

# THE WORLD WILDERNESS CONGRESS, A CONTINUING STORY

BY VANCE MARTIN

The World Wilderness Congress (WWC) is a story of the need for wild nature and people to co-exist on our planet, and the challenges of building a global community that recognises the central, irreplaceable role of wilderness in human health and well-being. This is a challenge because doing so is a call to completely reframe human behaviour and thinking, from one of simply taking from nature solely for our own good, to one of being in a relationship with nature, of reciprocity and respect.

Such an ask places you at the front-edge of thought and action, territories sometimes difficult to clearly define to others, where status quo institutions often are intimidated, and where funding for such a nonprofit venture is never easy.

Our status quo is the human development model that continues to literally consume our world, and that is clearly unsustainable because it is based on one-way extractions of value(s) from nature. Our relationship with nature is based on a one-way 'taking' approach that is doomed to fail.

What's more, this status quo model is not just about taking, it is also about our failure to complete the cycle of life by fully reducing, reusing, and recycling our consumption. A nature-based economy cannot be one-way... it must be circular. The one-way model has caused us to foul our own nest, and the results of this

are coming home to roost: climate chaos, oceans of plastics, species extinction, harmful pesticides, and all the rest.

We can and must change this. And that is what the WWC is all about... positive change. To understand it, let's go back in time just a bit.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

The world was a very different place 50 years ago, in the 1960s. The Cold War was raging between Russia and the United States. The ill-fated Vietnam war was at its peak. China was swirling in a time of unrest. There was no internet, no computers, no fax or cell phones, and so, the 24-hour news cycle was not even a consideration. In South Africa, the national Apartheid Law ruled the nation – the legal and strict separation of the races, and subjugation of the black race.

During this era and under these conditions, the World Wilderness Congress was born in Africa. We were originally the result of the work of two men... white conservationist Ian Player and traditional Zulu chief, Magqubu Ntombela. Contrary to what the law allowed, their relationship was characterised by mutual respect, shared vision, and hardworking collaboration for nature and people. It also became a friendship of love and brotherhood. They demonstrated that "working together" works best for all people and for nature.

Working together in South Africa – and in opposition to the unjust Apartheid Law – they achieved many things.

They led the pioneering conservation team that saved the white rhino from extinction, developing never-before-used techniques, drugs, and equipment that is still the basis of large mammal capture and translocation. They created the first multi-racial environmental experience programme in South Africa. Ultimately, they created the 1<sup>st</sup> World Wilderness Congress in Johannesburg in 1977. This forum included all races, all professions, was international, scientific and yet culturally aware. It was the first time that indigenous people had major input into a global environmental forum, and also the first time a banker was a keynote presenter at such an event. And all of this occurred during, and in opposition to, the unjust Apartheid Law.

Fifteen years later, in 1992, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. In 1994, he became the President of South Africa and enthusiastically agreed to write an endorsement of *Zululand Wilderness: Shadow and Soul*, Ian Player's memoir of the work he and Magqubu had done together. President Mandela wrote:

*"This book is Ian Player's tribute to Magqubu Ntombela and their remarkable friendship that grew while working together in the wild. Their relationship and their commitment to each other and to the conservation of wilderness is a shining example of the true spirit of people in South Africa."*

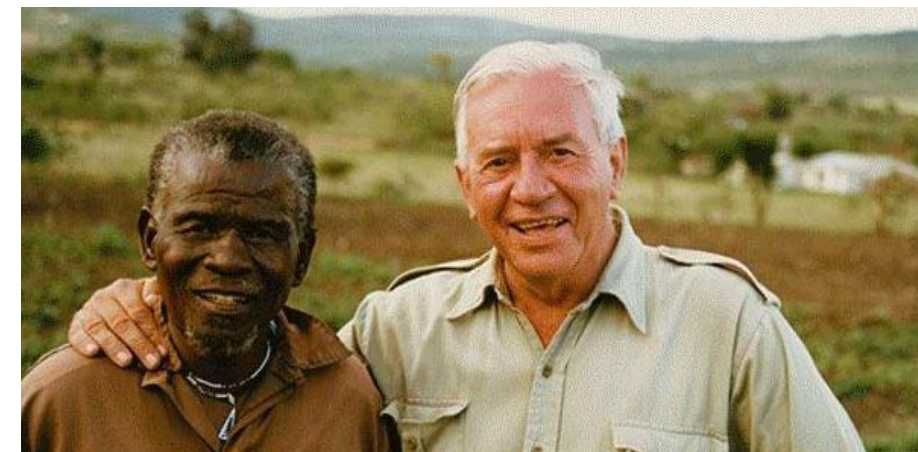
This is part of the founding story of the World Wilderness Congress and organisations such as the WILD Foundation and others that continue to steward the Congress. It clearly illustrates the principles and values that shaped our mission when we started in 1974, that continue to be at the very centre of all our organisation's work, and that especially guide the World Wilderness Congress. The principles are simple, and dedicate us to:

- Collaboration across cultures, races, nations and professions.
- Continual search for new, necessary, practical, and positive solutions that protect wild nature and meet the needs of people.
- The importance of culture – language, art, community and communications – combined with the very best policy, science and business to create the most effective solutions.

These principles have guided the collaborative process of the WWC that has been held 10 times around the world since 1977. It is these principles, and the commitment to producing practical, positive and inspiring results, that has drawn the participation of diverse people and professions: Heads of State such as the Prime Ministers of Australia and Norway, and the President of Mexico; Senior Ministers from some 40 nations; royalty such as the Queen of Spain, the House of Windsor, and Prince Albert II of Monaco; global/national/local policymakers; business leaders; top scientists; Nobel laureates; tribal elders; artists and writers; community members and students; young professionals; and more.

These delegates to the WWC built the substance and created the many outcomes of the WWC. Over 40 years, they turned it into the longest running, most successful, international, public process on the environment, with a globally recognised slate of practical accomplishments, some of which include:

- Initiating the process that would lead to the World Bank's Global Environmental Facility (GEF), the largest funder of environmental projects around the globe.
- Creation and implementation of the North American Inter-Governmental Committee on Cooperation for Wilderness and Protected Areas Conservation.
- Creation of International League of Conservation Photographers (ILCP), International League of Conservation Writers (ILCW) and numerous targeted, outcome-oriented NGOs.
- Dozens of new public and private Protected Areas covering millions of acres of land.
- Multi-lateral efforts to restore and protect trans-national wild areas on land and sea.
- is the most cost-effective and efficient way to address climate breakdown and species extinction. Nature does this very well on her own.
- meets human needs and also respects the spirit of nature.
- safeguards "natural capital", our "nature bank" that can provide benefits to us forever.
- assures continuation of the life support systems provided by wild nature, such as clean air and water, new foods and medicines, stable temperatures, and personal and cultural renewal.
- builds and maintains resilience, ecological strength, to offset the destabilising, chaotic impacts of climate change.
- creates new economic opportunities and livelihoods called nature-based



ABOVE The remarkable friendship between Ian Player and Zulu chief Magqubu Ntombela, then illegal under Apartheid Law, resulted in the birth of the World Wilderness Congress.

FACING PAGE Since 1977, when the first World Wilderness Congress was held in South Africa, 11 Congresses have taken place across the world, setting a platform for global collaboration to protect wild nature.

Each Congress has many aspects. It starts with events and consultations that take place in the host country over a year or more, leading to the Congress convening. At the Congress itself, the results are reviewed and announced, there are science and training sessions, cultural exhibitions, gatherings of ethnic leaders, a public expo of conservation photography; arts and business initiatives; involvement of local schools; media and communications programmes; and more.

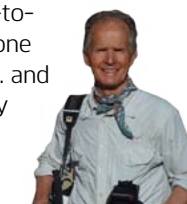
A central focus of the WWC is the irreplaceable importance of wilderness to the health and well-being of people. Protecting wilderness is important for many reasons, because it:

- is the most cost-effective and efficient way to address climate breakdown and species extinction. Nature does this very well on her own.
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- safeguards "natural capital", our "nature bank" that can provide benefits to us forever.
- assures continuation of the life support systems provided by wild nature, such as clean air and water, new foods and medicines, stable temperatures, and personal and cultural renewal.
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- creates new economic opportunities and livelihoods called nature-based

solutions, with initiatives such as new types of tourism and restoring land and seascapes.

Protecting all of these benefits that are provided by wilderness helps to maintain an overall type of "life insurance" for all life on Earth, including of course, our human species. The cost to pay for this life insurance policy is easy to describe, and therefore not always easy to accomplish! Changing human behaviour is a simple answer with a tough formula... patience, persistence, and perseverance. Successfully applying the formula produces an irrepressible, locally-based, globally active public movement that understands the importance of establishing the right relationship with nature, knows that the time is now, and clearly accepts that we are on the right side of history.

This is the continuing story of the World Wilderness Congress. People-to-nature and people-to-people. There is only one direction for us to go... and let's go on this journey together. It's a great time to be alive. 🐾



Vance Martin is the President of the WILD Foundation, he is the face of one of the world's most respected programmes, the World Wilderness Congress. Author and prolific writer, he directs and works with groups and individuals who lobby and campaign on issues related to biodiversity protection and climate change.

## PAST CONGRESSES

