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INSIDER NATIONAL

Forever Wild?

A recent competition sent 22 Vietnam-based students to South Africa to witness first hand the trials and tribulations of the rhino. Words by **Emma Hamilton**.
Photos provided by **The Wilderness Foundation**

“We are leaving civilisation as we know it to visit our neighbours, the animals.” With these words from Zondi, a ranger for the Wilderness Leadership School in South Africa (a sister organisation of the Wilderness Foundation Africa), a group of students from Vietnam including myself embarked on an African safari unlike any other.

In 2014, Vietnamese celebrities Thanh Bui and Thu Minh visited a number of international schools in Ho Chi Minh City. They are spearheading a campaign to educate young people in Vietnam that the rhinoceros is dangerously close to extinction in Africa because consumers in Vietnam and China continue to believe that their horns hold medicinal properties.

The matter is a complex one and involves not just changing beliefs in Far Eastern communities, but addressing the welfare state in Africa that almost encourages the poor to poach. Thanh Bui and the South African Wilderness Foundation are at pains to promote the idea that Vietnamese people can play their part, by saying: “Vietnam can help save the rhino.”

The Competition

During Thanh Bui’s school visits, students were asked to write essays explaining how they would encourage their families and friends to say no to rhino horn. Thousands of entries flooded in and 22 students were chosen from schools in Ho Chi Minh City to visit South Africa on a five-day wilderness trail and workshop, designed to help them understand the beauty of the rhino and the importance of keeping the species alive. I was invited to accompany two of my winning students on the trip and see for myself what life is like for the wild animals of the Hluhluwe Umfolozi game reserve situated outside Durban on the east coast of South Africa.

The game reserve is a two-and-a-half hour drive away from Durban city centre and is famous for being the location of the genetic origin for every single white rhino in South Africa today. Unlike a normal safari involving the observation of ‘the big five’ (lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard, rhino) from the safety of a jeep, the students and myself were told we would be walking through the park carrying everything we needed to survive in the wild for five days and nothing more — mobile phones, tablets, laptops, books, iPods and all other 21st century conveniences had to be left behind at base camp, the Stainbank Nature Reserve in Durban city centre.

Into the Wild

With some trepidation, we left Durban and headed out into the savannah. The group started out near the main gate of the reserve walking silently in single file, our backs burdened by the enormous packs that held camping equipment and food for the trip. To begin with it was much like a pleasant walk until the two rangers who were



accompanying us, Zondi and Janet, stopped suddenly, asked us to put down our packs and follow them to an earth bank.

In the barren riverbed below a group of lionesses were tearing a wildebeest to shreds. It was strangely beautiful in its viciousness but then one of them spotted us and began prowling towards where we were standing. It was only when she opened her mouth with a heavy and guttural roar to warn us off that I understood this was for real and not a walk in an amusement park looking at semi-tame animals. We were intruding on their territory and they would attack us without a moment’s hesitation.

Zondi told us to not move, and keep our eyes down until the lioness disappeared; wild cats, like domestic ones, enjoy chasing moving objects. The seconds passed like hours until Zondi told us it was safe to move back, pick up our packs and continue walking in single file. From that moment on, I realised we were visiting another world, one which co-exists parallel to ours but

which we barely notice; the world of the animals.

The Night Watch

After walking for another hour we stopped to set up camp for the first time. The Wilderness Leadership School practices no-trace camping and we were given a number of jobs to do. I was in the group collecting water and as the sun began to set we followed Janet to the riverbed again. There was a pool not far from our camp but as we filled plastic bags we became aware that we were being watched. Hippos. Janet urged us to be quick to avoid angering them. Hippos, for all their ungainly physiques, are extremely aggressive and territorial, and can run at speeds of up to 19mph on land. Thoroughly unnerved, and not looking forward to sleeping out in the open, we returned and were then introduced to the concept of the night watch.

To keep each other safe during the hours of darkness we were to assign ourselves

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numbers and take turns, for an hour-and-a-half each, to sit by the fire and every five minutes cast the light of the torch around the camp to ensure no predators were trying to intrude. It was terrifying; I have never felt isolation like it.

I was number three and so was woken up roughly around midnight to sit alone by the fire and keep watch. To sit apart from your sleeping companions with only the light of a small fire and the sheen of the Milky Way is both inspirational and hard. To help pass the time, Zondi and Janet had left a journal

by the fire so that people could record their thoughts and feelings. One of the students summed up the experience by noting that: “In the city so much noise means so little but in the savannah, so little noise can mean so much.”

The Trappings of Society

During the following four days, we were all struck, not just by the beauty of nature but its power and how insignificant we are. We would regularly hold *indaba* (Zulu for ‘business’) and sit in a circle to share

knowledge and thoughts. The delicate interwoven structure of the savannah was brought strongly into focus. For example, there is a species of butterfly that can only live off the moisture found in elephant dung. Poach all the elephants and the butterfly will die too. It is possible therefore, that if the rhino becomes extinct, something else will suffer along with it and contribute to the ongoing tragic demise of many species.

I was in the group that Thanh Bui joined later in the week. For all his celebrity status in Vietnam, out there on trail he was like one of us, scouring his skin with riverbed sand in order to stay clean, washing dishes and sitting around the fire singing songs with the students to pass the time once night fell. Being on a trail makes you realise that you can get by with less; when everything else is gone, all you need is somewhere safe to sleep and food to eat. Status and wealth become meaningless. There is no need to (literally) deface a rhino in order to keep our man-made idea of face in society.

All too soon, we had to leave the wilderness and head back to Durban, but inspired by what we had experienced, the group reconvened at the Stainbank Nature Reserve and set to work.

A Force for Change

“Consider the weight and responsibility on your shoulders,” we were told by the group of South Africans leading the workshop at the end of the trail. They included Cheryl Reynolds and Matthew Norval, both from the Wilderness Foundation, as well as a number of people battling the problem at the frontline such as rangers and vets. As much as we had enjoyed our experience and had come back moved by the beauty of the savannah, this was no ordinary holiday and we were being pushed to show how we would spread the message that people need to “Say No to Rhino Horn”.

The workshop highlighted that rhino poaching is a human tragedy too. For every adult poacher involved in a cartel whose bail is paid after being caught, there is usually a poor 15-year-old from the shanty towns left to rot in jail. For every poacher that has been caught, there is potentially a ranger who has been shot dead or injured.

Cathy Dao, from the Canadian International School (CIS), made the point: “All life is invaluable and magnificent and it is our duty to protect these wonderful rhinos so our children will be able to see rhinos thriving in the wild with their own eyes, not through faded pictures nor works of fiction.”

We left South Africa proud to be representing a change in Vietnamese culture. This is an exciting time to be in Vietnam and there is a real sense of the cause gaining momentum; change is afoot and that can only be for the good.

“The wilderness is not a place but a season and we are in its final hour.” Vietnam — will you be the hero?

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