The Price of Living with Nature: Stories and Sounds

Margie Mills

Early Years in the Kalahari

I have had the very privileged adult life of living with a man passionate about all things "wild"—particularly carnivores. This life has taken me, first as a young bride of 21, into the depths of the Kalahari Desert to study the then little-known nocturnal brown hyena with South African researcher Gus Mills. This meant the slow process of searching the Kalahari dunes with the help of amazing Bushmen trackers[1] for clues of hyenas' existence left by their tracks, and eventually locating and radio collaring several individuals. We were fascinated by the way the trackers communicated to each other in their language of symphonic clicks when deciphering the stories left in the sand. Using radio signals to find the hyenas, we patiently habituated them so that we could, by following them for nights at a time, begin to unravel how they existed in this harsh environment. This also involved long nights sitting in a vehicle at their dens, taking turns on watch in the dark and waiting for adults to appear. My method of keeping awake was to "crochet by feel," and the next morning I would often have to undo most of the night's handiwork.

The usually cloudless Kalahari nights present magnificent starscapes. Besides watching, which taught us how much one can actually see in the moonlight with a pair of binoculars, we listened. Since Kalahari nights are unique for their utter stillness, occasionally punctuated by the plaintive cries of black-backed jackals or the distant whooping of spotted hyenas, these sounds always elicited the comment and point of the finger by Gus: "Shhhh, listen, music!" But this quietness served to sharpen the senses so that the slightest sound—the soft scuffle of the pads of a hyena walking on the sand or a short squeal of a hyena cub—might be the cue to the arrival of an adult visitor bringing food to the den.

We soon found out that brown hyenas are great wanderers, moving up

[1] "Bushmen" is the preferred name that the San people in this part of the Kalahari Desert call themselves. They are the original hunter-gatherer inhabitants of the Kalahari.

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to 50 kilometers (31 miles) a night in search of food. Keeping up with them in the vehicle was challenging and exhausting, yet at the same time fascinating and rewarding, gifting us with many magical memories. No lights, no roads, no human sounds at all—only the music of nature. We often felt that we were the first humans ever to have been there.

For the first two years of marriage, our home was a tent and a ten-foot caravan [trailer] parked under the shadiest camelthorn tree we could find in the tourist camp where we were stationed. Although I tried to make it as homey as possible, we very quickly realized that living in this manner exposed us to the elements—the often above 40°C (above 100°F) summer midday heat, the below freezing winter nights, the sometimes violent dust storms (you could hear them coming) and even flooding. Our cuisine was limited primarily to tinned food, for the nearest fresh tomato was 420 kilometers (260 miles) away, a day-long expedition on dirt roads to the nearest town! We ventured into town only a few times a year.

Our anticipated two-year stay in the Kalahari ended up being twelve years; once that sand gets under your nails you are hooked. After seven years we were blessed with our first son, Michael. However, having a baby meant that I couldn't go with Gus careening over the dunes after hyenas at night, so life got quite lonely. By this time we were living in a brick house, with Gus employed as the first biologist in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. With a generator we now had electric lights from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM, but the generator was noisy and not strong enough for any electrical appliances. So, besides the pristine sounds of the desert, our soundscape also included the buzz of the generator and the musical whistle of the boiling kettle on the gas cooker, which was still very much a part of our lives.

Stevie was born two years later, meaning that Michael now had a playmate. Days were fun—going for game drives, reveling in nature's wonders, and always on the lookout for tourists arriving with children who might be extra playmates. A regular highlight was a trip up to Gus's camp in the bush a few hours away. Here, we would have an early afternoon family meal once Gus had woken from his day sleep after his night's work.

The boys loved to be playing outside. I felt I always had to be with them, mainly because of my worry about their encountering the extremely dangerous yellow cobra or the venomous puff adder, common snakes in the

area. Luckily, puff adders make a "puffing" sound which would warn us of their close proximity even when we didn't see them, allowing us to make a hasty retreat. I preferred being outside with the boys to the prospect of being faced with a crisis 160 kilometers (100 miles) away from the nearest telephone and 420 kilometers (260 miles) from the nearest doctor. It was always an anxious time for me when the children got sick, and only then did I wonder why we lived in such a remote area.

A Move to Kruger National Park

In 1984 we made a big move to the opposite side of the country, when Gus requested a transfer to the famous Kruger National Park in the eastern, much more luxuriant part of South Africa. Neither of us wanted to leave the Kalahari, but we both agreed that we did not want to send the boys away to boarding school at their tender age. Skukuza, the administrative headquarters and main camp of the Kruger where we were based, had both a nursery school and a primary school.

Life was now completely different from what we had experienced in the Kalahari, and in some ways we had the best of both worlds, surrounded by the bush but with all the modern conveniences—24-hour electricity and telephones—as well as doctors, a shop, a church, and a wonderful community of friends. The boys loved all the activities they could now participate in, and my only sadness was that I was no longer involved with Gus's research. I began to feel out of touch with nature. It was all relative, though, because the music continued, with interesting visitors like a family of warthogs rooting in our garden and roaming the streets, lions making nightly kills in the village, elephants enjoying our garden trees during the dry season, and spotted hyenas calling almost every night.

Within a year, tragedy struck when our little Stevie died from complications of chickenpox. This experience changed us forever, reinforcing what is really important in life. As the months passed, the darkness slowly gave way to glimmers of light, and within the next year we were mightily blessed with the birth of our daughter Debbie. For the next twenty years I was involved with community matters both inside and outside Kruger Park. Gus kept me up to date on his fascinating research, and the children and I relished opportunities to go out with him to witness first-hand what he was doing.

My main project was teaching various handicrafts to a group of thirty-six Mozambican women living in a community neighboring the park. The women were refugees who had fled war in their own country, many having braved walking through the dangers of the park at night with their children in order to escape to safety. For them, the sounds of nature often denoted eminent danger rather than conveying pristine beauty or musical wonder. They told some hair-raising and horrific stories. Most of their male family members had either been killed or remained in Mozambique to fight a senseless civil war. Life was extremely tough for them, and I will never forget the utter despair emanating from their eyes when we first met.

The refugees were given a piece of land on which to reside by the local chief, and an international NGO, Operation Hunger, provided basic foodstuffs on an irregular basis. This created tensions with the local residents who were also extremely poor, often hungry, and couldn't understand why food was not offered to them as well. We started a gardening project, but water was a problem, even for drinking. One of my most time-consuming activities in the beginning of the project was to collect empty bottles and fill them with drinking water to take out to the group each week. Luckily the end result was the installation of a borehole (a small-diameter well) sponsored by a friend and a local company, which lightened the load for the whole community.

My greatest desire was to work with these women who had suffered so many hardships. Together we decided that the best approach would be for them to acquire skills that could not be taken away. First, we built a community center, then we began sewing classes, and in the end some women became expert seamstresses as well as amazing designers. After a few years we received a generous donation of new sewing machines and other equipment. The weekly classes would begin with wonderfully enthusiastic praise and worship songs, often accompanied by drumming on the metal sewing tables, stamping of feet, and clapping of hands—an uplifting experience created by their music.

We would consult together about what the participants would like to make and consider what was in demand by surrounding communities, so they could produce items that could bring them money. Additionally, the women made articles for the ecotourism industry. I learned that hardship

can unite people, as shown by the joyous sounds of the women singing while they worked—with every now and then someone jumping up and dancing—and by the laughs we had trying to understand each other (I never did master the Tsonga language). Each visit was a blessing for me and, I hope, for them too.

Working with these women allowed me to see, first-hand, how they had to struggle each day to survive. Yet these wonderful people taught me so much. When their first crop of vegetables was picked, they wanted me to take it. Each year I would buy them a length of material so they could make themselves outfits for the annual Christmas party. One year they presented me with a tattered, worn envelope filled to the brim with coins they had collected so that I could buy material to make myself a new dress—humbling, to put it mildly.

However, challenges existed on many levels. Occasionally experts talked to the sewing group about conserving nature, although preaching to them about not chopping down trees for firewood to cook food hardly made sense, given their poverty. As well, family planning was complicated because women were often pressured by their husbands to have many children. Also, having only two children seemed risky, because so many children died because of isolation and lack of medical help. A few women bravely used contraceptives, afraid that their husbands might find out. Consequently I worked with basic hygiene and first aid, often driving sick people to the hospital.

We also helped the women start up an ongoing, flourishing preschool for their children. Soon after it was started, teachers brought a six-year-old deaf child to me for help. I took her to an ear and speech specialist, only to discover her problem was a huge wax blockage that she had had since birth. As soon as her ears were cleaned out, her hearing was perfect and she could learn to talk. Unnecessarily, she had spent six years in a silent and lonely world.

In total, these experiences with the Mozambican women proved invaluable in my discovery of both the beauty and harshness of life found in parts of South Africa's natural environment. The prices these women paid to live in this landscape provided me with yet another sense of what it means to live in relation to the land. But the nuanced sounds of these women speaking

lyrical Tsonga, dancing, jumping and singing, in spite of their considerable hardships, remain some of the most memorable parts of our stay in the Kruger.

The Kalahari Revisited

Gus and I were very happy to be able to return to the Kalahari in 2006, this time to follow cheetahs. We were once more listening to the stillness and subtle blend of natural sounds within the desert—the cries of jackals, the screeching of Barn Owls, the raucous *krak-er-ak-krak-er-ak* of the displaying Black Korhaans (birds of the *Otididae* family, which includes bustards) and, at sunset and through the full moon night, the perpetual *tuk tuk tuk* of the Barking Geckos, sounding like two stones being tapped together. As enchanting, but different from the sounds we remembered from our village setting in Kruger, were the mournful call of the Green-spotted Dove, the whistle of the White-browed Robin-chat, starting softly and rising to a crescendo, and at night the always pleasing whoop of the spotted hyena.

Forty years before, we had come to study the elusive brown hyena in this magical place and now, as we were about to remove the last collar from our last cheetah, we observed a thrilling and noisy interaction involving both these animal species. We felt we had come full circle, and had been gifted with a priceless collection of memories and experiences.[2]

Margie Mills assisted Gus Mills in his research (The Conrad Grebel Review 33, no. 2 [Spring 2015: 212-220]) *while raising three children, and worked with women refugees in South Africa.*

[2] Gus and I captured our first sojourn in the Kalahari in the book, *Hyena Nights and Kalahari Days* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media Ltd, 2010).

Mozambique women and children with patchwork clothing. Skakuza Camp, Kruger National Park, South Africa, 2002. Photo credit: Margie Mills