candidates as well as those in need of additional training. Once again Paul used the time to further develop the park's own trainers as well as identifying where there were gaps in the rangers skills. It's hoped that we will return next year with tracking training and possibly intelligence capability development in mind.

## SABAH (BORNEO) - Nov/Dec

Our former police undercover operator Chris along with another training partner was back out in Kota Kinabalu. This time to run a new Covert Human Intelligence Source/handler course followed by an instructor development add-on, which will go some way to giving them an in-house capability to select and train more operators in the covert intelligence field. Towards the end of the course we had a zoom meeting where I gave the class a brief concerning Big5Protection and the counter-Illegal Wildlife Trade/poaching work we do, with an emphasis on the Intel side. I also gave them an overview of the selection and training of the Rapid Reaction Teams (RRT) Paul and I trained last year.

I was delighted to hear that the RRT have made up to 50 successful arrests and prosecutions since their conception. They are, quite rightly, a much feared entity for those who have had an easy ride as poachers and trophy hunters, in and around the protected forests of Sabah.

### December - round up of developing ideas...

The first thing to report is that Paul, who has worked solidly and none stop with Big5Protection particularly these last two years, saw a job opportunity as a Chief Instructor for African Parks. AP are easily the biggest and most respected NGO in the game. They are heading swiftly towards their goal of leasing 30 parks across Africa in order to turn them around, repair all the damage from years of underfunding and neglect and make them functioning, independent and viable again. I'd had many conversations with Paul since he put his name in the hat and was as delighted as he was surprised when he was shortlisted and then given the role. This is an exciting adventure for us all as Paul takes with him the ethos that we have developed together through countless years since we first served together in a recce platoon in the Parachute Regiment but more importantly through these last years working together in Africa and Borneo.

Paul will continue to work with us in his down time from AP and hopefully it will help us to continue our good relationships with the parks we're already established with and maybe open up some new possibilities. Paul has a no-nonsense approach to our work and it's fair to say that wherever we've conducted our training it has gone down well, and I believe our approach and the way we interact with our students, particularly in developing the parks own trainers has always seen us invited back - until that is, the instructors we've developed have taken over, which is always our ultimate aim.

### UK Police training.

We were delighted to be approached by a UK specialist police unit enquiring about tracking training. Of course, we said, tracking training would be most useful and we would be happy to deliver a bespoke course. We're working on this right now and should be good to go in the first half of next year as the warmer weather comes.

## All Female K9 Unit

We were approached through the website by [AntipoachingK9Foundation.org](http://AntipoachingK9Foundation.org) Who are a relatively new all female K9 unit based in Zimbabwe. This unit is closely connected to the well established and respected [ryderprotectionservices.com](http://ryderprotectionservices.com). I had a zoom meeting with the founder of the unit and we established an outline plan and will be in communication early next year to see where we can collaborate.

## Recruiting new trainers

We've been musing for some time that we need to start identifying and selecting the next generation of trainers. This has given me the idea of initially running briefing courses here in the UK over a number of days to inform and enlighten those who may be considering a career in our world as anti-poaching trainers or similar. From there the next step would be to take those still interested out to Africa to run some training and assessments. There are a lot of moving parts to this and ducks to get in a row, but work is ongoing...

## Media collaboration

Something we've generally shunned all our working lives but the time has come to use the various media outlets and gain some recognition for our work and that of others. Our hope is to reach out to potential donors so we can gain funding for the great causes where organisations are struggling and in need of training and development. There are a few good examples on our radar. We are partnering with [DianaMaclean.net](http://DianaMaclean.net) and looking for parks, conservancies or ranches who wish to participate, for which they will get free or subsidised training. Based in Kenya, Diana has many credentials as a writer, videographer, researcher and photographer, with a strong background in the safari industry - all boxes ticked for us! This approach will tie in with our aspiration to conduct training and assessment with new trainers and give them a fast-track into the industry.

Still on the media theme and I was persuaded to do another podcast - The Debrief, with Force Radio's Phil Campion. The aim of course was to plug Big5Protection and our work.

## In Summary...

Another full year, if not necessarily quite so busy for myself. There's changes afoot but all positive and I will continue to push the development of new concepts. What's been particularly heartening is to get feedback, not only of the success of the teams we have trained but that there has been training conducted by our ranger trainers whom we've identified, trained and developed into the first class instructors that they are. It's in this way that we ensure the legacy of Big5Protection will continue long after we, as the founders and current trainers, have stepped aside and retired.

