



CHRISTOPHER LAURENZ

SAMSON PHAKATHI KNOWS HE'S ON THE RIGHT PATH WITH THE ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST, BRINGING CONSERVATION AWARENESS TO THE RURAL AREAS

BY KERRY DIMMER

His parents wanted him to be a policeman or an actor, but the young school-going Samson Phakathi was puzzled by and drawn to the number of binocular-wielding people that were wandering around his hometown and environs of Wakkerstroom, Mpumalanga.

This is one of SA's premier birding destinations, the wetlands, grasslands and forests making it a conducive area for many avian species. It was an encounter with a lost tourist one day that answered Phakathi's question. 'He was trying to find a Rudd's lark. I was astounded that someone was prepared to come all the way from England just to see a bird! I knew then that I had to learn more about the endemic species in my environment.'

On completion of Grade 12, the shy young man summoned the courage to contact the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) in the hope that they would be able to direct his passion for conservation. It was a good call, even though those early years were tough. One of his first tasks for EWT terrified him: Talk to and question 300 farmworkers about cranes, wetlands and grasslands.

'It didn't go well,' says Phakathi, 'I would go as far as to say it was a disaster. I was so miserable believing that I had failed, but it was a start and it made me realise I had to overcome my shyness as well as improve my knowledge. And the faith that EWT had in me was an inspiration to continue.'

It also did not help that his family was frustrated that he didn't have 'a proper job'. In most rural communities, conservation is the last thing on people's minds, given the more pressing socio-economic issues they face. 'HIV/Aids, poverty, health and schooling are of greater concern and we have to respect that,' says Phakathi.

It's his grasp of the broader social ills that has brought Phakathi success in his efforts to educate rural dwellers about the essential need for conservation. For the past 10 years his manner and approach towards changing mind-sets in traditional villages has been that of a participant who engages rather than preaches.

'You have to sit with the locals and feel part of them, wear their shoes. You can't go into this with an all-knowing attitude and expect a quick conversion,' Phakathi advises. 'Most communities already know a lot about animals, for example, and have unusual perceptions that you have to accommodate, and even I, with all my newly acquired knowledge, can still learn from them.'

Driving awareness has played an important role in Phakathi's own life. His father, who traditionally hunted for food such as guinea fowl, no longer hunts, influenced

as he has been by Phakathi's late mother who was a great supporter of her son's career. 'Women are especially important in campaigning change by challenging the men in communities,' says Phakathi.

He also believes the youth play a very important role. 'It's critical that we address our education system and challenge the national curriculum. Environmental issues should be integrated into every learning area, but it's just not happening, particularly not at ground level.'

'Teachers are not equipped to address this, especially in rural schools where they are already under-resourced. Curriculum advisors are concentrating on urban areas, leaving the already disillusioned rural teachers helpless. How to help them must fall to other role players like myself.'

In that vein, Phakathi drives the educational process by interacting with the youth in activities that are innovative and exciting.

Next year he plans to introduce a campaign he calls 'The Threatened Grassland Species Education and Awareness Parade'. This is yet to be funded, but his intention is to make the parade fun, using music and acting to stamp his message into the memories of young people. He also intends to use the platform to help with social upliftment. As a non-profit organisation, the success of the EWT's initiatives is dependent on sponsorship and donations.

Apart from his role at the EWT in charge of the Oribi Conservation Project and as field officer for the Threatened Grassland Species Programme, Phakathi is also taking on the role as an activist campaigning against illegal dog-hunting in KwaZulu-Natal.

He is distressed by the growing 'sport' of using domestic dogs for hunting. 'The indiscriminate killing process that dogs by nature adopt, means that every species is threatened, including livestock. Worse is the gambling that accompanies the so-called "taxi-hunts" that can motivate the sale price of such dogs to levels of R25 000. It's downright cruel.'

But what is most close to his heart is pollution. For Phakathi this means every scrap of paper and every kettle boiled should be used to its nth degree. 'I'm also angered by all the trash that is randomly discarded alongside the roads and, worse, dumped next to a provided bin. You even see rubbish piling up in the driveways of homes.'

'The point is that if you are going to be involved in conservation, you have to walk the talk. I boil a kettle in the morning, pour the water into a flask and use it for my tea throughout the day. It's the little actions that contribute to the greater scheme of things.'