



# emerging from the **SHADOWS**

Mercilessly hunted for sport and for their ivory until their very existence was rumoured to be a myth, the elephants of northern KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa are making a steady comeback. Thanks to the dedication of a group of conservationists, the pachyderms are coming out of their forest hideaways calmer, healthier and bigger-tusked than ever. Last year Clive Walker visited Tembe Elephant Park abutting the Mozambique border and investigated the progress of a sanctuary he helped create almost three decades ago. ▶

TEXT BY CLIVE WALKER

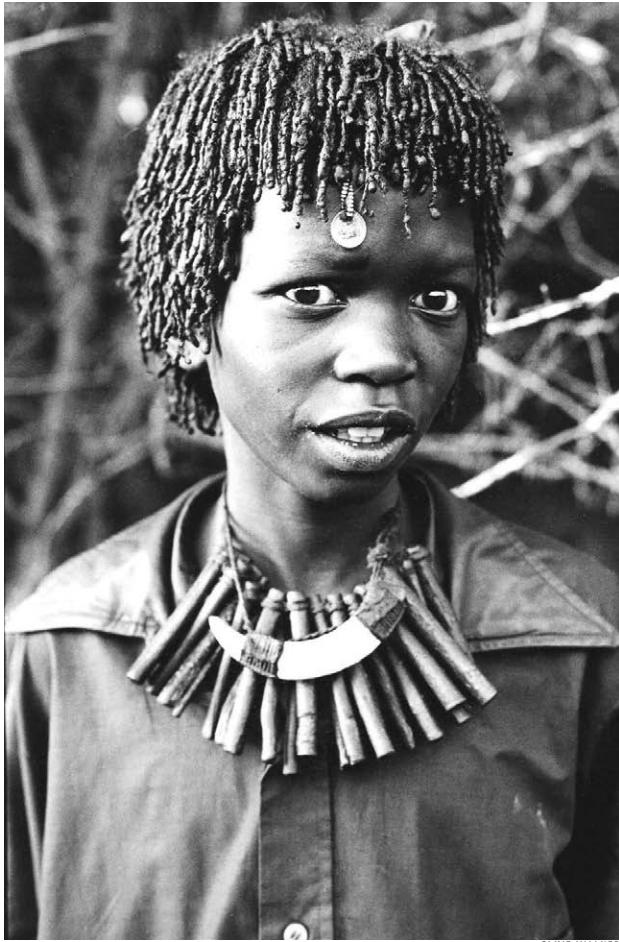
**I**t's not surprising that for many years the elephants inhabiting the area known today as Tembe Elephant Park, in Maputaland in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), were regarded as both phantoms and as extremely dangerous when encountered. In the 19th century, early European hunters had pursued them hotly for their ivory; in the 20th century, their ancient migration routes led them across the border into Mozambique, where they were targeted for both their tusks and meat. Those that escaped fled back to the safety of their sand forest home, where their descendants live to this day.

By the late 1970s, just 20 to 30 bulls remained, a pitiful fragment of the vast herds that once roamed as far south, it is thought, as present-day Durban and as far north, via the Futi River Corridor, as the Rio Maputo wetlands in Mozambique. By

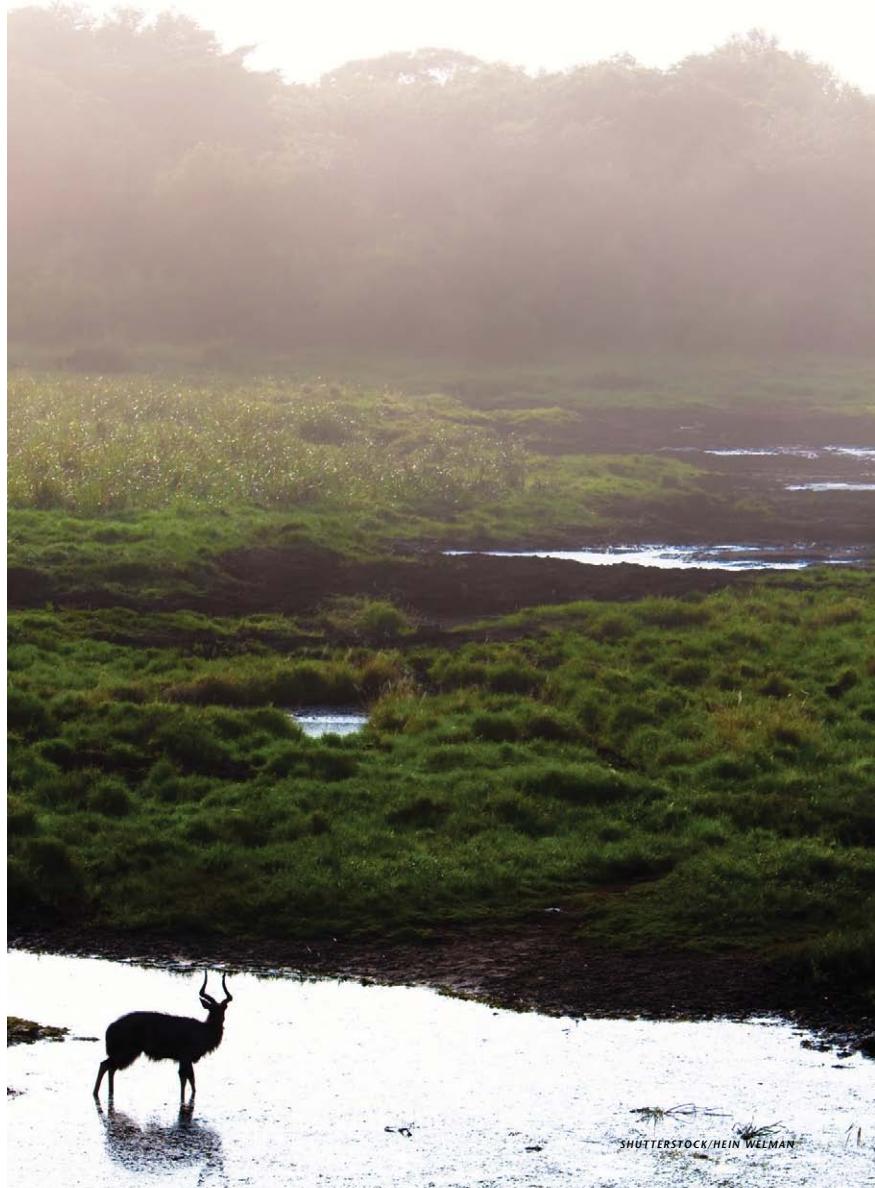
the end of that decade, no-one knew their status. Civil war had broken out north of the border and, understandably, the South African authorities were unwilling to allow researchers to investigate the population.

So what was I doing there in 1978 beating a hasty retreat from an angry elephant? How did I manage to find myself in a restricted area that required an entry permit from the South African government? Well, at the time, John Hanks of the University of Natal's Department of Biological Sciences had advised Iain Douglas-Hamilton of Save the Elephants of his concerns about the the province's last elephants living outside a protected area. As director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), I had been invited by Douglas-Hamilton to join the IUCN Elephant Specialist Group to help expose the illegal ivory trade in South Africa. And

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CLIVE WALKER



SHUTTERSTOCK/HEIN WELMAN

## NDUMO-FUTI-TEMBE TRANSFRONTIER CONSERVATION AREA

It's long been a dream of conservationists to create a vast arc of protected land stretching from South Africa's Indian Ocean coast through Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia to the Atlantic shore. Tembe Elephant Park is a core area within the proposed Ndumo-Futi-Tembe Transfrontier Conservation Area, which incorporates parts of Swaziland, Mozambique and South Africa, linking Tembe with the wetlands and pan system of Ndumo Game Reserve. It would restore to the elephants their territories in the Futi system and the Rio Maputo wetlands of Mozambique, allowing them to roam freely as they once did.



ARIADNE VAN ZANDBERGEN

that's how, one cool morning, I found myself running through the dense thickets with my companions from the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife).

Two other people were interested in the future of the elephants: Les Lückhoff, a former chairman of the KwaZulu Conservation Trust, and Anthony Hall-Martin, another member of the Elephant Specialist Group, who had worked in the region for a short period and believed only bulls inhabited the thick forests. Lückhoff had informed me that the establishment of a sanctuary was being discussed by the authorities, not only as a preserve for the elephants, but also to protect the area's biodiversity.

**M**aputaland (or Tongaland, as it was then called) lies in the north-eastern corner of South Africa, tucked between Swaziland, the Indian Ocean and Mozambique. An area of some 8 000 square kilometres, it includes reserves such as Ndumo and Kosi Bay, which also reach to the Mozambique border.

The region was occupied in part by the Tembe people, whose chief, Msimba Tembe, was open to the suggestion of a reserve area in the midst of their land. Our biggest challenge was balancing the needs of the people and the animals. There were 51 kraals, the inhabitants of

which utilised the abundant resources, cutting reeds and thatching grass, tapping the local palms, grazing livestock and collecting fruits and traditional plants. I had made numerous trips there in the past and had spent time photographing the huts and the inhabitants. Apart from the elephants, there were few larger wild animals other than red duiker and the elusive and very rare suni.

In order to determine the status and number of the elephants, I had to obtain special clearance for what turned out to be a two-year undertaking. The man chosen to carry out the survey was Walther Klingelhofer, a wiry young German-speaking Honours student who studied under Koos Bothma at the Centre for Wildlife Management at the University of Pretoria. Despite admitting that he knew precious little, if anything, about elephants, Klingelhofer set off gamely in the university-supplied vehicle. It was not a conventional 4x4 and could not penetrate the rough terrain, meaning that he had to carry out much of his work on foot, armed with a shotgun, binoculars, notebook and pen. He did wear running shoes – essential for escaping an irate elephant. I am certain that few students today would have taken on the task.

Our visits to check on Klingelhofer's progress were better equipped. When Bothma and I headed northwards, our transport was a Ford F250, (to page 42) ▶



OPPOSITE, LEFT A Tembe trainee sangoma photographed in the 1970s.

OPPOSITE, RIGHT A lone nyala moves across the Tembe Elephant Park wetlands.

PAGE 37 An elephant mum and baby. It has taken three decades for the elephant population to grow from some 30 to 250, comprising several breeding herds.

**Tembe Elephant Park is a wonderful tribute to all who put a great deal of effort into its creation, not least the men and women on the ground who are tasked with its day-to-day integrity**







TEMBE ELEPHANT LODGE

## TEMBE ELEPHANT PARK

**Established:** 1983.

**Size:** 30 000 hectares.

**Wildlife:** Elephant, suni, red duiker, leopard, African buffalo, porcupine, warthog, 340 bird species (notably plain-backed sunbird, African broadbill, Rudd's apalis, rufous-bellied heron and swamp nightjar).

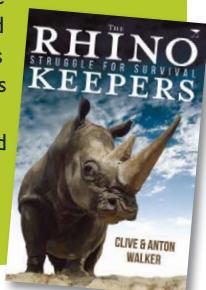
**Vegetation:** Sand forest, bushveld, swampland, palm veld.

**What to do:** A 4x4 vehicle is required to enter Tembe. Morning and evening game drives, self-guided trails, rock art.

**Where to stay:** The author was the guest of Tembe Elephant Lodge (above), which offers luxury tented accommodation with en-suite facilities (including outdoor showers) and excellent service. E-mail [info@tembe.co.za](mailto:info@tembe.co.za), tel. +27 (0)31 267 0144, or go to [www.tembe.co.za](http://www.tembe.co.za), where you can also view the webcam.

Clive Walker is one of South Africa's best-known conservationists. A co-founder of the EWT, he is also the author of several books. His most recent, co-written with son Anton, shares his personal story about rhinos. *The Rhino Keepers* is filled with a passion for the animals, and urges readers to question the way we manage our natural heritage and to recognise our role as custodians of our rhinos into the future.

The book is published by Jacana Media and readers in South Africa can buy it for R225.



one of those legendary pick-ups so well known to rough-terrain devotees. Our main concern when driving along the border was that we would hit a landmine, and I said a quiet prayer each time we ventured onto the road.

At that time, poaching in Mozambique was rife and the elephants that wandered across the border from South Africa were shot at. Those that survived their wounds fled south into the thick forests along the Muzi Swamp, occasionally killing people en route. Klingelhofer had his fair share of confrontations and on one occasion, unable to scare off an angry elephant by firing his shotgun in the air, he threw the weapon down in front of the beast and made his escape. Needless to say the gun required repairs, which did not impress the university authorities.

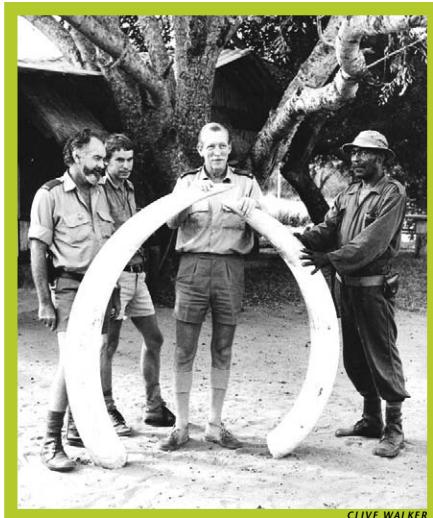
Two and a half years after starting work, Klingelhofer produced his findings, revealing the existence not only of bull elephants but of breeding herds in the swamp forests, totalling some 100 individuals. He also drew up boundary recommendations for fencing the sanctuary based on his assessment of the pachyderms' movements. The almost 30 000-hectare park was proclaimed in

1983 and the electrified fence was completed in 1989. The human inhabitants were resettled on land immediately south of the park, although they continue to cut and collect thatching grass and reeds within it.

**[Klingelhofer] had to carry out much of his work on foot, armed with a shotgun, binoculars, notebook and pen**

The move to establish a sanctuary on community land raised considerable controversy, and Chief Tembe's farsighted support played a major role in its realisation. It was part of a much bigger conservation plan that was led by the Bureau of Natural Resources director Nick Steele, with backing from the chief minister, Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Another supporter was the Natal Parks Board, now also incorporated into Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the park's managing authority.

In 1998, Tembe Elephant Lodge was opened to the public. A luxury 18-bed retreat, it is part-owned and managed by the Tembe community, with employees drawn locally. One of my greatest experiences was to meet and be taken care of by the staff at the camp. I kept remembering those early days when I photographed the people in their kraals; the caretakers all these years later could possibly be their descendants.



CLIVE WALKER

Tembe has come a long way in 30 years, but it still faces the pressing issue of the hoped-for establishment of the Ndumo-Futi-Tembe Transfrontier Conservation Area, which if achieved will expand and restore the elephants' ancient migration routes into Mozambique. This gem of a sanctuary is a wonderful tribute to all who put a great deal of effort into its creation, not least the men and women on the ground who are tasked with its day-to-day integrity. AG

LEFT Researcher Walther Klingelhofer (centre) poses in 1980 with staff from the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources. The tusks were recovered from a bull elephant that had been shot by poachers.

BELLOW Once pursued and hounded by poachers, the elephants of Tembe now live in peace.



ARIADNE VAN ZANDBERGEN

I returned to Tembe in October 2011 after an absence of nearly 30 years to experience the changes that have taken place there. And changes there are. There are now about 250 elephants, with a high proportion of bulls, which have calmed down remarkably. Among them are some of Africa's greatest 'tuskers'. To view elephant bulls with such exceptional, beautifully curved ivory is a rare experience.

The park has been restocked with all the major game species: giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, impala, nyala, kudu, buffalo and both black and white rhinos. Lions were introduced in 2002 and now number 36. This population is monitored on a regular basis, as are the 15 African wild dogs that arrived in January 2011.

The wild dog project is a partnership between Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the EWT Carnivore Conservation Programme, the KZN Wild Dog Management Group, Wildlife ACT and Rhodes University, and is designed to expand and understand the current range of the canines through the diverse landscapes of northern KwaZulu-Natal. The dogs are monitored daily by Priscilla Pickering of Wildlife ACT, who passed us on several occasions as she conducted her research. The day before our arrival an English couple, David and Tanya Trussler, showed us a photograph they'd taken of their marvellous sighting of the dogs playfully chasing a group of elephants, then hiding in the thick bush and reappearing to be chased in turn by the bigger animals. 'At some point,' observed Tanya, 'the elephants must have thought, "Hang on, we are elephants!"'