

# The soul of KZN explored by Player

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*Men, rivers and canoes* by Ian Player (Echoing Green Press, R240)

THIS republication of Ian Player's account of the epic conquering of the Umsindusi and Umgeni rivers by canoe in the early 1950s is more than an account of grit, endurance and courage; it is also an exploration of the soul of KwaZulu-Natal, an account of Player's personal immersion in wilderness and the spiritual strength he draws from it.

Player was to become Chief Conservator of the Natal Parks Board (as it was then), a driving force in the successful project to rescue the white rhino from the edge of extinction; a pioneer of wilderness trails that drew thousands of people into his philosophy; a founder of the Wilderness Leadership School; and an international authority on conservation and the ethos of wilderness.

His inspiration came from the experience of paddling for days on end in a cramped and unstable canoe, gliding past the most magnificent scenery – mountain crags, riverine forest, the fields of African communities, crocodiles, hippos, the full proliferation of tropical and subtropical birdlife, as he added the wild Umkomaas and Pongola rivers to his itinerary.

The paddling and gliding alternated, of course, with shooting rapids, overturning, almost drowning, scrambling over rocks, freezing and starving. When he was the only person to complete the first Dusi marathon to Durban, he did so crippled with pain and vomiting, having been bitten by a night adder. This was tough ecotourism.

## Crocodiles

I was particularly struck by Player's near-lyrical account of his trip down the Pongola with fellow-conservationist Ken Tinley where, on the water, vulnerable and nowhere near the top of the food chain – crocodiles abounded – they encountered the full mystic thrall of Tongaland (now known as Maputaland).

In the same account he laments the proposed building of the Pongolapoort Dam; the commercial agriculture, and human settlement that would follow – the destruction of wilderness.

Forty-odd years later, the dam is there. But St Lucia and Mapelane have been rescued from dune mining after public protest in which he was prominent. St Lucia is a World Heritage Site and the development of a vast wetland park is a flagship project.

The Maputaland elephants are protected in a game reserve, along with the rest of the Big Five. The fences are to be dropped, re-establishing the great game migration trails between Maputaland and Mozambique.

Conservancies and private game farms are to be found all over KwaZulu-Natal, not least the privately owned Zululand Rhino Reserve, near Mkhuze, which international and local conservationists are using as the core of a project to rescue the black rhino, the way Player and his companions rescued the white rhino all those years ago.

It would be interesting to know how he views the overall balance sheet. The ethic of conservation has established itself in a way that seemed impossible at the time. Player and his rangers met unremitting hostility from certain politicians, ranching interests and influential people who considered hunting wild game to be their basic right.

Player and his fellow rangers changed the course of things, they touched the lives of many people.

It is extraordinary that the workaday canoe should have played such a part in it.