

What to do if the large predators on your reserve are preying on your game animals and compromising their breeding capacities? Or conversely, if you own a property on which, in the absence of large predators, your game animals are breeding merrily and putting pressure on the available grazing? These were problems facing two neighbouring reserves in the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve in Limpopo, South Africa. The solution, **Jane Goodfellow** discovered, could be the start of something big.

problem shared, *problem solved*

Ka'Ingo is a Big Five private game reserve covering 8 464 hectares in an area of spectacular natural beauty, abundant wildlife and rich cultural history. Wildlife conservation and responsible tourism go hand in hand here, and luxurious accommodation provides a more-than-comfortable base from which to explore. Its occupancy also generates funding for the breeding of endangered white rhino, sable antelope, cheetah and disease-free buffalo, as well as for a leopard-release project. Under the management of Nick Callichy, Ka'Ingo is home to an abundance of wildlife, including a large number of birds. Additional interest is provided by several rock art sites that are testimony to centuries of human occupation of the area. Callichy told us a few things about game reserve management that most people are blissfully unaware of. I was surprised to learn that grazing areas need to be mown occasionally to encourage new green shoots, as not only is dry grass unpalatable to grazers, but the shade it creates when it falls over prevents the growth of new grass. And one of the challenges faced by the reserve's team is that warthogs cause endless damage to fences by excavating escape

routes beneath them. These holes have to be constantly filled to prevent cheetahs and lions from escaping onto neighbouring properties. He also explained, 'If you know the size of your reserve and that each large stock unit (the equivalent of a cow-sized animal, like an eland) requires 14 hectares of grazing, doing a few simple sums will give you the veld's optimum carrying capacity. A well-managed game reserve carries



JANE GOODFELLOW (3)

ABOVE When the fence between Ka'Ingo Private Reserve and its neighbour comes down, the food supply for lions and other large predators will be hugely increased.

BELOW Two of the Mokolo River Nature Reserve staff at the 10-kilometre fence separating the properties. In July, this boundary is to be dismantled.



Predatory pressure will be alleviated for Ka'Ingo's game animals, such as this giraffe, when the fence comes down.

slightly less than this so that in times of drought there will be no starvation.' Occasionally, when they are available, Ka'Ingo's surplus animals are sold, but currently predators are more than controlling the populations of game animals – they're making very heavy inroads into them.

Ka'Ingo's neighbour, the 8 000-hectare Mokolo River Nature Reserve, is managed by a determined German woman, Heidi Behr, and is not open to the public. It is home to large numbers of successfully proliferating game animals – but no large predators.

So the problem is that one reserve has an over-supply of predators and its neighbour has none. It took three people with a passion for wildlife and a lot of foresight – Behr, Callichy and Ka'Ingo's owner, Mac van der Merwe – to come up with a solution. In an unselfish and mutually beneficial move, they agreed to join forces and, by lowering a common boundary fence, create a larger reserve in which predators control the herds of game animals, alleviating the pressure on the grazing.

On 4 April 2009, after many months of negotiating and much excitement, they signed an agreement to combine their properties into a 16 464-hectare reserve for the benefit of the animals. This was the first huge step in the formation of the new Greater Mokolo Nature Reserve, and the first time that such a partnership has been formed in Limpopo. Hopefully, more

such agreements will continue to expand the Greater Mokolo Nature Reserve, with enormous potential benefits for the region's biodiversity, conservation, ecotourism and surrounding communities.

Already Callichy, Van der Merwe and Behr are discussing the incorporation of the 4 000-hectare provincial Mokolo Dam Nature Reserve with Fixon Hlungwani, general manager of the reserve and of Limpopo Parks and Tourism. Once the Mokolo Dam reserve has been re-registered under Limpopo Parks and Tourism (it is currently registered under the defunct Transvaal Provincial Administration), an agreement can be signed. Three other neighbouring game farm owners have expressed interest in removing common boundary fences, sharing the dream of one day seeing a reserve in the Waterberg that will rival Kruger National Park in extent and diversity, with the added appeal of being malaria free.

The next, much anticipated step in the birth of the Greater Mokolo Nature Reserve will take place on 11 July, with the removal of 10 kilometres of boundary fencing. Some six kilometres of the fence lies along the Mokolo River, and taking it down will allow large numbers of animals access to the watercourse and surrounding plains for the first time. Staff members of both reserves are eager to see how the animals will react to their expanded ranges, and only the presence of Ka'Ingo's lions deters them from camping out to watch them take their first tentative steps into new territory.

Some exciting things are happening in the Waterberg, and the conservation of its biodiversity seems to be in excellent hands. ■

Against the odds

When Heidi Behr came to Africa from Germany, she fell in love with the wildlife and bought an old cattle farm with the intention of starting a reserve – a daunting task for someone with no scientific training or game reserve experience. Against the advice of seasoned elephant conservationists, she adopted six unrelated, traumatised young elephants that had been orphaned by a culling programme in Kruger National Park. When they arrived, one little bull was so terrified he just sat and screamed, while a young cow, although tranquillised, rushed out of the transport crate in a temper and charged a tree. She then turned on the crate, causing the handler sitting on it to jump for his life.

Behr kept the orphans in a boma for several months to allow them to settle down and avoided touching them in an effort to keep them wild. As they were already weaned, she provided them with lucerne, game pellets and branches of indigenous vegetation. Much to the astonishment of the experts, when the elephants were released they formed a cohesive herd and have started breeding. Lack of experience – young mother elephants learn how to nurse their calves from older matriarchs – probably led to the death of the first calf, but two more have since been born and are doing well.

Mac van der Merwe, owner of Ka'Ingo, and Heidi Behr of Mokolo River Nature Reserve sign the agreement to join their properties.

