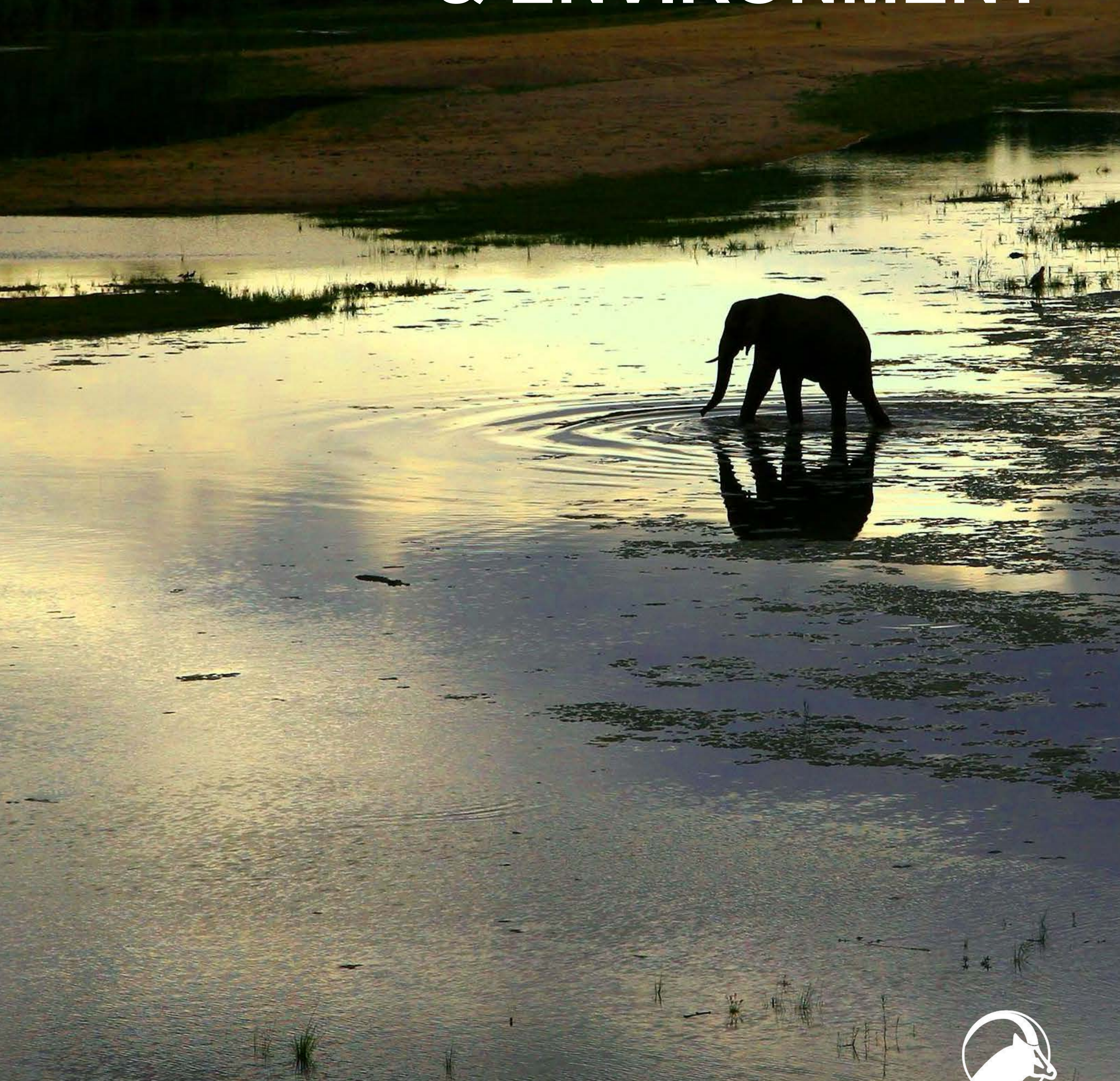


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**WESSA**

PEOPLE CARING FOR THE EARTH

# CONTENTS

The content below is hyperlinked to the article  
Just click and read

- 1 [Editorial](#)
- 2 [Letters to the editor](#)
- 5 [In memoriam: Garth Owen-Smith](#)
- 6 [Good reads](#)

## Conservation

- 8 [Does freshwater flow into the ocean constitute a wasted water resource?](#)

## Fauna, Flora & Wildlife

- 11 [Foraging food from the veld](#)
- 13 [A picture is worth more than a thousand words](#)
- 18 [The Majete story](#)
- 24 [A new tree book is born](#)

## Birding

- 27 [The majestic Forest Buzzard](#)

## WESSA Regions / Branches / Friends

- 29 [Friends of Moreletakloof](#)

## Eco-Hero

- 32 [Peter Hitchins](#)

## Subscriptions / General

- 38 [WESSA membership](#)
- 39 [Leaving a legacy](#)
- 40 [Region, area office, branch & centre contacts](#)
- 41 [Publication details](#)

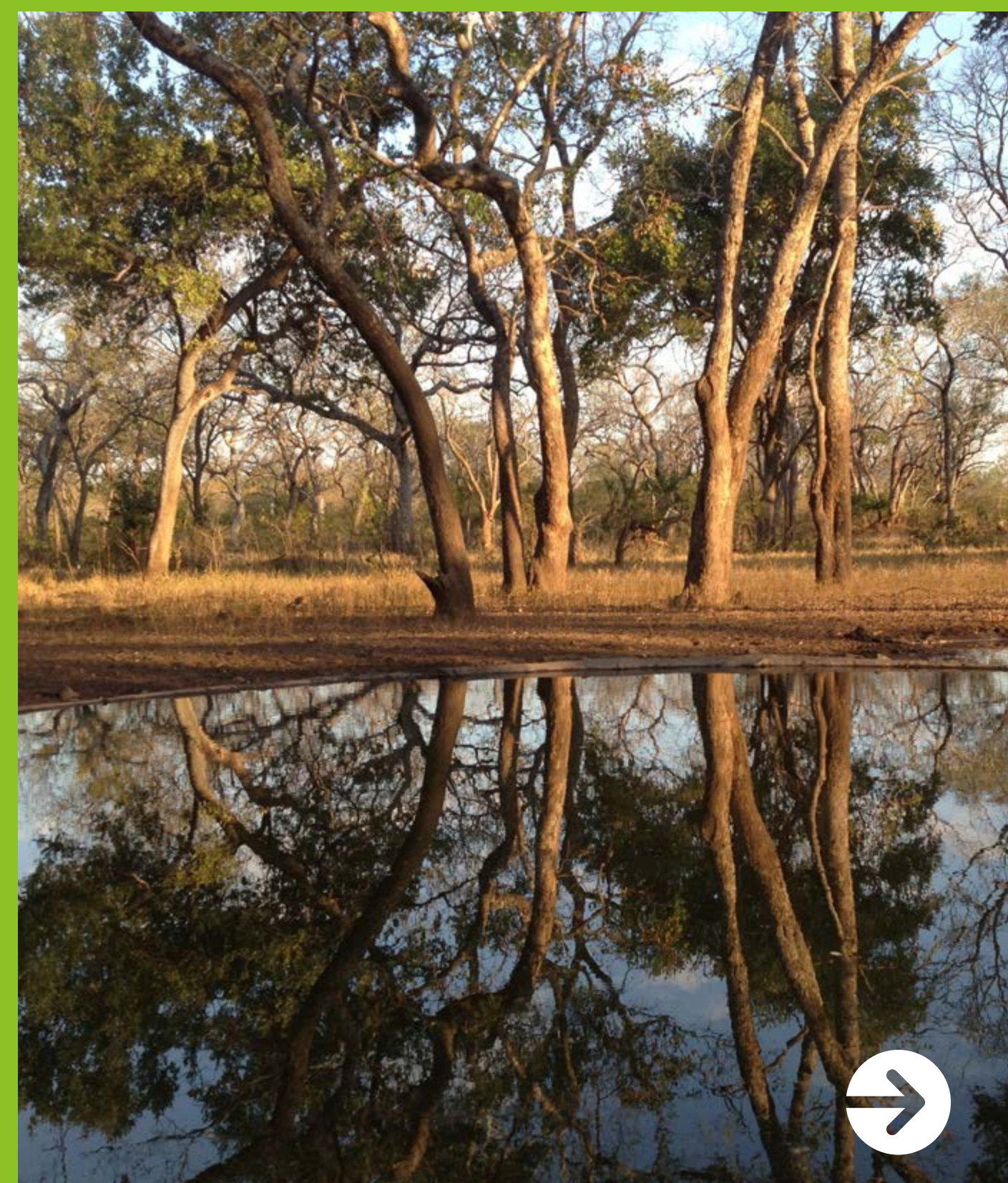
**THE MAGAZINE OF THE WILDLIFE AND  
ENVIRONMENT SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA**



**Cover photograph: John Wesson**



**A picture is worth more than  
a thousand words**



**The Majete story**



**Eco-Hero Peter Hitchins**

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# An unusual story in Malawi

## THE MAJETE STORY

MICHAEL EUSTACE

I'm sitting on a rock on the top of a hill in Majete. Below me is a carpet of treetops. It goes all the way to the horizon on every side. This immense landscape of trees is an unusual sight in Malawi. I feel as if I am in some pristine Africa of long ago. It is a good feeling.



I can see an eagle flying some way off and I can tell by the way it is dipping its wings from side to side that it is a Bateleur. They are often first on to a kill, perhaps because they fly lower than the vultures.

Below the canopy and out of sight, are lions and elephants and all the other animals of Africa. It didn't used to be this way. Fifteen years ago, there were very few animals in Majete and very few birds. They had been poached out. Without elephants, the trees thrived and became giants. That was a good thing. There was lots of food for animals and many rivers and springs for water but there were no game trails and there was no sound of

birds. Chopping is what you heard. People had started chopping down the trees for charcoal. It was an ominous scene. The 70,000 hectares park was threatened. Collapse could have happened in a few years.

And then some strangers came, and they brought with them thousands of animals from other parts of Malawi, and from Zambia, and from South Africa. Year after year truckloads of different animals came, and dozens of rangers were hired to look after them. The poaching was stopped, and the animals bred. The 2,500 animals that were brought in became 12,000. Thousands of birds arrived. Soon there were eagles in the sky, green pigeons



The Shire River

in the fig trees and parrots nesting in the holes in the baobabs. At night you heard lions and leopards calling. In 15 years Majete had changed from a sterile woodland to a paradise alive with animals and birds.

### **Who did this? Why did they do it?**

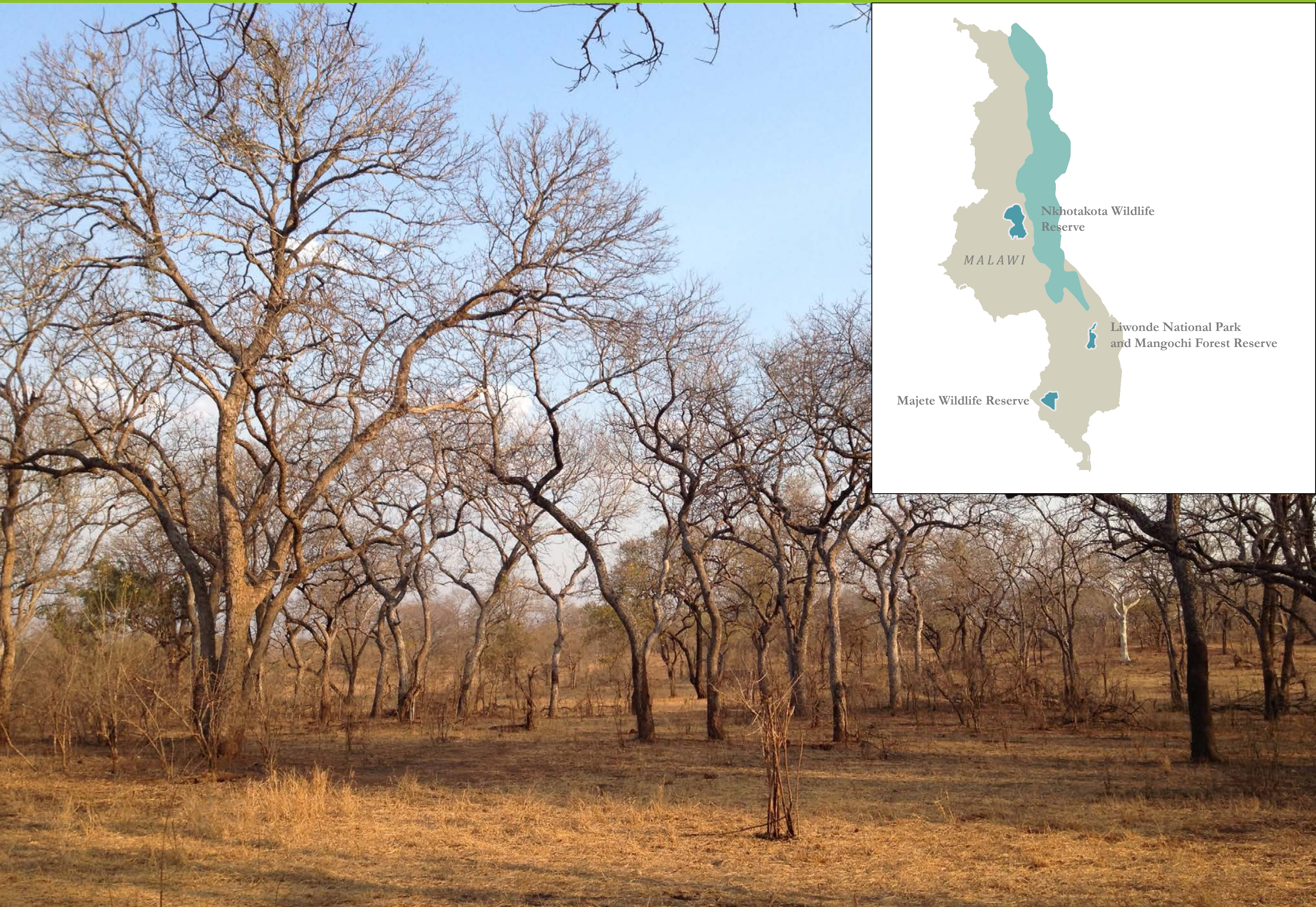
Well, it all started on the verandah of the Country Club in Johannesburg. Peter Fearnhead and I had both been brought up in Zimbabwe and as young men we had spent a lot of time in the parks there. We were both alarmed at the decline in parks in Africa. Peter was working for South African National Parks (SANParks) at the time and I was an investment manager. We had met when I had wanted to buy the lease over Coutada 16, a 500,000 hectares concession in Mozambique, alongside the Kruger Park. Buying the lease never happened because it turned out the Mozambique government could cancel it at any time, for any reason. The lease was worthless. But a plan to form the 'African Parks Management and Finance Company' did happen.

We asked Mavuso Msimang, the CEO of SANParks, and

Dr Anthony Hall-Martin who was the head of conservation, to join us. Later Anthony introduced Paul van Vlissingen, a wealthy Hollander, who liked the AP concept and promised funding in exchange for a shareholding. He soon started putting in a mountain of money and then said he wanted all the shares as he was providing all the finance. He threatened to start his own African Parks if we didn't sell. We were more interested in the success of African Parks than profits, so we sold. AP was later turned into a 'not for profit' company as it was easier to raise donor funding that way. Paul had no interest in making a profit out of AP. He was well connected and urgent and money was no constraint. Parks became a passion for him, and he gave great impetus to AP.

The problem for me was that Paul wanted to make all the decisions and he didn't want my advice. I withdrew to the sidelines.

Anthony knew people in Malawi through a long association between SANParks and Malawi Parks, and he was able to negotiate a 25-year lease to manage and finance the Majete Wildlife Reserve. Nobody was interested in the park because there were no animals left. Nobody thought



Majete trees in winter

Inset: Protected areas in Malawi managed by African Parks

of restoring it. While the lease cost nothing, it came with a commitment to finance the park.

Majete was AP's first venture. Management was chosen carefully, and donor funding was found. It turned out to be a bigger success than anybody ever expected. AP with Majete as an example went on to expand to 17 parks in 11 countries in Africa. These parks now exceed a total of 13 million hectares - or the size of England! Most new ventures fail but AP never looked like failing. Why was that?

There was clearly a great need to do something about all the collapsing parks. They were an African treasure, but conservation buys no votes in Africa and budget allocations to parks are minimal. There is no money for effective anti-poaching and no passion to conserve as in the first world, who have lost much of their wildlife. In Africa there are more important things such as food, health and education. Animals in parks are shot and snared for food. Poaching becomes a sport. Once the animals have gone the trees start being chopped down for fuel and people

move into the park to establish gardens and graze their cattle. With growing populations, land is in great demand and more and more people invade the parks. They soon become parks in name only.

With some money and energetic management, AP was able to control the poaching. If there is no poaching, and only that, a park thrives. Bringing in animals from surplus populations elsewhere helps. Managing a park is not a rocket science. All it needs is some thought and common sense and energy. Typically, AP does it with just two experienced park managers who have high standards and demand high standards.

It takes about a million dollars every year to control poaching in a park. On top of that there is the need for fences, game introduction, roads, staff housing and transport. We took over the government rangers and paid them more but as part of the arrangement we had the right to exchange any ranger we felt was not good enough.

AP found donors to be generous if they saw the need and that their money was going to be well spent by effective

managers. Governments usually say to us, "Give us the money and we will do the job", but there is no appetite from donors for that.

It would be good to make Majete less dependent on donor funding and find other sources of income and provide a model that other parks could copy.

Tourism and park entry fees bring in some money, but it is mostly small relative to expenses. Tourism in Majete is unlikely to provide more than \$300,000 profit a year.

Trophy hunting was planned in Majete but it has never happened because National Parks and Wildlife wanted surplus animals to be moved to other depleted parks. In time when animal numbers have increased it might become an option. We could make profits of \$500,000 per annum from a limited amount of trophy hunting in Majete. It is a 'Wildlife Reserve' and not a 'National Park' where hunting, by convention, is seldom allowed.

We could sell ten leases for small private lodges in Majete and that money could be invested to produce income of \$500,000 per annum.

In time we might be able to sell rhino horn to generate

\$500,000 profit annually. Rhino horn re-grows if you crop it. There is no harm to the animal. Most people dislike the idea of trading horn, but Africa could sell 5,000 kg of horn every year and raise \$150 million. That money would be enough to restore 150 parks. Those restored parks could generate \$3 billion in tourist income from which the parks could make an annual profit of \$300 million. The initial 150 parks would then become self-sustaining and a further 150 parks could be added, and so on.

Parks in Africa are a treasure and have a sustainable competitive advantage, but the world is slow to understand that. Somehow, parks need to become more financially viable.

There are hundreds of parks in Africa that are threatened with collapse. AP cannot manage them all. There is scope for more organisations such as AP, or for individuals to manage and finance a park as has happened at Gorongosa in Mozambique.

The annual increase of animals in Majete is difficult to value accurately because there is no market for live



A Bateleur eagle observing Majete  
Photograph: John Wesson

animals in Malawi, but it is significant. Adding value every year is of some comfort to donors and the managers.

The two small lodges in Majete are running at low occupancies. We need some new ideas. There are many wonderful walks and we need to promote longer stays at the lodges with different morning walks every day combined with drives in the afternoon. We need to have the best hide in Africa where guests can watch animals, in peace, at close quarters, and photograph them. We could also have an ornithologist showing visitors the many

The communities that surround Majete are our partners. Their biggest benefit is employment. We employ 150 people permanently and another 50 part-time and most of them come from the surrounding communities. We help with health and education, including 100 scholarships, and we help with small enterprises and we bring in hundreds of young people to show them the animals and how the park works and why the environment is valuable. In return, the communities help to protect the park and the animals.

AP has spent \$20 million on Majete. The park belongs to the people of Malawi and so do the animals. There has been no profit in it for AP or the donors. Their reward has been the restoration of an extraordinary piece of wilderness.

Every day in Majete there is some new excitement, whether it is the introduction of cheetah, the impala dropping their lambs or buffalo breaking out of the fence, or the river coming down in flood, or the arrival of a migrant bird, or the faces of Malawi children seeing their first elephant. It is an interesting place.

AP and Majete have been a wonderful adventure for all of us. It was clear what had to be done and it wasn't difficult to do. Sadly, both Paul and Anthony have died of incurable diseases. Peter Fearnhead led the team and they all made it work. Donors were crucial and without them AP would have failed. Donors were cautious at first but after the success of Majete, they were encouraged and generous.

The Bateleur eagle streaks past my rock now and dips his wings. I would like to think that it is a salute. He must be happy with the changes and so must the other birds and animals and people.



White rhino

special birds and putting up hides to photograph them in the summer months, when it is hot and few people visit. We could have a student studying leopard and helping visitors to see them.

We could bring in a few white rhinos from South Africa. They are easier to see than the black rhino we have. Bringing in white rhino may increase the risk of poaching and we are uncertain about it. Our rangers can alert the lodge guides to buffalo which may entail a trip to the south of Majete, but it is lovely wild country down there. If we can be fairly certain of showing visitors the 'Big Five', over three days, that will be a game-changer.

**Michael Eustace**

Director of Majete, Liwonde and Nkhotakota national parks in Malawi and a director of Bangweulu Wetlands in Zambia. He was formally the Senior General Manager of Nedcor Investment Bank in South Africa.