

Fences Between Thornybush Game Reserve and Timbavati Nature Reserve

Game fences are coming down across Southern Africa! Countries such as Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa have been opening their borders on boundaries where conservation areas meet, to allow wildlife free passage between countries. Importantly, this new freedom of roaming creates vast 'Peace Parks', where governments, park management and environmentalists cooperate with regard to nature conservation.

In a similar vein, Thornybush Private Nature Reserve, has begun dropping the fences on the borders of the Timbavati. The adjacent reserve is unfenced on its Kruger boundary which means that the 14,500 hectare wilderness of Thornybush will essentially become a part of the Greater Kruger National Park.

According to Thornybush Luxury Game Lodge Collection's MD, Nic Griffin, this move has been on the cards for quite some time and has positive implications both for safari guests as well as the local wildlife. The aim of bringing the fences down

These bold (and controversial) moves have several aims in mind:

- to boost and sustain the environment through free movement of animals across larger tracts of land
- to encourage eco-tourism and economic growth
- to provide involvement for local communities
- While these motivations may seem only remotely related to the conservation of wildlife, they are in fact inexorably linked.

Animal Migration Routes

For decades, the first instinct of conservationists has been to keep their precious resources under lock and key from the 'world out there' where dangers in the form of human-animal conflict, poaching and modern development lurk. However, by doing this, wild animals are prevented from following the natural migration patterns which are important for them to flourish.

The importance of staying on the move

The concept is as simple as pasture management in agriculture. Wild animals naturally move toward areas where food and water are abundant, allowing barren, overgrazed pastures to recover. This loosely means they must 'follow' the seasonal rain patterns of their host country. Fences prevent the herds from leaving for greener pastures when they have exhausted their available resources.

Times of plenty allow animals to increase their numbers beyond the threshold that the land can bear, and with nowhere to go, this ultimately leads to famine and starvation.

By removing as many fences as we can, we allow game to move as freely as possible along their traditional migration routes and allow nature to flourish according to its grand plan.

Another hot topic, global warming is taking its toll, with unpredictable weather patterns changing all the rules. Wild animals are forced to adapt their behaviour to suit and in many cases, the wildlife management techniques that used to work simply don't anymore.

Diversity. Genetic diversity is limited in these confined spaces and inbreeding has to be carefully managed. Endangered animals such as cheetah already have a gene pool which is limited to the extent that it adds yet another obstacle to their continued existence.

Some reserves are too small to sustain a viable population of particular species. By joining forces, the smaller reserves are able to benefit from a far more efficient conservation effort.

The Big Idea

The Peace Park initiative has the noble aim of establishing at least a broad band of conservation land stretching from the mouth of the Limpopo River on the East Coast of Africa to where the Orange River empties into the sea in the West. As they say, charity begins at home, so it is important that the internal reserves of South Africa set the example.

By merging the conservation areas on its borders with the larger park, Thornybush is committing to the greater good of enhanced freedom for their animal inhabitants and paving the way for conservation success in Southern Africa.

Pooling resources

Clearly this involves cooperation between large numbers of conservation areas but it also means that more players are involved in a collaborative conservation effort. More players in the field means more skills, knowledge and experience working together for the greater good.

It also means more teams of anti-poaching patrols can cover a bigger area. While there can be no argument that fences deter poachers to a degree, they have been of little effect in stemming the tide of poaching. In fact sometimes the very fences that are put in place to protect animals from poachers become a confined environment where animals are easier to seek and destroy.

While uncommon, it is not unheard of for animals injure themselves on fences or to become separated from their peers by breaking through and being unable to return. This can be a death sentence for herd animals left to fend for themselves, leaving them more vulnerable to attack by predators or hunters.

Tourism. Allowing animals to move freely between reserves provides guests at the smaller, more intimate lodges with a greater pool of animals to admire. Now tourists can enjoy the full blown diversity of a large reserve such as Kruger, combined with the luxury of the intimate safari experiences offered by Thornybush Collection.

One only has to look at the impact that the Serengeti migration has had on Tanzanian tourism to see that allowing animals the freedom to roam can be the ticket towards increased tourism revenue.

As it is, eco-tourism is the world's largest growing industry and provides employment both directly and indirectly to many of the local communities in close proximity to nature reserves. The bottom line is that more tourism equals more employment for local communities which equals greater financial gain to these people, making them more inclined to protect our natural resources and less

inclined to be lured by the risks of poaching. Likewise, funds generated from touristic activities can be used towards conserving the natural resources which make these activities possible.

Combined, the dropping of the fences along with all of these factors contribute to the welfare of Southern Africa's wild animals and the continued existence of our thriving National and Private reserves.