Of vulture, safari guides and conservation

By Duncan Butchart

Good morning to you all and thank you to the University of the Witwatersrand for giving me this incredible honour. If I do indeed deserve it, it is only because of the many individuals who inspired and assisted me with my endeavours.

It was the American artist Andy Warhol who said that everyone gets their 15 minutes . . . this was a cynical remark aimed at the fleeting nature of fame, but I’m getting mine here, so hang in there and thanks for bearing with me. Before I begin, however, and in the tradition of award speeches - I would like to thank a few people who have got me here: first, my wife Tracey who has always shown a keen interest in my work, sharpened the left-hand side of my brain, and shared many of my travels; to my mentors in conservation and biology Dr John Ledger and Dr Peter Mundy; to James ‘Buster’ Culverwell who has opened my eyes and mind to so many things in the natural world; to Hugh Marshall who so enthusiastically facilitated my work among the safari guides; and to Chris Roche, Graham Vercueil, Tony Adams, Les Carlisle and all of the guides in Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and South Africa with whom it was my great privilege to visit, nurture and befriend. And finally to Ann Cameron and Professor Kevin Balkwill for nominating me and for taking the time to evaluate and motivate for this recognition which I accept here on behalf of all those just mentioned.

When I matriculated from Mondeor High School in 1977 (that is just 36 years ago) over 90% of the island of Borneo in south-east Asia was blanketed in pristine tropical rainforest which had evolved into a highly complex tapestry of biodiversity over millions of years. But in the same short amount of time that it has taken to lose the hair on this bald head of mine, only an estimated 6% of this huge island still supports natural vegetation!

The Dutch, the British, the Indonesians and the Malaysians felled the forests and replaced them with row upon row of oil palms. To put this devastation into a local context, it is equivalent to scraping away the natural vegetation and all the wildlife of about 30 Kruger National Parks! I never went to Borneo in the year I left school but I have been there three times since, and – remarkably - the thing that has struck me each time is not what has been lost, but what survives! The remaining forests – only fragments of what once was - are still home to singing gibbons, massive hornbills, pygmy squirrels, flying frogs and extravagant orchids. Despite everything, nature is clinging on, even flourishing. It is this realisation that inspires modern-day conservationists who are characterised, in the simplest sense, by the altruistic desire to retain space on our planet for other species.

Looking around, it seems like I just might be one of the older graduates here this morning! I come from a generation in which many ‘middle-class’ parents viewed universities with a good degree of suspicion. In my own case, I had a father who regarded liberal institutions such as Wits as nothing more than a breeding ground for hippies and protestors, and so I never made it here to study. The message I was given was: “get out into the world, make yourself useful and just get on with it”. A rather cavalier approach when looked at from today’s economically-fragile vantage point! Nevertheless, my own dad – the son of a Dundee ironworker and a world war two soldier in Montgomery’s 8th Army - had an insatiable thirst for knowledge and learning, and he found work that enabled him to travel the globe as an engineer.
As a youngster fresh out of school, I took a job in an art supply shop, and enrolled for a correspondence course that might earn me a diploma in ‘Wildlife Management’. My thought was this qualification would enable me to secure a position as a game ranger with some government agency or other establishment. Back then, at the end of the 1970’s, there were only a handful of private nature reserves in South Africa, rhinos had only recently been reintroduced to the Kruger National Park, and the world had not yet heard of ‘ecotourism’ with trained guides adept at interpreting nature for paying guests.

My spare time was spent very close to where we are all sitting now - exploring the Mondeor hills and other pockets of natural habitat around Johannesburg. Later, when I got my first car, I wandered further afield to the Magaliesberg, Nylsvlei, Kruger, Swaziland and the Kalahari. Here I would observe, sketch, photograph and write down what I saw. And when I was not out with binoculars and notebook, I was at home reading. I was especially attracted to the journals and diaries of naturalists and explorers who lived in wild places and took careful note of what they were seeing. People such as Gerald Durrell, Peter Scott, Alexander Skutch and – way before their time – the great Alfred Russel Wallace.

But also by the more sober conservation messages in books by the likes of Norman Myers, John Hanks and Peter Beard. By now I was a member of the Wildlife Society and the Witwatersrand Bird Club and eagerly read through the informative periodicals that contained articles on animal behaviour by the likes of Peter Steyn, Gus Mills, Keith Cooper, Vincent Carruthers and Warwick Tarboton.

Inspired by these naturalists, I was soon contributing my own notes and observations to the journals and while working at my second job in a technical bookstore I was introduced by the owner Russel Friedman to the work of a lively and passionate collective of volunteers known as the Vulture Study Group (which operated under the auspices of the Endangered Wildlife Trust). Not only did Russel have a number of endangered Cape Vultures in captivity on his farm, but he was an active member of the Group led by the vulture gurus themselves: John Ledger and Peter Mundy (both of whom – I am delighted to say - are here today).

These two characters had a profound influence on me because I was not only exposed to the procedures and discipline of biological study, but also to the philosophy that it should go hand-in-hand with conservation. This was by no means the prevailing mentality among biologists at the time, but Mundy and Ledger were at the vanguard of a movement and taught me that it was of little use obtaining data and statistics if that information was not applied to safeguarding the species concerned. So it was that I became intimately involved with both the science and conservation of vultures and my work with Mundy, Ledger and the late Steven Piper culminated in our 1992 publication: The Vultures of Africa.

My own interests were never confined to vultures, nor even to birds in general, although these winged wonders continue to captivate and inspire me. I have always been intrigued by how things fit together in nature. Why this or that species occurs here and not there? Why some trees have rough bark and others smooth?

As you might have gathered from my earlier reference to Borneo, I have always had the desire to travel running through my veins and so it was probably inevitable that I would at some stage find a way to work in the nature tourism industry.

In the mid 1990’s I approached a company called Conservation Corporation Africa (now known as &Beyond) – which operated numerous top-end safari lodges in six countries - with
the idea of mentoring the resident guides who showed wildlife to international guests. These individuals – over 200 young men and women – were living and working in mostly pristine African savanna ecosystems and were witnessing animal behaviour and ecological interactions on a daily basis as they went about their work.

Many were expert trackers and had an intimate knowledge of their surroundings. But since none of their observations were being recorded, there was clearly an opportunity to encourage these keen-eyed observers (most of whom were locally born and raised) to document their sightings and develop their own communication skills in the process. My role was to introduce ideas and demonstrate methodologies and then edit the material accumulated by the guides into an annual publication that we called the *Ecological Journal*. This not only provided these individuals with motivation and recognition, but also captured the attention of the scientific community who found the information to be of value. It also increased the focus and specialisation of the guides which enhanced the guest experience and the publication also became a useful promotional tool – naturally, the CC Africa shareholders needed some motivation to send me all over the continent!

So it was, that observations and reports made by guides such as Johnson Ol Nkukuu, Abdallah Hassan and Menziwa Sibanda were now available in the libraries of universities and museums not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world. Prior to the project, ruraly-educated African guides such as these had no experience of compiling notes, gathering data or using a computer. When I one day took the opportunity to hand-deliver a copy of an *Ecological Journal* to the librarian at the British Museum of Natural History in London, I was delighted when she agreed to my request to view some of the original notebooks and beetle specimens obtained by Alfred Russel Wallace from his visit to Borneo in 1855. (For those of you who may be unfamiliar with him, Wallace – who died 101 years ago - spent eight years exploring what we now call Indonesia and independently conceived the theory of evolution through natural selection; and he is also regarded as the father of biogeography). At that moment, with a copy of the *Ecological Journal* under one arm, and looking at Wallace’s handwriting, it seemed to me that some kind of circle had just been completed.

As the strands of the World Wide Web became more and more interconnected, the *Ecological Journal* eventually morphed into a web-linked publication known as *WildWatch*. Here, the material was put into an electronic format but when the 2008 financial crash arrived, budget cuts and related factors brought the project to a close. Since then, however, numerous institutions around the world have made it possible for anyone – from safari guides and birdwatchers to fishermen and farmers – to contribute observations of nature to a variety of sophisticated on-line data-base systems. These ‘citizen science’ programmes enable wide participation, providing people with a direct way of contributing data that assists with conservation initiatives.

One hundred years ago, only two out of every ten humans lived in a built-up area. The majority of our species were living off the land, interacting directly with nature. Today, close to three quarters of the human race live in towns and cities of concrete and steel where they have limited contact with nature but are still utterly dependent on it. At the same time, rural areas that were once a patchwork of various farming activities are increasingly being turned over to enormous monocultures that displace biodiversity and have massive negative impacts on our precious soil and water resources.

If we are to have any chance of preventing the collapse of the vital services that nature provides for all life on Earth, we desperately need a much greater number of conservation-
minded humans. We need to have the upper hand. Connecting people with nature through ecotourism and developing observation skills among African people who have not had the benefit of higher education, is just one very small part of this. Critically, we need big industries and governments to take the environment more seriously and the internet is a hugely powerful and persuasive communication tool in this regard. With it, we can shape purchasing and voting patterns and put the right people in charge.

My message to those of you who have graduated today is to make every effort to use this advantage in the name of conservation in its broadest sense. You are among a tiny number of Africans who have had - and clearly seized - the opportunity to further your education and you now carry a responsibility to spread this knowledge around!

Congratulations to each and every one of you, and may the odds be forever in your favour!