



is asked about the lodge's meticulous attention to detail and presentation, she answers, "Food is important. You can have stunning accommodation, a fantastic game drive but if the food is horrible the whole experience can be spoilt. We believe good food is essential for our guests' experience of Woodlands."

On a rhino mission

After a leisurely tea we are sufficiently refreshed to climb back into a vehicle for a game drive. Nambiti is a relatively new reserve, having been successfully developed from an extensive community land claim. Besides the Big-5, the reserve boasts over 30 mammal species and excellent birding, including being the breeding ground for blue crane, long crested eagle and bald ibis. However on this day, our mission is to see if we can find rhino.

Determined to discover them before the day's light fades, we wind our way through the reserve. Eventually our elusive rhino are spotted in the distance – too far and too late in the day for photographs. Later, with rhino still on everyone's minds, we chat to Desmond about Nambiti's efforts in preventing poaching. He tells us that reserve management coordinates all conservation aspects at Nambiti. Wildlife specialists, lodge owners and community leaders work together.

Nambiti has had good success limit-

ing poaching. Desmond believes this is because the reserve is community owned. "Community involvement has been key. They are the shareholders and 99% of the staff in the reserve are from the local community."

Desmond further explains, "With assistance from the Indunas, people realised that if they remove game, visitors won't come. The first thing we noticed was that antelope were no longer being taken." With regards to protecting rhino, Desmond says that the reserve is a no-fly zone. He holds the belief that a strong relationship through interaction with the community, pride in the rhino and buy-in from the Indunas is the key. He says, "The voice of an Induna counts far more than any rhino specialist talking to the people."

Feline fiesta

Breakfast arrives with a bonanza – an introduction to some more unusual members of the Woodlands family. Sky and Storm are three-month old cheetah cubs. The cubs are the offspring of a female cheetah on the reserve. The mother initially had five cubs. However after hyenas killed two, the mother took one cub and moved to a new den, never returning for the other two. Eventually the folk at Woodlands rescued Sky and Storm and have hand reared them.

Even at such a young age, Sky and Storm display the essence of the 'cheetah persona'. They are self-contained, elegant and regal. Cheetahs are by nature solitary creatures although this morning they happily seek us out and sit contently purring.

The cubs are dignity personified, that is until the entry of Vega a four-month leopard cub. In a blur of spotted fluff, Vega leaps wildly over the coffee table and attacks Sky in mock battle. Cheetah dignity is severely dented as Vega causes general mayhem. Finally, 'Zulu' the Meerkat steps into the fray to stamp what he perceives as his authority as leader of the pack. With such unusual family members, clearly Woodlands is not the typical lodge.

The Le Sueur Cheetah Project

Rob Le Sueur owns both Woodlands Private Safari Lodge and Nambiti Plains Lodge, a five star African Eco Lodge. As one of the original founders of Nambiti Private Game Reserve, Rob has been intimately involved over the years in its development and conservation. With only about 8 000 to 10 000 cheetahs left worldwide, the Le Sueur Cheetah Project works towards repopulation by breeding and then releasing cubs back into the wild.

Cheetahs are highly endangered. They are included on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) list of vulnerable species and listed as a threatened species in Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). Roughly 2 000 cheetahs are lost every four years worldwide. This is due to three main threats.

The first is that cheetahs are at the bottom of the carnivore hierarchy. Other predators, such as lions and hyenas, not only take cheetah's prey but will also kill adults and their cubs. Nambiti has lost 12 cheetahs over the years to lion kills. We ask Desmond why the cheetah just doesn't run away, after all it's the fastest land animal with speeds over 100 km/hr. Desmond explains, "Cheetahs rely on their camouflage till the last moment. Often it's too late, the lions have encircled and trapped them".

Secondly, human factors threaten the survival of cheetah. Often they are shot because cheetahs hunt livestock. Destruction of habitat also plays a large role in their declining numbers. Cheetah ideally requires open plains to hunt. However, as Desmond says, "It's so much easier to plough up an open plain than to deforest an area". In addition Desmond highlights trade in the East as another factor; "The demand in the East for cheetah skin, teeth, skull and bones is a massive problem. Cheetahs' skins in Vietnam are regarded as a big commodity".

Lastly, cheetahs' own gene pool accounts for their rapidly declining numbers. Sometime during the last ice age an