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Environmental Review 2000

As in other parts of southern Africa, the year 2000 will be remembered for the torrential rain and flooding of February. At Londolozi we received over 400mm during just eleven days of intensive rain. The Sand River rose to a level only witnessed once in the last century and road networks in nearby rural communities were cut off. The neighbouring Kruger National Park's main headquarters at Skukuza was devastated by the floods when the Sabie River burst its banks, and several smaller camps and lodges in the area were flooded. It was a sobering education for all who inhabit the river banks regarding the potential of these drainage systems. As a direct result of the rains, the habitat maintenance program at Londolozi came to a standstill until the end of March when conditions dried out sufficiently. Despite the delay, habitat manager Chris Irwin and his team were still able to mow all the clearings, providing short grass conditions for grazing species into the winter months. Not surprisingly, the rains resulted in a high water table and streams which normally flow only after downpours, ran throughout the dry winter months.

Due to the nature of our business, we had to begin doing game-drives while much of our traversing area was still very sensitive to vehicle impact and erosion. The fact that we were able to drive around at all is due to the extensive road restructuring which has been underway for a number of years. The low causeway over the Sand River held out during the February floods, making us the only lodge in the Sabi-Sand able to traverse on both sides of the river for about three months.

Since the flood the main focus of the habitat team has been the restoration of degraded habitat on Marthly, the northern section of our traversing area. A total of 91 hectares of encroached bush was cleared and yielded an immediate improvement in game-viewing. With these clearings established, work on the road system has begun to eliminate vehicle impact in sensitive areas. An exciting development has been the creation of a 'wilderness area' centred on the seasonal Manyeleti River habitat where future exploration will be limited to walking trails.

It is said that the Sabi-Sand teemed with Blue Wildebeest during the first part of the previous century. The former population of these gregarious antelope was estimated 10 000, but only about a few hundred survive in the area today. It is hoped that the restoration of the Marthly area will provide more suitable habitat for the plains-loving wildebeest, and a project has been launched at Londolozi to monitor the dynamics of the remaining groups.

The annual Sabi-Sand Game Reserve census figures showed a further drop in Blue Wildebeest number to just 139 (down from 203 in 1999, and 854 in 1990). The number of Impala - the most abundant herbivore - increased slightly to 9 898 (up from 9 732 in 1999, but well below the peak of 17 776 in 1993). African Elephant now number 537 (up from 497 in 1999, and a massive increase since the 1987 low of just 14). Other population estimates for the 56 000ha Sabi-Sand in 2000 are Burchell's Zebra 479 (down from 538), Giraffe 194 (down from 216), Buffalo 925 (down marginally from 931), Waterbuck 343 (down marginally from 349) and White Rhino 174 (up from 161).

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