

# Lure of the leopard

HOW MY LAST VACATION GIVES A WHOLE NEW MEANING TO THE CONCEPT OF ECO-TOURISM. BY SCOTT SALZMAN

# A

*Land Rover is hurrying down a rutted dirt road – little more than a pair of tyre tracks carved into the thorn forest. The driver stops at a crossroad, reaches behind him and fiddles with an antenna and what looks like a CB radio. He's tracking a leopard. When the signal indicates that she's close he'll attempt to spot her and record her precise movements and position using Geographical Positioning System (GPS) equipment.*

Am I describing last night's National Geographic episode? No, I'm describing the daily routine of the Phinda leopard project in South Africa. I know because for two weeks last summer I was riding in the passenger seat of that Land Rover.

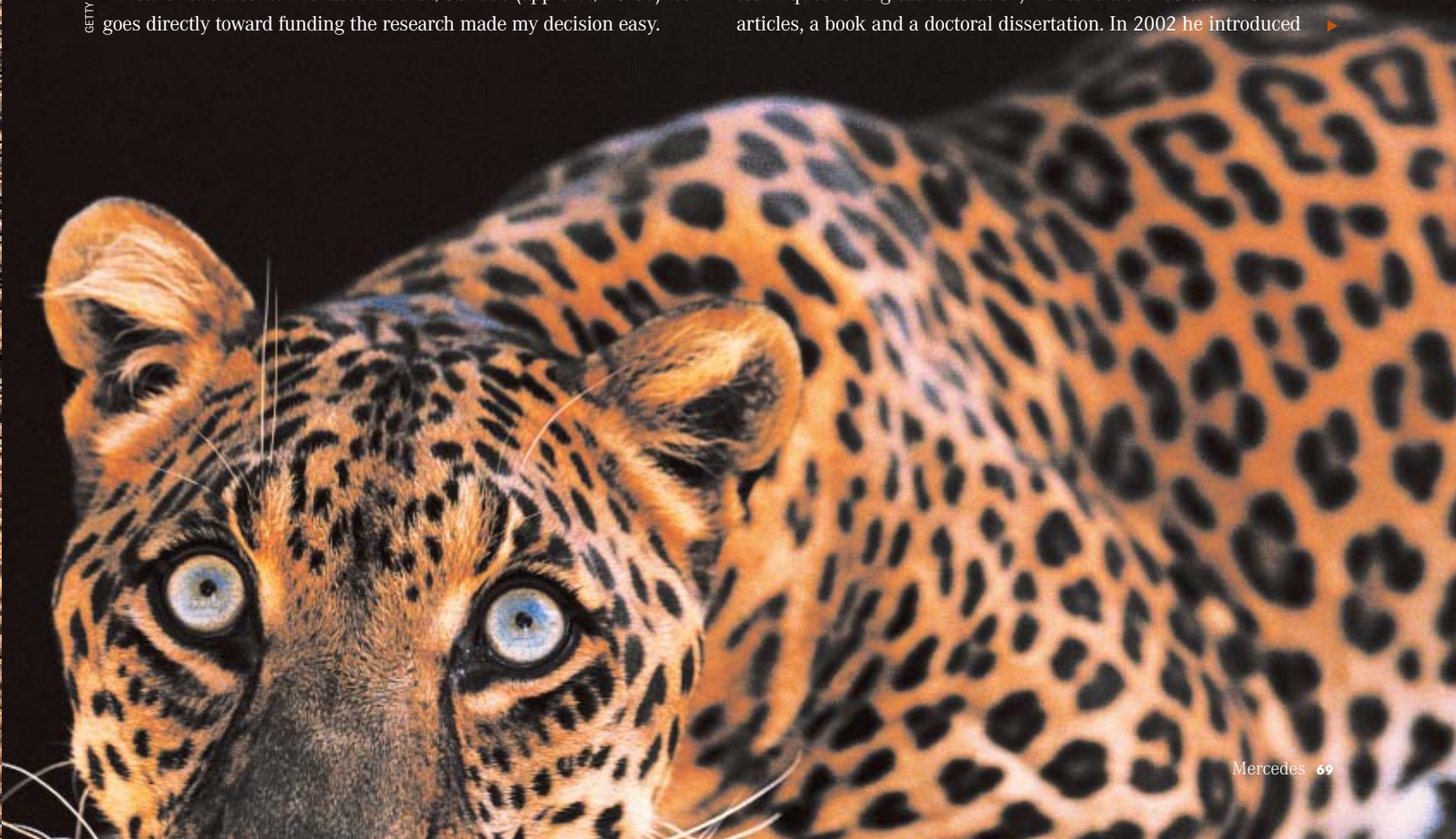
I first heard about the project through a message posted to an email discussion group. I'm not your typical 'adventure travel' or 'eco-tourism' type. I'm a librarian and computer systems manager from New York. I'd been reading about wild cat conservation and there, on the computer screen in front of me, was an opportunity for me to get hands-on experience. My 40th birthday was coming up and I figured I could either put a deposit on a red SLK 320 or I could break the mould and go live out a dream in Africa for two weeks. The fact that the \$US2660 (approx. \$A4730) fee goes directly toward funding the research made my decision easy.



What is the Phinda leopard project? Developed by South Africa's stock market-listed CC Africa, Phinda Game Reserve has a worldwide reputation as one of southern Africa's premier wildlife viewing destinations and hosts some of the nation's most upmarket safari lodge accommodation. Located in the KwaZulu-Natal province about 560km south-east of Johannesburg, Phinda covers 17,000 hectares and now hosts all the 'Big Five' – lion, leopard, elephant, white rhino and Cape buffalo – as well as dozens of other species including cheetahs, spotted hyenas, giraffes, zebras, nyalas and impalas.

Amazingly, only a decade ago, its most common species was the domestic cow raised mainly by white-owned commercial cattle farms. The eco-tourism developers of Phinda removed the cattle and set about reintroducing the big game, which had originally roamed the area. When the time came to add big cats – lions and cheetahs – they recruited Australian Luke Hunter, then a graduate student at the University of Pretoria. No one had attempted reintroducing big cats on such a scale, so this was an opportunity for the first serious investigation of whether it could work.

In those early years, from 1992–1996, as well as revealing the best techniques for big cat restoration, Hunter's work led to numerous articles, a book and a doctoral dissertation. In 2002 he introduced



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## CARL CAN UNFAILINGLY IDENTIFY AN ANIMAL IN THE DARK BY THE REFLECTION OF THE LIGHT IN ITS EYES

► this novel form of eco-tourism to entirely fund the costs of leopard preservation at Phinda. He continues administering the program from his base at Monash University in Melbourne.

The versatile leopard survived in the region through decades of cattle farming, despite their territories being fragmented by barbed wire fences, and continued hunting, trapping and poisoning by farmers. Phinda is still beset by these old problems. Cattle farms jostle for space along its borders and farmers still shoot leopards. Phinda has electrified fencing securing its entire boundary but the ever-resourceful leopards scramble under it or jump over. Most likely, they're just heading for other nearby reserves but they have to run the gauntlet of the farms to reach them and many are shot every year. The research project is collaring leopards to protect them. The radio collars provide data showing which areas leopards frequent and why. Over time, this will identify areas that might need special protection to ensure the species persists. In other cases it may be used to show farmers leopards are not a threat that needs eliminating as they are just passing through their land. If hunting is as prevalent as some authorities fear, the data will reveal the numbers. Without the collars, this would all be guesswork; the leopard's future would be a lottery.

*I grab a last sip of coffee, sling my camera over my shoulder and help Carl Walker, the project's research assistant, load our gear into the Land Rover. Alongside the ever-present two spare tyres and two Jerry-cans of petrol go the radio-tracking receiver, the half-million candlepower spotlight, an impala carcass, and the tranquiliser dart gun kit. Tonight will probably be a long night – we're hoping to dart and collar another leopard – so we also pack a dinner, of sorts. Later tonight we'll snack on hard-boiled eggs, in the middle of the South African bush, illuminated by a full moon with hyenas yowling in the distance.*

*The radio crackles. One of the rangers, out on an evening game drive with some lodge guests has seen a large male leopard. "Confirm it's Six-two?" asks Carl. Leopards are identified by the number of marks on the top row of their whisker pads; our target leopard tonight has six spots on his right whisker pad and two spots on his left one. "Affirmative" comes the answer. "It's definitely him." Off we go, racing through the night, over a network of unmarked roads that Carl knows like the back of his hand. My role, as we drive, is to sweep the beam of the spotlight back and forth across the road, and into the surrounding bush. Carl can unfailingly identify an animal in the dark by the reflection of the light in its eyes and we might spot a leopard by its eye-shine.*

*Suddenly, the Land Rover slows. Without a word Carl reaches for the spotlight and I place it in his hand. His eyes never leave the road. In the dead of night, at 55 km/h, he's spotted leopard tracks. "They're very fresh. He's right ahead of us," Carl says. The Land Rover creeps slowly along. "There he is!" I say as quietly as my excitement will allow. With that otherworldly way that leopards have, the big male called Six-two materialises on the road ahead of us. As long as we don't get too close – no nearer than 35 metres – he's completely indifferent to our vehicle. He pauses and sits at the edge of the road and I take the opportunity to snap a photo. The challenge will be to get close enough to dart him. And Carl is worried that we're right up against the boundary fence.*

*"He wants to go through that damned hole," says Carl, pointing to a shallow dugout under the fence, probably the work of warthogs. "If he goes underneath, we won't see him again tonight." Indeed, the stakes are much higher. The other side of the fence belongs to the area's most notorious shooter of leopards. "We've got to block the hole and hope we can draw him to a bait and dart him," says Carl. He swings the Land Rover along the fence-line and we inch past Six-two. "Grab my toolbox!" whispers Carl. With the Land Rover between the leopard and the fence, I carefully lean over the side of the vehicle and wrestle the 25kg metal case in front of the opening. "Looks good," says Carl. "Let's back off and set the bait." We move off a short distance, enough so that the wary Six-two can't see us, and wire the impala carcass to a tree. Without the incentive of bait we'd never get an opportunity to dart the leopard.*

*We climb back into the Land Rover and roll slowly toward the area where we left Six-two. We both see it at the same time. A shallow opening under the fence and nearby one heavy blue toolbox, lying upended, its contents strewn across the road. The big leopard had brushed it aside as though it were a doorstep. The missed opportunity to collar Six-two is disappointing to me but it's a greater loss for the leopard project.*

We never do get Six-two but a few weeks later, back home in the US, I hear from Carl. With other volunteers assisting, he finally darted the male and fitted the precious collar. They discovered that he'd recently been shot – fortunately, a scattering of shotgun pellets to the face and neck that caused no serious damage. I still wonder if it happened the night he eluded me. With radio-collar in place, Six-two's chances are a lot better, but that's only the beginning. Carl knows of at least nine more leopards that leave the reserve and all are destined for collaring. I'm already planning a return-trip. ■■■

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**TO JOIN THE PHINDA LEOPARD PROJECT >> Contact:** Dr Luke Hunter, Dept of Biological Sciences, Monash University, PO Box 18, Victoria, 3800  
**Email:** [lukehunter@dodo.com.au](mailto:lukehunter@dodo.com.au) >> **Website:** [www.wildaboutcats.org/internship.htm](http://www.wildaboutcats.org/internship.htm) >> **When:** 15 volunteer expeditions each run for two weeks throughout the year. Only two volunteer places are available at any one time to ensure participant 'hands-on' experience. >> **Travel:** Volunteers are responsible for their own transportation to/from Johannesburg. From there, a shuttle flight is provided to/from the field site. >> **Accommodation:** A comfortable bedroom in a self-contained farmhouse. >> **Cost:** \$A4730.00 includes accommodation, site costs and the transfer flight to/from Johannesburg



Scott Salzman (inset, page 69) tells his story. Clockwise from top: An unnamed leopard; Phinda staffer Matthias Wessels weighs Six-two when Carl caught him after Scott's visit - the big cat came in at 60kg; One-two in Matthias's spotlight; Luke Hunter (left) with Carl Walker and Four-three.

