

Illustrations: Nicolaas van Huyssteen

THE SMELL OF PYTHONS

In the greatest wilderness in Zululand, HLENGIWE MAGAGULA learns to close her eyes and breathe

She woke, instantly alert. She tilted her head, nostrils twitching. There was something in the night air of uMfolozi. Moving towards the scent, she paused to listen. The harsh bark of an nyala made her jump. Somewhere close, a predator on the prowl. Still, the aroma drew her forward, stepping silently through the shadows under a knob thorn tree. Now it was stronger, meatier. Was she too late, would she have to fight for scraps? Then another sound, belly deep, told her to press on – she needed to feed. She emerged into a clearing to find a figure in white, half hidden behind steaming potjies. “Good evening madam!” All was well, her instincts perfect – first at the dinner buffet.

And what a feast I had. Later, sitting on the terrace, I tuned in to the nocturnal sounds of KwaZulu-Natal’s greatest wilderness area. There came another pang, this time for the animals that have it less easy, out there in the moonless night, sniffing for food. My mind also wandered

to something I’d discovered on arrival at the new uMfolozi Big 5 Game Reserve: that this area was once home ground for the great conservationist Dr Ian Player. On community-owned lands that hug the right bank of the White uMfolozi River, the reserve shares an unfenced boundary with the vast wilds of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. As a young ranger in the 1950s, Player patrolled here on foot and horse, and I’d seen the ruins of his brick-built stables as we drove in via a rough track to Mthembu Lodge. Perhaps he slept at this very spot? He would probably scorn the luxurious villa that was my home for the night, as he was more of a bedroll-under-the-stars guy.

But he would be delighted that this area is now formally protected alongside the state-owned park, which conserves almost 1,000km² of wilderness.

It was Player’s life goal to conserve the last great wilder- ☺



ness in the heart of Zululand. He used the near-extinction of the white rhino as the vehicle to galvanise support for habitat protection, fighting a small army of farmers, hunters, poachers, magistrates and Parks Board bureaucrats. And he won. His entertaining memoirs are filled with the sights, sounds and scents of this land he loved.

"The smell of umThombothi wood smoke drifted through the air, its strong scent overpowering the faint smell of the pythons and the surrounding bush. There are subtle scents of shrubs, bushes, trees and flowers that hang in the still air on May mornings and one learns to identify them as though they were bird song," Player wrote in *Zulu Wilderness: Shadow and Soul*.

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Woken by the birds, I stepped outside, closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. The scents were there, and I wanted to learn their signatures. Like Player and his men, reserve guides Vuyani Mbuzwa and Simphiwe Mandleni already

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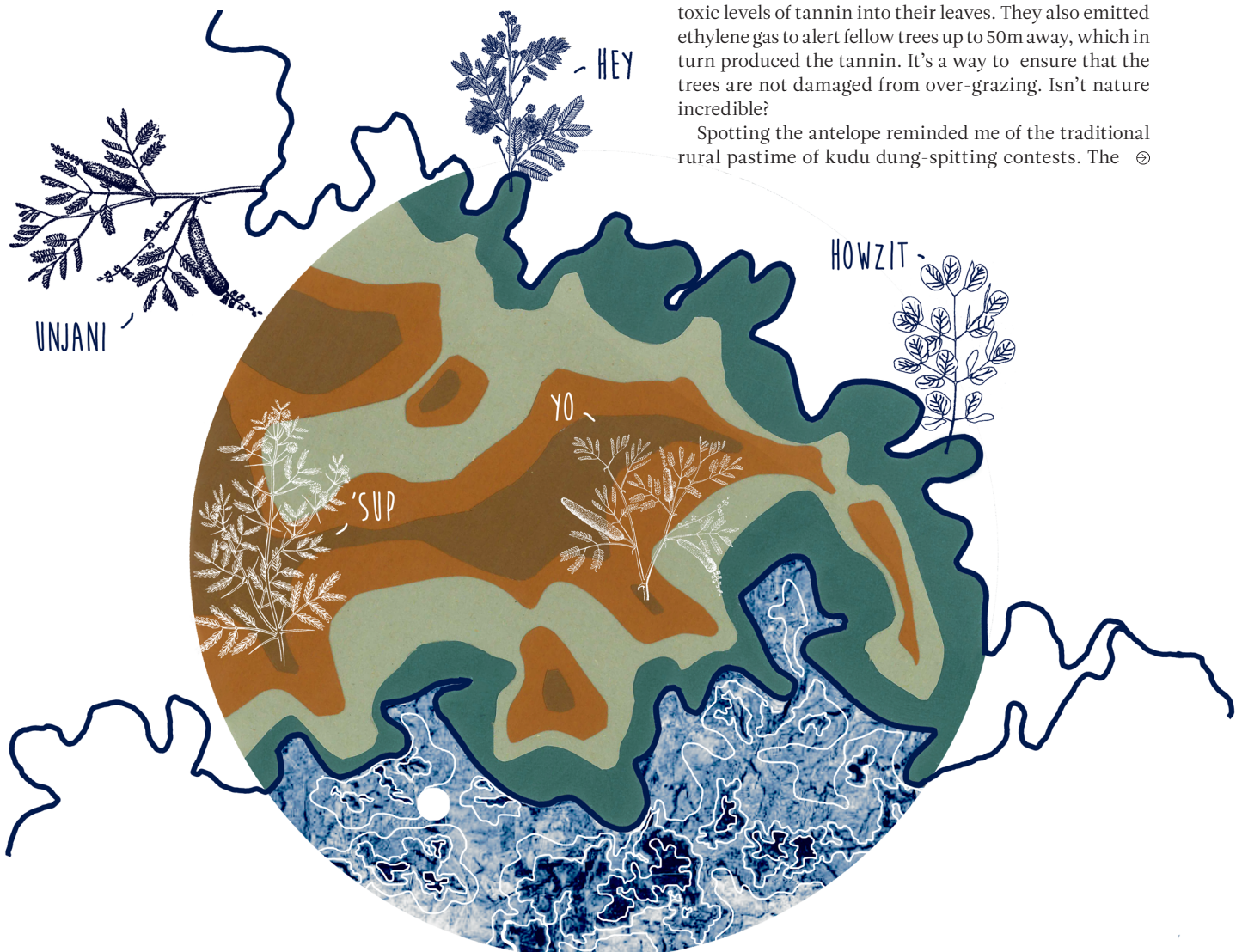
have the skill. Even on a game drive, they can detect by nose which animals have recently passed. The muddy aroma of elephant and rhino, the stale meaty cologne of old lions.

We spotted a puff adder and killed the engine, as Vuyani explained how they could give a dry bite, choosing when to conserve their venom for something worth eating. These snakes ambush their prey but don't bother to hide under rocks or logs, as their camouflage is Olympic class. What's more, scientists from the University of the Witwatersrand

(with the help of some meerkats) have discovered that unlike Player's pythons, puff adders don't have a scent, so have olfactory camouflage too. Very sneaky.

Vuyani seemed happy to have found someone interested in scents. Did I know that trees could smell, he asked. Well of course – I'd already crushed some small knobwood leaves for their citrus tang, and enjoyed the fresh bouquets of late-flowering sweet thorn. No, he said; I mean they can really smell things. Vuyani pointed at some grazing kudus. He explained how they must move upwind as they browse, because the trees could detect a muncher and would excrete toxic levels of tannin into their leaves. They also emitted ethylene gas to alert fellow trees up to 50m away, which in turn produced the tannin. It's a way to ensure that the trees are not damaged from over-grazing. Isn't nature incredible?

Spotting the antelope reminded me of the traditional rural pastime of kudu dung-spitting contests. The ☺



record distance is 15.56 metres – take a bow Shaun van Rensburg of Addo. Herbivore pellets are like that, pretty clean and inoffensive. Crocodile and hyena dung is chalky from the bones they crush. As for big cat scat, it's top of the whiff charts, especially after a feed on a fresh kill.

"The warm wet red earth of Africa, the rocks and trees, gave off a strong heady scent," wrote Player. Along with woodsmoke, nothing is more evocative of African bushveld than the aroma of freshly wet soil. Without knowing it, his 'heady scent' may have been petrichor, a smell associated with rainfall after drought. It originates from oils exuded by plants during the dry season that are trapped in the ground to be released when the first rains come. The word itself is a poetic combination of *petra* (Greek for stone) with *ichor*, the fluid that flows like blood in the veins of Greek gods.

Player told tales of poachers who would avoid his game protection patrols through their ability to smell the faintest traces of cigarette smoke or soap. But even the finest masters of the bush arts are a league below animals in olfactory powers. Hyenas can smell carrion from up to 4km away. Elephants can sniff out water sources from 20km and research in Namibia has found that they can detect rain storms 200km away and move towards them, although

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British Airways flies
daily to Durban
from Jo'burg, Cape
Town, PE and
London.

it is not clear if this is through scent or sound.

The web of bushveld tracks we see in the landscape has another invisible layer of scent trails and territory markings that are clear to the noses of animals and experienced humans. Head guide Simphiwe told me that leopard urine smelt like popcorn. The musk of civet cats and other mammals was once an important fixative additive for human perfumes, now thankfully replaced by synthetic substances. These man-made versions are realistic enough to be used by researchers to attract big cats to camera traps.

Speaking of perfumes, it's best to keep those for evening when you're in the veld. Wearing them on a game drive or walk is as bad as shouting.

"I found myself hypnotised by... the warmth of the afternoon sun, and the smell of the bush.

"It wafted over the stream bed, the lingering scent from the ashes of the fire, mixed with dry white rhino dung, crushed leaves, mud, water, rocks and the tang of sweat on our khaki shirts."

By afternoon, I too felt hypnotised, my scent sense awoken – at least a little. At the villa, my tangy khakis were consigned to a basket. The quinine scent of the pool was irresistible. There would be time to rest before nightfall and all its foody fragrances. ■



NOT COOL, BRO