

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2006

CONTACT US

Phone: (707) 923-4205

Fax: (707) 923-1065

E-mail: indie@asis.com

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Tracker Chris Bader

Follow These Tracks

South African Trackers Join Dozens Of Experts at Redway Symposium

BY CRISTINA BAUSS

INDEPENDENT STAFF WRITER

Kalahari Bushmen at Camp Ravencliff?

Unlikely, but true: half a dozen visitors from South Africa were among the more than 60 trackers who attended a conference in Redway over the weekend, which featured presentations from some of the top experts in their respective fields. The event, sponsored by the International Society of Professional Trackers, was hosted by local tracker Kim Cabrera, and facilitated by ISPT Executive Director Del Morris.

Cabrera began tracking with her father at age 5, and has attended numerous training seminars over the last 15 years. She has also led hikes through Sanctuary Forest, and taught at College of the Redwoods. "There are trackers who are search-and-rescue people here, there are folks who are animal trackers, folks like me who are [both], military trackers, and law enforcement," she explained. "There are Bushmen trackers, and they're trained to use their tracking skills to monitor wildlife in the preserves in Africa, to [control] poaching activity and things like that. What we're doing is bringing together trackers from all these different venues, so we can learn from each other."

Wildlife Applications: Tracking Endangered Species

The keynote dinner address on Saturday was given by Louis Liebenberg, the designer of CyberTracker — an icon-based program that enables illiterate native trackers to record complex information about wildlife movements and behavior into GPS-equipped Palm Pilots, which are then used by researchers and park caretakers. CyberTracker is being used by trackers all over the world, from Siberia to Southern California, for a number of purposes — including the creation of wildlife corridors and legislation barring development in areas that are native to threatened and endangered species.

Liebenberg is the author of the acclaimed "The Art of Tracking, The Origin of Science," which posits the theory that tracking is the first scientific skill ever employed by humankind. He went to the Kalahari Desert to spend time with hunters who still use bows and arrows, eventually coming to the same conclusion drawn by many other modern scientists: that the notion of the "primitive brain" (i.e., "savage" cultures perceived as backwards by Western scientists for centuries) is a false one. "At that time, no one appreciated the sophistication of hunter-gatherer cultures, and the intellectual requirements of hunting," he explained.

Liebenberg, a South African, spoke movingly of the clash between traditional Bushman culture and the modern world, and the severe problems (including alcoholism) that they are confronting in the face of globalization. He saw a need for track-



Above, a group measures and identifies a circled animal track, as part of an exercise during a tracking conference at Camp Ravencliff over the weekend. At left, John-son Mhlanga, a Kalahari Bushman who grew up tracking animals in the wild both for food and for self-defense. He now works with the South African scientist and writer Louis Liebenberg, recording wildlife behavioral patterns.

CRISTINA BAUSS
THE INDEPENDENT

ing to be developed as a modern profession — so that the practice wouldn't die, and so that its practitioners would be able to earn a living within the parameters of their cultural values and outstanding skills. In South Africa, anti-poaching units receive invaluable assistance via the information collected using CyberTracker. "We've refined the software to make it really easy to use, and to make it easy for people to re-program it for specific wildlife needs," he said. It's even being used as the basis for non-wildlife applications, such as organic farming and disaster relief. Liebenberg's ultimate vision — "which will probably take 50 years," he laughed — is to combine traditional tracking skills and "a very efficient data-capture tool" to create an interconnected, worldwide database of animals and plants that is updated daily: the ultimate tool to help save a planet in peril.

Johnson Mhlanga, who grew up tracking animals in the Kalahari, gave one of the other three presentations from the South African contingent. He was working as a tracker for a national park in South Africa when he was first exposed to Liebenberg's work: "My plan was to be a tracker, and then become a ranger, but now I've decided to [remain] a tracker," he said. Mhlanga spoke positively of

the direction that it's taking as a profession, "especially when compared with other forms of work, like being in the offices," he laughed. "I want to promote tracking, and help others [find work as trackers]," he said. "It will help our world [in South Africa]... and many of the people in finding jobs."

For Mhlanga, it has opened up that world: "It's my first time coming to the United States," he said. "Even in South Africa, to come into Johannesburg, it was my first time, to arrange my visa to come to the U.S. It's very, very nice to [have] a different experience, compared to where I'm from." He admitted that he was "just a little bit scared" about the depth of knowledge represented by the trackers present, but was looking forward "to lending something here, because for me, everything is new... the terrain, the tracks of the animals here. But I think in two or three days' time I'll be used to it. We are hanging around with Mark Elbroch [author of "Mammal Tracks & Sign: A Guide to North American Species] from San Francisco, and he's showing us everywhere. I was happy yesterday when he showed us sea lions, something different... it was my first time, and that was fantastic!"

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Worldwide Tracking Experts Meet in Redway

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Dr. David Kowaleski's presentation touched on some of the same themes presented by Liebenberg, Mhlanga, and the other South African trackers. "I see tracking as a metaphor for life," said Kowaleski, a retired professor from western New York who has been tracking for 13 years. "It's a way to connect with our own life journey, following the tracks of others and comparing their life journey with ours." He has found that being outside is a way for his students to become "part of their natural landscape, instead of just visitors on campus... I think that's the only way we really should live."

For Jonah Evans and Ciel Wharton, both of whom recently received master's degrees from Texas A&M, tracking is a practical — and invaluable — way to train biologists in the field. They explained how a tracker evaluation developed by Liebenberg enabled the Texas Park & Wildlife Department to better assess its wildlife observers' qualifications, and how their skills improved during the time that they were evaluated. Adam Fox, a reserve police officer in Carlton, Oregon, said that he uses tracking in both his search-and-rescue work and to study nature.

Other presentations addressed topics such as track aging, useful to both wildlife observers and search-and-rescue

teams; following blood trails, a skill tied to, but entirely different from, following footprints in clay, dirt, or sand; trailing in the field; and human visual perception — how to train the human eye to search for specific patterns.

A Primeval Skill with A Place in the Present

Regardless of background and area of expertise, virtually all the trackers interviewed traced their fascination with it to childhood, and extolled its uses in a world that largely views it as an anachronism. "In my mind as a kid, I would think of myself as an Indian warrior, running through the woods," said Barry Martin, who conducts wildlife surveys in the Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve with the San Diego Tracking Team. "There's a mystical aspect to it that's very compelling... but it's used in modern times to pursue modern science, and craft planning decisions." Chris Bader, who works with Martin and is one of the founding members of the SDTT, had a similar experience as a child: after initially resisting a family move to Missoula, Montana when he was 11 or 12, he became enamored with the outdoors "and set out to get every merit badge possible, in outdoor lore, activities, camping, Indian lore... it [tracking] keeps me outdoors, keeps me active, and there's so much that we can learn from animals, and from the lore of our ancestors. So many societies today still depend on those ancient skills, and that's part of the fascination for me."

Several trackers decried the common view that tracking is no longer needed in the modern world: Fox said that, when asking fellow law-enforcement officers whether they've heard of it, a common response is "That's what we have K-9 dogs for... we don't need to follow footprints." They don't realize that there's another skill set available to them. Tracking as a whole isn't just following footprints on the ground; it is the fundamental awareness of what's going on in the local environment, and that can be anything from what happened in someone's kitchen [in a forensic investigation] to broken twigs, which way leaves are arranged."

The 2006 conference was the seventh annual event sponsored by the ISPT (www.ispt.org). According to Cabrera (www.beartrackersden.com), they're always held in areas that provide plenty of tracking opportunities (next year's forum will be held in Washington). As for what this year's guests thought of their surroundings? One of the African visitors may have summed it up best, in a written comment left during the event: "In Africa a giraffe is called 'Allulamithi,' 'taller than the trees.' Here it is called 'Panzimithi,' 'lower than the trees.'"