

## **Project Update October 2009:**



I find it hard, it's hard to find words, which can adequately express the emotions we are feeling at this moment.

Mashambo is dead.

I don't know if my sense of loss or despair reaches a greater depth than that felt by Jealous, Xmas or Mk, the other people who worked most closely with Mashambo. I gave the instruction to capture him when he was only ten months old, when he turned up at our Rehab Facility on his own; they are the ones who carried out the capture. They were with me during the days on Starvation Island, when he, Mashambo, came of age, his hunting prowess keeping his pack mates alive.

It's not the effort, the emotional investment and certainly not the financial investment that make the tears fall. It's the absolute senselessness of the loss of a life that had already delivered so much and promised so much more. Mashambo was magnificent. A shining example of a species with so many commendable characteristics.

He died in a snare set in the Gwayi Conservancy. The snare that killed him was a seven strand woven cable, the type used for a vehicle handbrake or similar. It was set by someone perhaps hungry for food, someone looking for a way to ease his own personal existence. We don't know the exact location that the snare was set, because Mashambo broke the snare in his struggle for life. If you know or are familiar with the type of cable I am talking about, you will know how strong it is. You need a seriously good pair of side cutters to cut through such a cable. Mashambo broke it, aided by his protective collar and certainly a will to live. The agony he must have suffered as the cable cut through his throat is impossible to imagine.

Jealous had been searching frantically for Mashambo and the rest of the fragmented Bambanani pack. The female, Vusile, was missing and we only had a decent handle on Sithule and Sibuyile, her two brothers and their cohort, Lobels.

Our Phd student, long time friend and supporter, Ester van der Meer, was helping Jealous. She called upon some pilots for help, who were in the area for a bit of a holiday and they responded by letting her fly with them to locate the missing dogs. Ester found the dogs quickly from the air, however when she came back to the PDC office, the concern on her face spoke volumes. The two brothers were north of the airfield, Lobels was far to the east and Mashambo was in the north-east. Njiva, who had been moving with Mashambo, was also missing and there was still no sign of Vusile. This wasn't the worst of it. The signal from the collars worn by Lobels and Mashambo indicated that they were not moving.

Lobels was the easiest to locate and his body was recovered on Saturday. His desiccated remains were still attached to the tree by the snare that had killed him. His snare was made from copper telephone wire. I met with Xmas and Mk at our Rehab Facility on Sunday morning as they dug Lobels grave, we talked openly of our frustrations and the sadness felt at his loss. We had become

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familiar of course with Lobels, but that relationship was nothing compared to the one we felt we had with Mashambo.



It was fitting that Jealous came alone to my office with the news I was expecting about Mashambo. I walked to my land rover with him and we drove the short distance to the Rehab together, in silence. It was hard to hold the tears back and we arrived at the Rehab as Xmas and Mk dug the second grave of the day. Ester and her husband, Hans, stood in silence as I crouched down to inspect what was left of Mashambo. Jealous estimated that he had died 5 or 6 days ago.

He was buried without words from us, the raucous, somehow sinister chorus of calls from five pied crows provided a back drop of sound on a suitably, dismal, grey, over cast day.



Sithule and Sibuyile are still alive

The Bambanani had been released on August 28<sup>th</sup>. Only two months have passed and the pack no longer exists in any real sense of the word. Sithule and Sibuyile were still alive for now, Vusile and Njiva are missing. This shows the enormity of the situation we are fighting against. A country ravaged by political and subsequent economic turmoil, which has impacted so devastatingly on many sectors, wildlife preserves being one of the most severely affected.

Rather like a boxer, you wonder just how many punches you can take. We have been through this too many times but will find the resolve to continue, to step up our efforts, otherwise it is all in vain. Ironically the children from the Gwayi are attending our Bush Camp as I write. I suspect the anti poaching play they will perform tonight will seem more profound. They are the light at the end of this dark tunnel, which we hope to reach.



The Children from Gwayi Primary School learn about the life of Painted Dogs.

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