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Bhekithamba Njoko doing what he loves best, photographing wildlife from a hide in the Tembe Elephant Park.

KHETHUKUTHULA XULU

Some folks study a discipline and stay in it all their lives. Others, like Bhekithamba Njoko, start their careers in one field – IT in his case – and end up in something completely different.

His destiny has led him to the bush, as a lodge manager, a tour guide and now a wildlife photographer.

The extent of the knowledge that Ezemvelo's official photographer has picked up comes out during a road trip from Pietermaritzburg in the Midlands to an elephant park in the far north of KZN.

Our destination is the Tembe Elephant Park, established in 1983 by the Tembe Tribal Authority and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, to protect the elephants that once roamed between Maputaland and southern Mozambique.

Njoko knew the history of the different towns we passed, knew the animals and the trees, as we headed north from eThekweni through KwaDukuza and Hlabulwe towards the far northern district of uMkhanyakude and the hills and mountains disappear.

No wonder it's called uMhlaba-yingana which loosely translates as "flat land".

Born and raised in New Hanover, Njoko began his career with Ezemvelo in 1986, starting in the IT unit. Back then, his role involved laying IT cabling at Queen Elizabeth Park, a task he undertook before laptops were commonplace.

In 1991, Njoko moved to the research unit at Hlabulwe-Mfokosi Park, where he served as a technician assistant.

After four years of dedicated service, he was promoted to camp manager in 1995, where he took charge of game drives, guided walks and training guides.

Njoko's career continued to flourish when he became a range officer, managing five bush lodges: Masinda, Nseweni, Goyeni, Buthabulu, and Sontuli.

In 2008, he briefly stepped into the role of Mpila Camp resort manager, a period that deepened his love for photography – a passion that would later redefine his career.

In 2012, Njoko's talent behind the lens was recognised by then Ezemvelo's CEO, Bandle Mkhize, who transferred him to the communications unit at head office, appointing him as the organisation's official photographer.

This role allowed him to merge his professional work with his personal passion for capturing the beauty of the natural world.

Six hours later, after a few pit stops and countless photo shoots, we arrive at Tembe Elephant Park, to be greeted by Zulu dancers and a Swati speaking security guard – charming but it was an indicator that we

had entered a diverse world and a mixture of people and cultures.

After familiarising ourselves with the area, we were taken on a late afternoon game drive. Njoko immediately turned from driver to photographer.

The number one goal was to spot a herd of elephants, however, a lion would have also been nice.

Unfortunately for us, as the sun was setting, the only animals that were excited to see us were the nyala, giraffe, cranes and we caught a glimpse of one lion as it took its afternoon nap in the river.

After the 45-minute game drive, we enjoyed vuvuzela music while being serenaded by a musical performance from a local artist.

The trip was not entirely all leisure, the whole purpose of the trip was to witness the tripartite agreement between the community trust, Ezemvelo Wildlife, and Peace Parks Foundation, which was aimed at decreasing poaching, creating job opportunities and elevating the standard of living for the Tembe people in the far north of KZN.

There again, his role was clear, armed with a camera, Njoko clicked away during the signing of the agreement.

The agreement served to promote collaboration between the parties for the development of the Tembe Elephant Park, which borders Mozambique.

It will also enable the implementation of biodiversity conservation programmes aligned to Ezemvelo functions.

According to Ezemvelo Wildlife chief executive officer Sile Mkhize, the anticipated benefits of this agreement are job creation, the use of satellite amenities at the Mangazi Airport and "joint funding proposals for submission to international co-operating partners and promotion of conservation of biodiversity and meaningful collaboration".

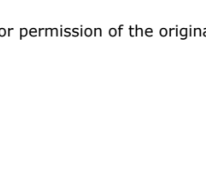
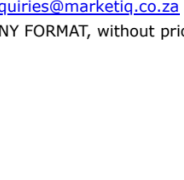
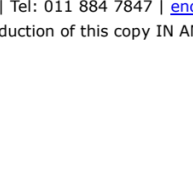
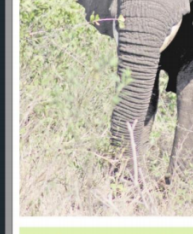
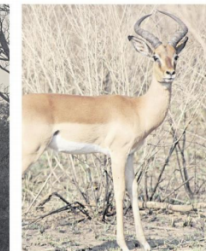
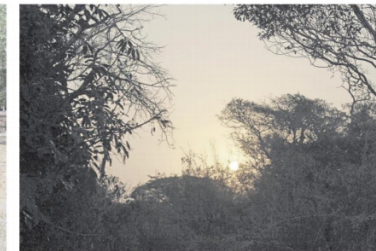
Local traditional leader Inkosi Mabhodu Tembe applauded the partnership, adding that: "Without working together, there would be no development in our community and for our people."

After the signing of the agreement we headed to the Hlabulwe-Mfokosi Game Reserve, still on our quest to see some elephants, and luck was on our side.

We saw at least five different herds "families" as they attempted to cross the reserve roads on their way to the river.

When we stumble upon a group of elephants that looked like a family, Njoko told us a story about how elephants had a good memory and how that could work against rangers' favour at times.

"When these animals escape as a group and you have to dart or put down one, it is important to not do it in the presence of its calf as that calf will never forget what you



Slindokuhle Mngadi from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

Bongani Mkhize before taking visitors on a game drive.

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