LEFT Survival skills: digging for water on trail in Balule Game Reserve.

OPPOSITE Awl or nothing: field guide Julie Bryden keeps the tools of her trade sharp.

Into the heartland

IN THEIR RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE, WOMEN WHO ARE CUSTODIANS OF WILD KNOWLEDGE ARE MODELLING A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD; ONE BASED ON RESPECT, HUMILITY AND THE WISDOM OF OUR HUMAN ANCESTORS. **DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS** MEETS THREE OF THEM

SKILLS FROM THE BUSH

'Something happens when you hold clay you have dug from the earth or leather that you've tanned, that your body recognises from thousands of years ago,' Julie Bryden said and then unpacked a bundle of sheep hide, thread, and some hand-carved hardwood needles and passed them around. 'All I know is that I find bushcraft fascinating.'

I was celebrating my 40th birthday with a small group of friends on an unsupported, back-to-basics trail – no tents, no ablutions, no cellphones, and just what you can carry – through Greater Kruger.

I was here for them, for myself, and for the wilderness. But I was also here for our guide, Julie, a woman of the wild who had earned my admiration over a decade ago, when she guided another primitive trail. That one was through the vast expanses of Kruger National Park's Mphongolo area. Tuned in to everything ancient and real, her tracking and bush skills were next level.

The make-your-own-bag sets were unexpected. The leather was cut to a simple pattern for us to sew together before we hiked on.

We sewed as we'd walked: rhythmically, with concentration, a little uncertain. We'd spent the morning unsuccessfully trying to find what had alarmed a kudu herd – likely a leopard. It didn't feel like failure, though. It felt like adventure, possibility, a mystery unfolding.

Julie recently attained the coveted senior dangerous game guiding qualification in an assessment by the best guiding mentors in the world, including Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) scouts Adriaan Louw and Colin Patrick. 'It's no longer just an old boys club,' she quipped.

Have there been career struggles because she's a woman? I asked the question in order to understand if her achievements represent a crack in the shell of a chauvinist culture. Most rangers are men, after all.

'It was just me doing something that I've always done and sharing it with men I've walked a long path with and who have been role models and incredible mentors to me,' she said.

A lifelong student of the wild, Julie began her career in nature conservation, wildlife management and trails guiding in the Greater Kruger region in 2002. She was drawn to Kruger. This was the drive and motivation for her to graduate, one of nine women in a class of 40, cum laude, with a national diploma and a BTech in nature conservation.

She spent almost every day between 2002 and 2007 tracking and monitoring buffalo for Kruger's Bovine Tuberculosis Monitoring Programme. She also completed advanced field ranger training (the only woman in a class of 57) and is an accredited national assessor for Cathsseta, the Culture, Arts, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority, and FGASA in the fields of nature conservation and nature site guiding.

As much as Julie loved her early years in the park working on research projects and adrenaline-filled game capture operations – moving black rhino, disease-free buffalo, and elephants – the "glossy cover page stuff" lost its appeal when she experienced a wilderness trail. It made something in her go still. And it set something in her free.

'That's when the real learning started,' she said.

Now, the wilderness is her true home, which she shares with her husband and

sons. ‘I need wilderness to feed my soul. It has healed me over and over,’ she said.

What has she needed to heal from? I was curious but didn’t want to pry. Her response was candour. ‘When I became a mother, I lost my own identity. On a wilderness trail in Rwanda, I realised how much of a shadow of myself I had become. When I set off on that trail, I was running away from my boys. Now when I go on trail, I look forward to coming home to them.’

Julie’s day job is to support rangers in the field, which she handles with the same calm authority as she would a charging buffalo bull. She’s never complacent, though. ‘I’m always afraid of making a mistake that will cost someone their life.’

Bushcraft has helped her feel her way deeper into her environment and her own identity. ‘It’s like my synapses have rewired themselves to continuously find solutions to any problem, using what’s already in nature, in the form you need,’ she explained.

Instead of carving an awl for leather work, she uses a spine from a sickle bush because it’s got the point and an excellent grip. ‘It’s not trying to justify the sickle bush’s existence because it now has a function to me… It’s about creating more of a connection with it.’

On Instagram Julie posts detailed photos of ‘buckskin stitched with sinew with a fish skin thong made from a simple two-ply twist of some left-over scraps of fish skin leather’; or ‘home tanned impala, bark and brain tanned leather’; or a ‘grewia bark utility basket’; or a pot made of ‘primitive wild clay with milk glaze’.

To learn, she relies on experimentation, her bush knowledge, and the occasional YouTube video.

These are usually filmed by like-minded people in other parts of the world, so she searches for local materials to serve the same purpose.

Back in the Mohlabetsi riverbed, our group of women had moved closer together. Our stitches had become more confident. We chatted about where the leopard might have been. About the little bones of a mouse that we’d seen in the pellet of an owl. About the martial eagle

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Field guide and bush skills aficionado Julie Bryden; Julie uses what she finds in nature for her bushcraft; rawhide, which Julie has tanned using various natural substances; a bag she’s made using brain-tanned hide combined with leaf-tanned hide; a few of Julie's leather working tools.

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ABOVE Energetic and vibrant planthropologist Denisha Anand, who is helping to revive ancient custodial land-care practices favoured by indigenous communities.

TOP RIGHT Denisha presses plants.

RESTORING BIODIVERSITY

Fit for a Princess

Princess Vlei is the gateway to the wetland system that runs through Cape Town's Grassy Park. It was long neglected because of the apartheid era's Group Areas Act; during this time, its indigenous culture was replaced by a culture of racial stereotypes, gangsterism and substance abuse. But in recent years, the Princess Vlei Forum has been working with the City of Cape Town to restore biodiversity and transform the vlei into a world-class site where its rich natural, social and cultural heritage can be celebrated.
It was declared a provincial heritage site in 2020.
princessvlei.org

DAYS ON THE TRAIL

Take a Walk

Julie Bryden doesn't have her own website, but she can be contacted about bespoke trails and workshops that she facilitates according to your requirements.
You can also book through Lowveld Trails Co – ask for her specifically. Or email wolhuterbryden@gmail.com
072 379 5854
lowveldtrails.co.za
wolhuterbryden

we'd spotted. About how close the hyena had really been the night before.

About how Julie had taken our fear and held it like a baby bird.

The next day, in between walks, we sat and sewed again. As our bags took shape, Julie explained how she'd prepared the rawhide.

She tended to the hide for weeks while it transformed. 'I burst into tears when I had the sheepskin softening and melting in my hands like it was supposed to. There was a feeling inside me that I'd never had before,' she said.

It seemed, for us, a doorway into a new relationship with the landscape. One of reciprocity and respect. It wasn't just making leather. It was a way of being in the world. An abandoned blue waxbill nest and dry mounds of elephant dung were gifts for fire-making. The flexible limbs of the sandpaper raisin bush could be woven into a basket. The mud wallows where we'd seen some buffalo tracks were also a source of clay for pots. Everything we needed to survive was in our immediate environment. It was wild and beautiful.

'Sometimes, I feel overwhelmingly sad. We're losing knowledge and wilderness all the time. We used to live out here comfortably. Now we're scared to walk around,' Julie said. That evening, she showed us how to dig in holes the elephants had made, where we bathed.

THE WISDOM OF PLANTS

As she works to restore Princess Vlei, a 109ha nature reserve on the Cape Flats, Denisha Anand's energy is as stimulating as a wildfire blazing through the fynbos. Her approach is old enough to be seen today as revolutionary; she wants to restore not only the ecosystem but the "intimate care-based, restorative ways of connecting with land" practised by indigenous communities worldwide now and in pre-colonial times.

As a "planthropologist" (someone who revives plant-human connections), a central character in her quest is the Khoe Princess, after whom the vlei was named. Legend remembers her as a wise custodian, murdered by Portuguese explorers in the 17th century. Her removal from the landscape is emblematic of how indigenous people have been severed from their heartlands through colonial endeavours.

'We've lost a way of knowing and interacting with nature based on human-plant intimacies that have had complex consequences,' explains Denisha.

Today, many people in the community feel the land is not theirs to take care of. So how do you begin to repair the damage to people and nature? 'You remind people that they are linked through genetics to the Khoe Princess and other indigenous people and can access the same values and ways of connecting to the land,' she said. 'Restoration is part of custodianship because you give back to the land. In turn, the land gives you an intact ecosystem that alleviates the impacts of climate change or gives you medicine or other ecosystem services.'

She started exploring the socio-ecological aspects of botany when doing plant physiology and chemical analysis of forage species in the Northern Cape. 'The social aspect of the study became more important to me than the chemical testing of the species,' she explained.

She's now pursuing her Master's degree in environmental humanities, 'exploring what it means for a plant to be bio-cultural: have a biodiversity value, but also have a cultural value'. Plants are her research participants. 'I am trying to actually learn from plants so as not to see them as just objects. What do they say to us? What are the messages?,' she said.

'Some people think the world will thrive without human beings. I think the world will thrive without destructive systems. We've all co-evolved with this planet, so the solution is not to eliminate us but to start telling these stories about our harmonious past with the environment so we can learn. Because we do know how to do this. We just need to relearn these ways. That's what I try to bring into conservation.'

As a woman in the male-dominated field of botany she has not always been taken seriously, more so because her Master's is in the arts.

'As a woman of colour, letting go of the idea that I needed to prove myself was very difficult, but I did. And now I'm on a trailblazing mission to show people that it's possible for traditional botany and the social sciences to intersect. It's a career. It's a worldview. And it is how indigenous people think.'

THE TRACKER

From the backwoods of Connecticut in the USA to the wilds of South Africa's Greater Kruger, Kersey Lawrence has been a student of nature, learning the language of animals by faithful study of their tracks and signs.

From bears to leopards, bison to kudu, she's tracked and trailed them all the way to the pinnacle of the international tracking community as the first woman in the world to earn the title of senior tracker in the internationally renowned CyberTracker system. She recently completed her PhD on trackers and tracking through the University of Connecticut, where she also received an award for excellence in teaching.

Kersey spent almost the first decade of her life in the wilds of northern New York, and then Connecticut. Years later, an experience at a tracking conference in the USA changed her life.

A Shangaan tracker from South Africa, Eksoni Ndlovu, was trailing a mule deer, showing where it fed and how it moved. 'I could see the signs. We got to a point, and he said, "and the animal is watching us now".

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LEFT On the other side of Kersey Lawrence's cap are the words 'Fear is the mind killer'.

AFRICAN TECHNOLOGY

Tracking for Science

Prompted by Kalahari San trackers and developed by Louis Liebenberg in the 1990s, CyberTracker is a system that enables trackers to record data that assists with conservation and contributes to our understanding of biodiversity. Now used around the world, CyberTracker was designed specifically for oralate (non-literate) trackers. It combines indigenous knowledge with computer and satellite technology. The CyberTracker Tracker Certification enables trackers to get jobs in ecotourism, as rangers in anti-poaching units, in wildlife monitoring and in scientific research.

cybertracker.org

RIGHT Kersey Lawrence runs regular tracking workshops and assessments together with Lee Gutteridge. Here, they study mongoose tracks.

BELOW Paws for thought: Kersey gets into the nitty gritty of track identification.

We looked at him and asked, "how do you know that?" And he said, "because it's standing right there". And we looked up, and there it was.'

At the time in North America, tracking was taught in all kinds of esoteric ways. 'This was different. It was a system anyone could learn, something that is part of our lineage as human beings.' Two years later, she'd followed tracking to its roots in Africa, where humans evolved to be able to read the signs left by the animals they shared space with, in order to hunt, stay safe, and survive in wild environments.

Connecting with generous mentors and teachers, like Wilson Masiya and Louis Liebenberg – men widely acknowledged as the patriarchs of tracker development in southern Africa – Kersey immersed herself in tracking history while working to profile its role in modern science, and as a viable livelihood, through her practical and academic work.

Now, she teaches and assesses trackers using the system she'd seen demonstrated all those years ago. 'When we say we teach in the Cybertracker style, we're teaching a process. Evaluations punctuate your learning so you can assess your progress. But the highest level is the lowest level of your actual knowledge because, by the time you get [to] senior tracker, you realise how much more there is to learn,' she said.

In South Africa, most trackers are still men, but several women are on the cusp of becoming trailing specialists or senior trackers. And while some may call it courage, curiosity or an obsession, tracking is a way of understanding and engaging with the natural world that is enlightening and ever-challenging.

'We need more trackers in the world. We need more people to expand their definition of where they can feel at home.' G

PHOTOGRAPHY KELLY WILKINSON, DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS, THE DOLLIE HOUSE