



NTSHONDWE

CEO OF EZEMVELO KZN WILDLIFE, DR. BANDILE MKHIZE

THE SURROUNDING MOUNTAINS FLICKERED LIKE THE BEGINNING OF AN OLD BLACK AND WHITE FILM. The distant army of weather had built quickly and the late afternoon had blackened into night. The wind picked up and I pulled the blanket around me and waited.

The water seemed to collapse from the sky. The rain overwhelmed all my senses, accompanied by the crusty smell of dry winter soil. In no time that distant shimmering of lightening had changed to a sudden crack and the Almighty roared. It was here.

Protected but alone, I huddled in the security of the verandah at our Ntshondwe camp. And yet I felt exposed and vulnerable. Actually it was eerie. Here I was

at our Ithala Game Reserve and this fury was speaking to me; like a barrage of abuse - an imbizo whose protocol had collapsed under the weight of decades of abuse, deprivation and anger. The raging elements had turned to voices of pain and accusation.

There was a frightening co-incidence about all of this. That very afternoon I had been mesmerized by the turbulent and sometimes tragic history of this protected area and its community's ancestors.

Sam Ndwandwe, our community conservation officer had persuaded me that if I wanted a real grasp on African Conservation then Ithala was the place. I have talked of Ezemvelo's need to look beyond boundaries, to care for our communities and assume their welfare as part of our larger conservation brief. But perhaps I had never got to the heart

of the issue.

If there is one then it lies here in Ithala.

Like the storm, Sam beguiled and buffeted me with stories: Of King Shaka, Zulu Kings and Boers; of locals seeking refuge in caves in the Ngotshe mountain right above me; of labour tenants and the decimation of so much wildlife, overgrazing and soil erosion. In so many respects Ithala represents a very real and riveting slice of South African history.

While most people know this as a game reserve proclaimed by the old Natal Parks Board back in 1973, it is what came before that so fascinated me. I appeal to all of you to come to this extraordinary place and experience a bit of what overtook me that day.

Ithala is something of a cradle of mankind and its most obvious feature is its geology. Did you know that some of the oldest rock formations in the world are found here, dating back some 3000 million years? Ithala is mountainous and you can witness this geology right in your face.

The Ntshondwe Camp I was cowering under in this storm sits right at the base of the Ngotshe Mountain, in many respects the focal area of Ithala. Sam set the scene, saying that Ithala (meaning 'high platform') has been occupied by man for thousands of years. The reserve is littered with Stone-Age spears and axe-heads, which even go back 20 000 years. The San also used the region, leaving their rock art in several sites in the eastern part of the reserve near one of our bush camps, Mhlangeni.

But let me jump forward to the arrival of the Nguni people. People, such as the Ndwandwe clan, originally lived here in the Ngotshe area under King Zwide before 1818. They fought and lost a number of battles against King