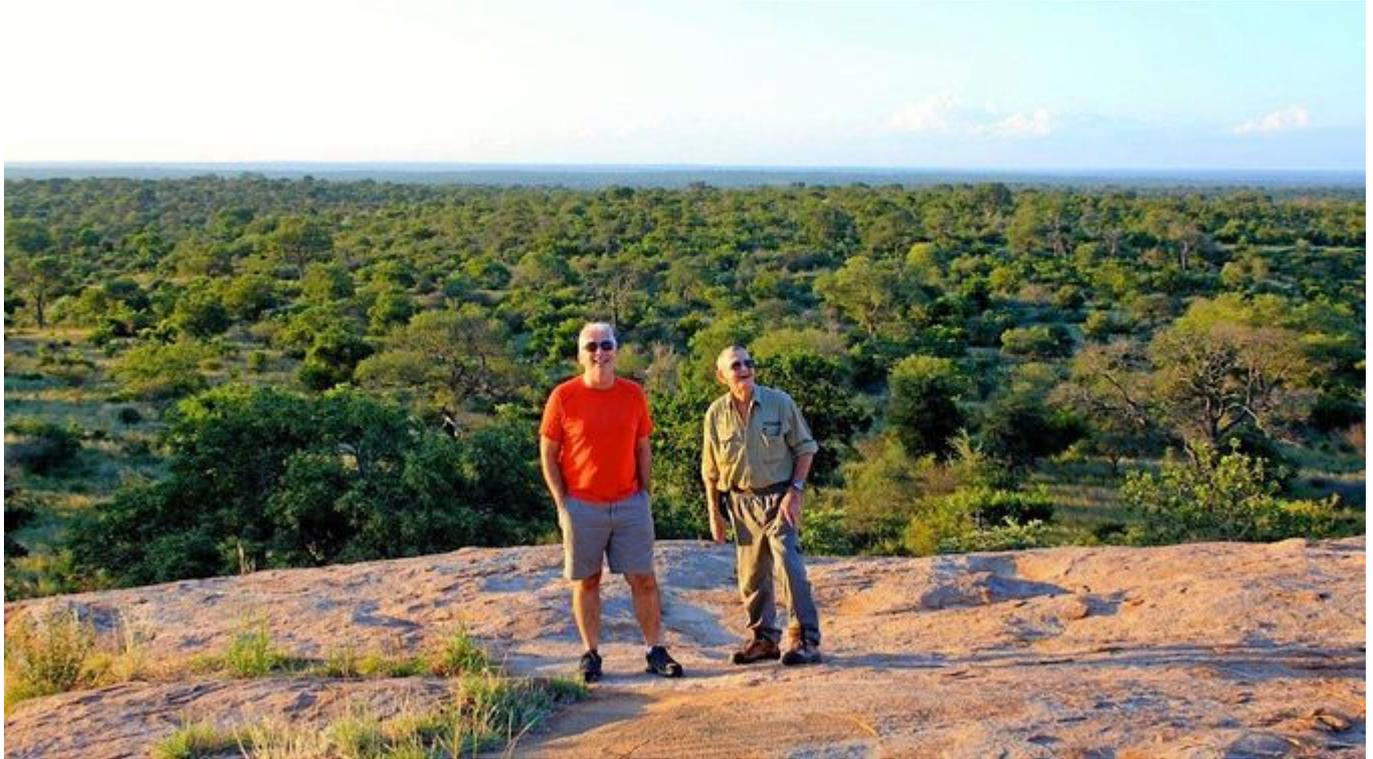


Bob Irwin takes a walk on the African wild side



Bob Irwin with Kevin Todd, who was his guide during his visit to Kruger National Park.

<https://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/bob-irwin-takes-a-walk-on-the-african-wild-side/3177238/>

by Bob Irwin

EARLIER this year I received an invitation from the University of the Sunshine Coast to be a guest of USC International on the journey of a lifetime.

In March, I was given the chance to experience the wilds of South Africa at one of their many international projects. Projects that I was surprised to hear were even on offer to students today.

Back in my day, education involved sitting in a classroom and that was it.

I was particularly interested to discover that their international study program encompassed a number of unique wildlife conservation projects that have taken high precedence within their organisation.

One of them was giving a facelift to the Letaba Elephant Hall, a much-loved elephant education centre in the heart of Kruger National Park.

It became the purpose of my visit to attend it's much-awaited grand opening.

As a wildlife enthusiast, visiting Africa was a dream I've had for as long as I can remember; a chance to encounter some of the world's most threatened species on the planet at close range.

Despite my initial excitement, I had some reservations. I'm now 77-years-of-age and I had to weigh up the realities of that.



Bob Irwin was amazed by what he found in Kruger National Park.

The last time I went on a long-haul flight was back in 1992 for Steve's wedding in the States. Back then air travel was reasonably different. Airport security wasn't as complicated to navigate, liquids weren't considered suspicious and you could smoke up the back of the plane!

I knew my greatest challenge would be sitting still for the 14-hour flight confined to my seat.

I don't do idle hands well. But the lure of the experience ahead was too good to pass up and before I knew it I had a renewed passport, bought a plane ticket and had a bag packed ready to go.

I won't lie when I say that on more than one occasion I wished I had a paintbrush and a tin of paint to keep me occupied on that flight. I reckon I could have painted the whole interior of that plane by the journey's end!

But it's true what they say; there is no gain without a little bit of pain and the experiences that awaited us were more than worth it.



On safari in the park.

Wildlife in abundance |

When we entered through the first security checkpoint of the gazetted 19,500 square km Kruger National Park, what surprised me most of all was the abundance of wildlife we sighted in such a short time.

Before we set off, I imagined it would take the entire trip to seek out the "big five" but within the first hour I was in awe to have already encountered some of the most impressive animals I'd come to see.

Majestic African elephants and their calves crossing the road just metres from the car.

Hippos lazing about in the water.

A hyena scurrying off into the bush.

The arid landscapes of the park outside of our window reminded me of parts of my wildlife expeditions to Far North Queensland. Although the vegetation seemed familiar, the kind of wildlife that inhabited it couldn't be more different.

There were so many weird and wonderful animals that could and would eat you given half a chance.

Child safety lock |

"Enter at your own risk" is the policy within the park.

Associate Director of USC International, Kevin Todd, was my personal guide for the trip.

The "click-click" noise of the child-safety-lock mechanism in the rental car became a bit of a laugh on our daily safari drives in the wilderness of the park. I think Kevin knew as well as I did that if a Black Mamba or a Spitting Cobra slithered across the dirt road, then curiosity would get the better of me in the end and I'd be out of the car in a flash.

When I see something of interest back home, I immediately like to get out of the car for a closer inspection and you can guarantee that tenfold when it comes to any variety of reptile.

But within the park, you heed those rules and that's for very good reason. The abundance of apex predators across that landscape kept me unfamiliarly inside the vehicle at all times.

I'll admit when I saw a juvenile Nile crocodile basking on the bank one day, I was reasonably tempted. But then I remembered the night before eyeballing a leopard at close range and observing three hyenas wandering out of someone's driveway, so common sense quickly prevailed.



Bob with Kevin Moore from SANParks at the Letaba Elephant Hall's opening day.

Kevin was the perfect host and I'll forever be grateful for the time he took to show me his favourite parts of the park.

It became clear to me that this wasn't just work for him as the design project director for the Letaba Elephant Hall. Over the years he has developed a personal passion for the wildlife and people he has encountered working on these kinds of global wildlife projects.

How could he not?

Letaba Elephant Hall exhibition opening |

After seven years in the making with more than 40 USC design students directly contributing in the field, the day finally came to re-open the Letaba Elephant Hall to the general public.

I was personally blown away by the final result as I stepped inside the doors of this beautifully-restored building. Not only to see the immaculate displays of known "giant tuskers" and their mammoth preserved ivory tusks securely bolted into the walls, but to learn how important this facility was as an educational stronghold within the park.

The attendance of senior South Africa National Parks staff, USC Vice-Chancellor and president Greg Hill, representatives from the Australian High Commission and other important stakeholders like the many volunteer honorary rangers, was testament enough to how significant this project was on so many levels.

But what impressed me most of all was to see a Sunshine Coast facility prepared to collaborate with an organisation in a foreign country to further the cause of conservation globally.

When you think about the tens of thousands of visitors that will pass through that exhibition annually, you don't get a much better platform for conservation than that.

It is an absolutely amazing achievement that I hope they will continue well into the future implementing similar projects all over the world.



Those tusks are from some of Kruger National Park's best-known tuskers who have died from natural causes or poaching. They are bolted to the walls for security.

A day in the life |

Certainly, the most eye-opening part of the entire trip was the chance to meet the dedicated individuals behind Kruger National Park that are committed to its ongoing protection.

I felt so privileged to have the chance for many people in their varied and interesting roles to take me into their world and show me around.

I was invited behind the scenes to visit the orphaned rhino enclosures which house the latest victims of poaching. The high security location and briefing we received was proof of just how serious they take the issue of the protection of their most endangered and sought-after species.

I was later invited into anti-poaching HQ. This floored me as I looked at a GIS map of the entire park, showing every bit of activity happening across its vastness in real-time on a big screen.

Here I learnt that the park is divided into grid-like sections for around-the-clock observation by military-trained rangers and anti-poaching patrols.

On any one section there could be up to 80 rangers allocated.

This wasn't your ordinary wildlife protection act, this was a war - a war on the illegal wildlife trade which today sits second to drug trafficking.

I was both saddened and reassured by the lengths gone to by the authorities in order to keep the most at-risk wildlife safe from the high demand for ivory-fuelled by the black-market trade.

An ongoing and widespread battle that I now understand is more complicated to tackle than I first imagined.

I was heartened by the passion shared by each and every department I got to meet from the botanist in charge of growing endangered tree seedlings to the young man I met in charge of the logistics of tending to any rescue within the park.

Imagine being in charge of relocating an entire herd of African elephants. The heavy equipment and logistics required of such an operation truly blew me away.

It was certainly worlds away from our own National Parks and Wildlife department.



The chance to get up close and personal with some of the world's most endangered wildlife is an experience I will never forget.

Thank you |

Eight days in Africa certainly wasn't enough time to see it all but what I did will never ever leave me.

I sincerely encourage anyone who has been dreaming of observing the wildlife of other worlds; in particular those with an endangered status, to take the opportunity while you still have the chance. You never know when it might be your last prospect of seeing a Black rhino or an African elephant in this current climate of poaching and habitat loss threatening all wildlife worldwide.

I can't thank the staff from USC International enough for giving me such an insight into the wonderful work they do overseas.

I am so impressed to know that a Queensland-born educational facility has their sights set on many more international projects just like the Letaba Elephant Hall right around the globe with a focus on conservation through some truly exciting education.

What a time in our world to be a student and to literally have the world at your feet.