

adventure

YEAR IN THE WILD



SCOTT RAMSAY

IT WAS the blackest part of a moonless night, when the stars were at their brightest.

I was alone at the campfire, while seven other trailists slept nearby. It was my job to keep the fire going, and to watch for lions, elephants, buffalos or leopards, which could wander into our makeshift campsite.

We were on the Primitive Wilderness Trail in the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve. For five days and four nights we explored Africa's oldest proclaimed wilderness area, walking alongside wild animals, sleeping under the stars and reconnecting to the timeless rhythms of ancient Africa.

A lion roared in the distance. Then another roared, closer to camp. I shone the torch into the bushveld, and two golden eyes blinked back at me. Blink, blink, blink. Gold, gold, gold.

Suddenly a hyena called, as if it was challenging the blackness of night itself. I stoked the fire and felt a deep peace.

"If you see something dangerous – like a lion – walking directly towards camp, then wake me," our isiZulu trail guide Nunu Jobe had explained earlier in the evening.

"But if the lion is walking past, just enjoy it and don't wake me. It's a privilege to be alone with a wild animal like that..."

Then, just after another lion roared, I heard a distant blast. Dynamite. Two coal mines operate outside the park, a few kilometres from the fenceline. The mines use explosives to blow up the earth, exposing coal seams.

Then I heard the rumble of a train and saw its bright light shining into the night sky. It was the train that carries coal to the port of Richard's Bay.

The 900km² Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park is one of the oldest on the continent, proclaimed in 1895 to protect the last 50-odd white rhino in Africa. Today, each one of the 20 000 or so white rhino in Africa are descended from the few saved at Imfolozi more than a century ago.

It is one of the greatest conservation success stories.

The 300km² wilderness area lies in the south of the reserve, and is off-limits to any development.

It is an untarnished pocket of ancient Africa, a place where the iconic wild animals are left in peace.

While the rest of the park has extensive tourism facilities, the only way to explore the wilderness is on foot, on one of the guided wilderness trails.

Unsurprisingly, the park is also the most famous wildlife destination in KwaZulu-Natal, drawing thousands of local and international tourists, many of whom walk the trails.

Now, a third open-cast coal mine is planned for imminent development on the reserve's southern boundary, next to the proclaimed wilderness.

Unlike the other two mines – Somkhele and Zululand Anthracite Colliery – situated a few kilometres from the boundary, the proposed Fuleni mine is to operate within 30 to 70 metres from the park's



CURIOS: Hikers on one of the wilderness trails are able to get up close to a white rhino. A handful were saved at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi a century ago, saving the species from extinction. The project is considered to be one of wildlife conservation's biggest success stories. Pictures: SCOTT RAMSAY

WILDLIFE TRAILS WORTH IT



ENCROACHING THREAT: A processing plant of the Somkhele Coal Mine – one of two mines near the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. Now the proposed Fuleni mine plans similar future operations.



'PROTECT OUR RESERVE': Nunu Jobe, a wilderness trails guide.



AT PEACE: Keeping watch around the campfire at night on the Imfolozi Wilderness trail and listening to the roar of lions.

southern fenceline.

"Undoubtedly the noise, blasting, vibrations and other side-

effects of the Fuleni mine will have a severe impact on this world-famous wilderness," said Morgan

downstream commercial use by the existing coal mines, sugar cane farms and tree plantations.

Now the risk of acid-mine drainage poses another threat.

Any pollution of the water source would be detrimental to people and domestic or wild animals.

Rhino poaching is also a deep concern, and the location of a mine on the border of the wilderness would only cause more problems for the rangers patrolling the area.

But the problem of a coal mine on the park's boundary is not a new one, Griffiths explained.

"When the Somkhele mining company discovered another viable coal seam close to the park boundary a few years ago, they acknowledged the tangible value of the iMfolozi wilderness area and chose not to mine this seam.

"Instead they chose a seam further away to reduce the impact on the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park."

Early the next morning, the trailists sat around the campfire drinking coffee. I told our guide about the blasting I had heard, and the train lights on the horizon.

"We hear and see that regularly while on trail," said Jobe, who has guided the trail for two years in this pristine wilderness.

"The government should be investing in tourism in this area," Jobe said. "We already have one of the best game reserves in Africa, with millions of tourists coming to see the wild animals. There are hundreds of local people working at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi, and these jobs will always be there if we look after the land and the wild animals," he added.

Already most of Africa's natural habitat has been transformed, and much of the iconic wildlife – so valuable in terms of biodiversity and jobs – has disappeared.

"We should consider Africa's protected areas sacrosanct and worthy of the utmost protection," Jobe said.

For the Primitive Wilderness Trail, e-mail trails@kzswildlife.com. The five-day trail costs about R2 800 per person, fully guided, including food, backpack and sleeping bag. Ramsay is a photojournalist focusing on Africa's protected areas. See www.yearinthewild.com. Partners include Cape Union Mart, K-Way, Ford Everest and Goodyear.

Griffiths of WESSA (Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa).

"The managers of Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife have already reported that the existing Zululand Anthracite Colliery and Somkhele Mine – situated much further from the Park fence than the proposed Fuleni Mine – already affect the park adversely."

"Mining noise can, for example, be heard within the park's boundaries, particularly at night."

There are other threats, besides noise, light and coal-dust pollution.

Acid mine leachate from existing, closed and abandoned mines has already polluted key water sources in the country, creating environmental and social problems.

The White Umfolozi River is the lifeblood of the reserve, and of the extensive rural communities outside it. Already its flow has been reduced by upstream and