

Lawrence Anthony - South Africa's conservation giant

Last Updated Saturday, 03 April 2010

This article appeared in the November 2009 edition of Leadership magazine.

At just over six foot, internationally acclaimed South African conservationist, Lawrence Anthony, casts an imposing figure silhouetted against a darkening bushveld sunset.

Surprisingly soft-spoken for a man who all but single-handedly waded into war-torn Iraq to save lions, bears, tigers and other zoo animals in the capital city of Baghdad, he comes across as a genial and gentle giant, deeply concerned about humanitarian issues, animal welfare and the degradation of our planet.

But youâ€™d be a fool to mistake this humble man of the bush for a softie.

Like the wrinkly but seemingly benevolent rescued elephants now roaming around his Zululand game farm, Thula Thula, Anthony has clear boundaries that should not be crossed!

Evidenced fleetingly by a determined glint in the eye and the speed at which staff scuttled to intervene when Anthony pointed out the unintentional misdemeanour of a conservation vehicle dropping off one Africaâ€™s most majestic cats, a gorgeous young serval, for release on the 1,500-hectare reserve.

With his elegant Parisian wife, Françoise, Anthony has established a five-star luxury lodge and a four-star luxury tented bush camp on Thula Thula to help finance their conservation efforts.

Although he has no formal conservation training, the skills honed from years in the bush have been all Anthony has needed to turn from estate agent to property developer to respected conservationist.

Anthony, who matriculated from not too distant Empangeni High School, was originally drawn to the remote area near Heatonville, inland from Richards Bay, as the result of a project to encourage five Zulu chiefs to combine efforts to create a community game reserve abutting KZN Wildlifeâ€™s Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park.

When a neighbouring property, previously run as a hunting lodge, came onto the market for the first time in 50 years, Anthony, snapped up the largely untouched land without hesitation. Naming it Thula Thula, which means peace and tranquillity in Zulu, it has been his home and base for his impressive conservation work ever since.

Twelve years later, after literally hundreds of meetings to establish a basis of trust and encourage previously rival clans to work together for the greater benefit of both communities and wildlife, this ambitious community eco-tourism project is set to take off

Fences are about to be dropped between Thula Thula and neighbouring community land in a joint venture that will ultimately see the local communities owning and operating their own game reserves with the requisite training and transfer of skills. The added benefit will be an extended conservation area of 15,000 hectares that will eventually join up the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi reserve. Clearly a win-win situation for man and beast.

Adamant that he is not a greenie or a bunny hugger Anthony is of the opinion that conservation needs a clear vision and new leadership. He believes mankind abuses the environment because we do not understand the role it plays in our own survival.

The eldest of three children, Anthony grew up in the African bush, moving to Zambia, Malawi and then Zululand in South Africa according to the dictates of his fatherâ€™s job in insurance sales.

This early intimacy of a youth filled with exploring the bush with Tiger, his Alsatian, cemented a deep and abiding love for the natural world. Anthony says that even at the age of 10 he could feel that the relationship between mankind and nature was not right.

â€œWe need to reinstate or revitalise our natural association with the plant and animal kingdoms,â€• says Anthony. This is where Thula Thula plays a part, encouraging visitors to become better acquainted with nature through game drives and guided bush walks where one can feel the thrill of watching an elephant browsing robustly just metres away or capture the shot of an spotted eagle owl exiting the abandoned old rustic hunting lodge (on camera, of course).

Given Anthonyâ€™s internationally recognised conservation efforts, and the tangible pride the staff have in being part of it, it is hard to come away from Thula Thula without a deeper love of nature and a greater respect and appreciation of conservation efforts in general, while the possibility of bumping into the amiable Anthony and chatting to him in person is certainly a big draw card for the reserve.

You can expect to be regaled with hair-raising encounters with wild animals and poachers; of cunning and intrigue and even betrayal by trusted staff – Tales of sadness and loss, as well as triumphs.

Anthony believes that education is the key to future conservation efforts. He says that man has already had a massive impact on nature and that we are on the way to putting homo sapiens on the endangered species list unless we act now

The real issue is that in the process of civilisation we have lost touch with nature and stopped passing on the essential knowledge of the interconnectedness of all living beings.

He feels strongly that education is essential in order for mankind to change its relationship with the natural world.

In support of this Anthony founded the Earth Organization, an independent non-profit international conservation and environmental organisation with the poignant selling line: “Because none survive alone”.

It is the biggest conservation group to come out of South Africa and expanding rapidly with a presence in 13 countries, says Anthony.

The unique attraction of the Earth Organization, which has borrowed the franchise principle and applied it under a non-profit scenario, is that it encourages members to adopt projects that hold a personal interest for them, giving a constructive outlet to areas of conservation passion.

The Earth Organization's members come from all walks of life, from all cultures, races and religious backgrounds, all motivated by a common cause: to reverse the dwindling spiral of life on Earth and create a healthy habitable Planet on which all life flourishes and prospers says Anthony.

We are a “doing” organization that believes that actions can always be taken to improve any situation - and we are doing it

Anthony also uses the Earth Organization as a vehicle to disseminate what he considers vital conservation education, and is involved in an education programme for schools in the US which he hopes will be repeated in other countries around the world.

The South African Association for the Advancement of Science is affiliated to the Earth Organization and provides access to scientific knowledge and advises the activities of the chapters around the world.

Unassuming and humble, especially for the recipient of United Nations Earth Day award and someone who has been interviewed by almost every major publication in the western hemisphere, there is something unusual about Anthony.

He’s not a brusque military leader type that one would expect of someone campaigning for animal rights, with scant regard for their own welfare, in a code-red area in war stricken Iraq.

With a music system in his Land Rover that has been known to play Led Zeplin, Deep Purple and Uriah Heap at a volume that makes the windows bulge; he’s not your typical greenie either.

His is a more elusive quality, more directly grounded, down to earth and watchful, but with quick sense of humour. There is a hint of constant and unwavering vigilance and sharp focused attention akin to that of a martial arts master – likely the result of living on his wits in the bush for months on end, where a lapse in attention could mean death; and then surviving Iraq.

Anthony’s 2003 wartime zoo rescue in Baghdad is best relived by reading his well-paced and exciting book Babylon’s Ark jointly authored by Anthony with Graham Spence in 2006, but in summary: Through a self-funded initiative Anthony arrived in Baghdad to help save the traumatised animals at the zoo. Ignoring daily threats to life and limb and with limited resources that were often stolen by equally desperate and hungry looters Anthony co-ordinated work with zoo staff in appalling conditions, successfully saving a number of animals from death by dehydration and starvation.

A film recounting Anthony’s epic rescue is currently under negotiation.

Flowing out of the Baghdad rescue, Anthony is successfully campaigning for the United Nations (UN) to give wildlife areas including game reserves, zoos and marine parks the same status as schools and hospitals during times of conflict; and veterinarians and game rangers the same status as doctors and nurses.

“There are so many critically endangered species that a war could prompt the extinction of a species. For many species zoos and game reserves are little Noah’s arks – the last refuge for critically endangered species – and they need to be protected,” says Anthony.

The current draft resolution with the UN seeks to declare an attack on such places as a war crime, and Anthony believes

it has a good chance of being adopted.

With cutting insightfulness Anthony says he has never understood the saying to “think outside the box”. “Why would anyone sit inside a box and try to think outside of it. Why not get out the box?” questions Anthony who is a strong believer in questioning societal conventions and the accepted way of doing things.

He certainly did that when settling what was euphemistically termed a herd of rogue elephants on verdant green hills of Thula Thula, learning to trust his instinct over textbook knowledge to save the lumbering but powerful pachyderms.

Traumatized by the culling of older herd members, the herd Anthony inherited had become escape artists and as custodian of the herd Anthony unwittingly embarked on a personally transforming odyssey as protector and finally as a trusted friend of the herd.

The moving tale is recounted in Anthony’s recently released second book, also with Graham Spence, *The Elephant Whisperer*, which is already reaching best seller status in the UK.

With limited time to prepare for the arrival of the herd of seven elephants, Anthony and his staff at Thulu Thula built a boma for initial acclimatisation and elephant-proofed the perimeter fence, but efforts were sabotaged by staff who unbeknown at the time, were part of a poaching syndicate that was not keen on having to watch out for ellies on their poaching turf.

The elephants uprooted a tree to short the electric fence and escaped. The matriarch and her baby were shot and the rest of the herd recaptured. It was only pleas from Anthony that saved the reduced and severely traumatized herd and won them a second chance.

Anthony then camped on the outside of the elephant boma, establishing an intimate relationship of trust with the new matriarch of the herd in an attempt to convey to them that they were safe as long as they stayed on Thula Thula.

It is a moving story that highlights the intelligence of these lumbering and powerful beasts. Anthony was able to carefully nurture trust, and then set about acclimatising a traumatized herd to people and vehicles, while ensuring the animals remained wild and not treated as a circus act.

The luxury Elephant Safari Lodge at Thula Thula, replete with tree-strung hammocks and a pool with a view, was named after the herd.

The father of two adult sons has also won acclaim for his work persuading rebel troops fighting in Uganda to protect the white rhinoceros.

“I think that the elixir of life is to do things for other people or creatures. “Help” should be a subject that is taught at school. Life is about giving, not receiving. Helping is the greatest secret of all “you feel great when you do it,” says Anthony.

Having a purpose or focus is also one of Anthony’s secrets of success. He says the Baghdad zoo rescue succeeded was a result of a heavy focus on purpose. “If you have a purpose, you find a way to achieve it,” he says.

The other lesson from Baghdad, faced with war zone chaos and deplorable conditions, was to pick something small and work until you achieved it says Anthony. That way you build one small success on top of another and make tangible progress.

Anthony’s future plans are to keep picking meaningful conservation projects and grow the Earth Organization into a major international organization, encouraging individuals to get involved. He hopes the books about his exploits and adventures will help in the much needed education process and change people’s understanding about man’s relationship with nature.