

The Wattle Warriors of the Northern Drakensberg



Built on what was the worst of the wattle infested farms of the upper Thukela River catchment area (above photograph 1995), Montusi Mountain Lodge (right), today stands free of this invasive tree thanks to the efforts of the Carte family.

In 1941 when the word green referred to only a colour and not sustainability, a newlywed couple moved to the Northern Berg to follow their dream to build up a farm and home second to none in South Africa. They established one of the first holiday destinations in the Drakensberg, still a favourite spot for families today – Montusi Mountain Lodge.



As part of the establishment of their haven in the mountains a war had to be won on the wattle tree. It seems a foreign concept to have to fight against trees, but these trees are not the happy, shady, carbon-soaking, oxygen-providing, soil enriching trees we know and love. They're alien invaders that degrade the soil, use all the water and cause extensive erosion.

Wattles, from Australia, are part of the acacia family. South African acacias are beautiful, giraffe-feeding trees, but their Australian cousins are a curse in our country. Once established, they spread rapidly, seed prolifically, even lying dormant for decades in a thick bed within the topsoil, waiting for a veldt-fire or a plough to disturb them and sprout an entire new crop of hair-like saplings.

The problems caused by wattle forests include:

- massive topsoil loss because no secondary vegetation will grow under a wattle forest so there is little to bind and protect the soil from our harsh African rains.
- erosion of river banks as a result of wattle debris being caught up against boulders forcing the flow of the water sideways thereby widening the river bed destroying the pools that would normally occur, impacting negatively on the diversity of aquatic life.
- leaching of the soil's nutrients long after the wattle is gone, the soil is inhospitable to other plants.

So the dastardly wattle is the villain of the story... but who is the hero?

Enter the Carte family. In 1963 Ruth Carte and her sons Peter and Anthony, during the difficult years of developing their guest farm, cleared massive areas of wattle by employing locals with pangas and herbicides to chop the trees and paint the stumps by hand. It was a costly and time-consuming process, but they felt compelled to maintain, in the long term, the sheer beauty of the valley.

During this time the government was not concerned with the conservation of the rural areas. The focus of rural funding was agriculture, but in the 1990s there was a shift. The importance of the Thukela River (and its catchment area: the Northern Berg) came to the fore and conservation of water resources became a priority, as did job creation in rural areas.

The National Working for Water Project was launched in 1995 by the then Minister of Water Affairs, Dr Kader Asmal. On first hearing of this project Anthony quickly shot a letter to the Minister alerting him to the urgent need for the inclusion of the Upper Thukela Catchment area in his proposed project. Within months the Working for Water's massive wattle eradication project started when 1000 previously unemployed workers took to the mountains in gumboots, wielding their pangas and paintbrushes. The result: the stunning Northern Drakensberg Valley, free from wattle within four years.

One condition of the Working for Water

Project was that once the wattles were cleared it would be the land-owner's responsibility to attend to the re-growth from the seed bed. Government would provide chemicals used in the poisoning of the cut trees, but the labour and hardware would be for the land-owner's account.

The Northern Berg Valley is owned by a handful of people and together they ensure that the wattles are kept in check. This makes it a unique area. You might notice that the Central and Southern Drakensberg and the Midlands are all home to tracts of wattle and other equally noxious exotic invader plants which mar the beauty of these popular holiday destinations and cause serious damage to the rivers.

In the last 15 years Anthony and Peter parted ways as business partners (but remain the closest of siblings) and Montusi Mountain Lodge was born. Built on what was the worst of the wattle infested farms, it has the most spectacular view of the Amphitheatre. Anthony and Peter, with their cousin Ross Aitken, took inspiration from the extraordinary view and embarked on a new mission: a luxury lodge, separate and different to the original family hotel, but with the same family-owned-and-run feel. The first step was to build a road to the site, then a dam, and next to remove hundreds of wattle stumps so they could establish the indigenous gardens within which are sited the 14 free-standing luxury Garden Suites.

Now run solely by Anthony and his family, Montusi provides South Africans and international visitors with the rarity of genuine hospitality in down-to-earth luxury.

Come and experience what the victory over the Wattles has made possible.



For more information visit www.royal-drakensberg.org.za

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