

Ingwelala Work Party Pilot Project

In March of 2014 a few of my overseas guests and I booked a guided walk with our fearless ranger Mark. Apart from being able to explore Ingwelala on foot, we came across a few prickly pear cacti. Mark informed us that the prickly pears had quite a wide distribution on the property.

Inspired by the work of other conservation organisations, I suggested that we organise a focused work group to tackle the problem of this invading species. This suggestion found some favourable support from the Board and a few months later a small group of volunteers was ready to get their hands dirty.

On Thursday afternoon, 23 October, Monique, Alison, Uli and I arrived at Ingwelala and took the rest of the day to acclimatise to the environment. Mark joined the evening proceedings and we discussed the set-up of the next day's activity.

Bright and early we all met up at the work shop where we received our instructions and met up with the rest of the team, which included our dedicated supervisor, Gladman, who was instructed with teaching us the ropes of eradicating the cacti, and Thanks, who was employed to ensure that we were safe at all times. Once the poison was mixed and the tools were handed out, we drove off to our work station.

The object of the work party was to try and poison as many prickly pear plants as possible. This encompassed punching holes into the stem and filling these with poison. Because any part of the prickly pear can regenerate and grow its own roots, it was important to also inject every leaf with its own dose of poison. Armed with pitch forks, syringes and a GPS, we headed out into the veld.





We parked our vehicle at Hyena Dam and proceeded on foot from there. Very quickly did it become evident that this was a task not to be taken lightly as we inspected both fresh lion and rhino spoor around the dam. We were quite glad to have our competent and armed field ranger close by our side.

Apart from trying to treat as many individual cacti as possible, being on foot lets one appreciate the smaller aspects of the bush veld that one does not get to witness from a vehicle. We often deliberated about who made a particular spoor or who left a particular scat on the path. But quite soon we were shown the reality of being in a Big 5 area and that you can never let your guard down. Fortunately our 6 foot 6 inches tall supervisor spotted the approaching bull elephant and quickly got the group together. The elephant thankfully showed very little interest in us and continued on his merry way as we enjoyed this remarkable sighting. Another special experience was a herd of about 20 wildebeest that made its way past us. At first the wildebeest were not aware of our presence. We stood completely still as the wildebeest approached. When about half the herd had passed about 20 meters from us, one slightly more alert animal took scent of us and called the alarm. That caused the whole herd to scatter off in various directions. It is very seldom that one is able to get so close to animals such as these when being on foot. Apart from these two incidences, we were spoilt with seeing impala as well as kudu, not to mention the countless number of birds constantly around us.

On day 2 we continued the efforts and later in the day focussed on the section closer to the river. While working, we couldn't drop the feeling that we were being watched. This was reinforced by the constant strong scent of fresh elephant urine. But despite our senses being on constant high alert, no elephant was to be seen. This does create a certain feeling of uneasiness, and despite these animals being the largest on land, it is amazing how easily they hide among the bushes and trees. Hurrying up our efforts and fearing the sudden appearance of a bull in musth, we called it a day and made our way back to the vehicle. Our suspicions were confirmed when we got back to the vehicle and saw the clear evidence that an elephant had been around. The ground was visibly disturbed

directly in front of car as the elephant had left his mark. I have no doubt that this mighty beast just wanted to give us a small reminder that we are on his turf and that he was watching us. Despite us working never more than about 100m from the vehicle, this elephant remained as hidden as a scrub hare in the grass. Seeing this, we were happy to have made it back to the relative safety of our vehicle, and we headed back to camp.

The object of this weekend was not only to address a part of the prickly pear infestation that Ingwelala suffers from, but more importantly to be a pilot project for the possibility of arranging regular work parties of a similar nature at Ingwelala. There are many similar conservation activities that will allow for volunteers to get their hands dirty. In any managed conservation area, there is far more work behind the scenes that goes unnoticed by the visitors than what most people realise.

With the cooperation from the Board and the staff of Ingwelala, the intention is to set up similar work parties for the members and their guests for the future. With conservation being highlighted in the last member's survey as one of the more important functions of Ingwelala, work parties of this nature will give the members an opportunity for a hands-on contribution in these efforts of conserving "Our little piece of Africa". Apart from completing the actual work, these work parties will give the members and their guests a unique way of experiencing and interacting with nature, as well as bonding with fellow and like-minded hobby environmentalists. The only requirements are a healthy dose of enthusiasm.

Once confirmed, the dates, planned activities and set-up of the next work parties will be placed on the website. For further questions, please feel free to contact myself, Uwe Hohl, at druwehohl@gmail.com .