

An expanded Big Five reserve spreads the conservation spirit by giving people a hands-on wilderness experience. **Kathy Waddington** visited

IT'S ALL ABOUT GETTING UP

close. Once you've touched and smelled the animals," says Nick Callichy, "I defy you to tell me that you haven't been changed in some way, that your soul hasn't been touched in return."

While this doesn't extend to creating "petting zoos", once people have personal interactions with a lion, cheetah or leopard – even if it is fast asleep – it becomes far more than a vicarious thrill.

"If we can increase the pool of people who feel personally, deeply, about wildlife, we expand the number of people who feel a sense of ownership – and responsibility – towards preserving it."

This philosophy is being put into practice at the brand new Greater Mokolo Nature Reserve in the Waterberg Biosphere in Limpopo, southern Africa's first savannah reserve to achieve this status. In this restored and expanded wilderness, you can join the rangers and vets on sorties to track, dart and attend to animals, all of which have been reintroduced after being hunted out in the past century.

The new reserve came about with the merging of Ka'Ingo Private Reserve with a sanctuary founded by Swiss-German Heidi Behr to care for orphaned elephants.

Behr fell in love with South Africa 21 years ago during a holiday – and stayed, to found the Mokolo River Nature Reserve, which was previously off-limits to the public.

On the other side of the fenced-off Mokolo River was Nick Callichy, general manager of Ka'Ingo, and Mac van der Merwe, CEO of the owners, the Zorgvliet Group.

In the middle was a "no-man's-land" around the clear waters of the Mokolo River and yet another impenetrable barrier for the wildlife. Many of the animals that roamed the area 300 years ago are now proliferating, thanks to vigorous commitment to conservation by landowners. With the removal of the fences, their range has doubled and the chances of improving gene pools has also increased.

Today about 42 species, from elephants to honey badgers and African wildcats, either hunted out or deprived of their habitat, are back home in the 16 500-hectare sanctuary. And, says Nick, it's just the first step. Discussions are under way with Limpopo Parks and Tourism to incorporate the Mokolo Dam Nature



Nick Callichy (left) and Justin Ehlers change a tracking collar on one of the reserve's lions. Guests can assist, ask questions and, wearing latex gloves, examine the beast.

Up close and personal

Reserve and three other neighbouring farmers are interested in bringing down their fences too. The intention is to incorporate the Nylsvley Reserve, a Ramsar site since 1998 and, ultimately, to create a reserve as diverse and almost as big as Kruger National Park, with the added advantage of the area being malaria-free.

Heidi's elephant project began when she took in orphaned elephants, traumatised by the shooting of adults during culling at Kruger National Park. Her project grew to include white rhinos, and a cheetah reintroduction project is under way under the leadership of wildlife scientist Lee Edwards.

Nick and his team at Ka'Ingo, in between restocking the land with elephant, buffalo, lion, cheetah, tsessebe and other endemic species, have spent the past seven years working to strict land management plans to return the land to as close to its natural state as possible.

Until the 1800s, the Big Five co-existed with several mammals now regarded as rare, endangered and threatened. Through carefully planned reintroductions and monitoring, they again have a home on the plateau and in the mountains and forests of the Waterberg. Previously, the Ka'Ingo

property consisted of nine separate farms that had been turned over to cattle and stock, including peanut and tobacco farming. "In places it was a desert, there were alien species to be removed, and old structures and dilapidated buildings dotted the landscape. It was a mess," says Nick.

Travelling through the reserve on dirt tracks designed to create as little impact as possible and seeing forests of indigenous trees, shrubs and healthy grasslands, it's hard to reconcile this wilderness with its previous life.

There's little chance of having to "share" your sightings with anyone else, since the theoretical ratio is 3 000ha of bushveld for every game viewing vehicle – that's the equivalent of just you, up close with the animals, in an area the size of 3 650 Fifa soccer fields.

An hour's bush-drive from Ka'Ingo is Dinkweng Safari Camp, 12 secluded self-catering lodges, a central boma, lounge, pool and pub hidden in the bushveld. It's designed so you can take children on hikes and mountain biking among the kudu, impala, waterbuck, zebra, giraffe and other animals of the Waterberg – minus the Big Five.



A perfect spot for a sundowner, with views over the Greater Mokolo Nature Reserve towards Botswana. Pictures: Kathy Waddington

Bringing the bush back into budget

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The stone and thatch lodges, each accommodating six to eight in three en-suite bedrooms, perch on a ridge with expansive views of the valley and ravines below. There's an enormous deck and private splash pool. A bonfire pit and braai area make it ideal for families and groups. There are flat-screen TVs in each bedroom and a fully equipped kitchen.

Game-viewing vehicles that look like golf-carts are assigned to each lodge, so any driving you do keeps your footprint to a minimum.

A deck on the edge of a gorge provides views across the mountains to Botswana, 60km away. And after sunset, the clear, inky skies seem custom-made for stargazing.

And it's affordable. A group can hire a lodge for less than R400 a person a night. Van der Merwe says it's important for South Africans to experience the wilderness before they can feel any sense of ownership or responsibility.

An alternative to the Safari Camp is fully catered Ka'Ingo Main Lodge, where understated luxury is the theme in the en-suite rooms.

First-rate African fusion cuisine is served on a broad deck surrounded

by landscaped gardens, in a boma or "in the bush" overlooking the river.

You can choose game drives or safari walks with knowledgeable rangers from an extensive "menu" of activities, to fit your budget.

Bush wine tastings are held regularly. There are also excursions to view rock art. It is, in the opinion of artist and conservationist Clive Walker, who spearheaded the move to have the Waterberg declared a Biosphere Reserve, "one of the most special examples of rock art in the province".

Van der Merwe says they've devised a variety of ownership models in addition to rentals for both Ka'Ingo and Dinkweng. These include sectional title, fractional and perpetuity purchases through the Zorgvliet Private Residence Club.

Getting there

The new Greater Mokolo Nature Reserve, comprising Ka'Ingo, Dinkweng and Mokolo River Nature Reserve, is a three-hour drive from O R Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg. A private airstrip can accommodate light aircraft. Contact: www.kaingo.co.za
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