

# Leopards of the Cederberg

through the eyes of a **Cape Leopard Trust Environmental Educator**

by CATHERINE KÜHN



Max (M6) patrolling his territory past the Mied se Kop camera with the sun rising behind Tafelberg.



**T**he Cape Leopard Trust (CLT) is an NGO and NPO based in Cape Town. It is an active predator conservation organisation which focuses on the importance of leopard research and environmental education in order to raise awareness and continue the protection of the species. The Trust was started in 2004 by Dr Quinton Martins, who surveyed parts of the Cederberg to establish a baseline study of the leopard populations in this area. Today we have various ongoing projects in different areas in the Cape, including the Boland area and the Cederberg.

In addition to the research projects, the CLT has an environmental education programme, which began in 2009 when Elizabeth Martins took it upon herself to create a Cederberg-based environmental education programme. This enabled

youngsters and adults to come together in a beautiful wilderness setting to learn and experience the wonders of nature. The project expanded since then, and we now have a Cape Town-based programme running alongside the work that we do in the Cederberg. The education project hosts between 4000 and 5000 children and adults per year through its activities, including camps in the Cederberg, outings, presentations, eco-clubs and holiday programmes, all subsidised by the Trust.

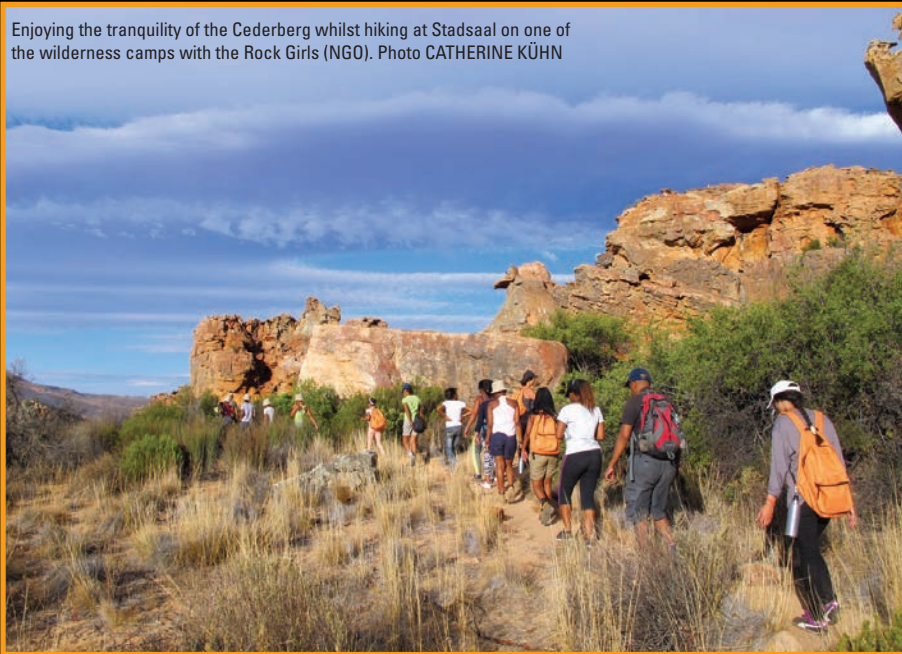
When it comes to environmental education, we often ask ourselves why it is necessary. One of our goals is to help children reconnect with the natural world by fostering a greater respect and sense of caring for the environment, wildlife and also for each other. Our wish is to see greater citizen participation, inspiring a natural

change in behaviour that ultimately leads to meaningful conservation action. The CLT's focus on environmental education in the wider community builds the necessary bridges between landowners, farm workers and residents living on the urban fringe. This encourages collective responsibility for the respect and protection of their natural surroundings and the biodiversity in their immediate area.

In the education programme, we cover many topics related to conservation. It is important that we not only teach, but that we allow for those very important connections to take place through seeing, hearing and feeling nature, as well as through interactive learning. Nature almost does our job for us. We are able to take people into nature, share knowledge, and the beauty and magic of nature does the rest.



Enjoying the tranquility of the Cederberg whilst hiking at Stadsaal on one of the wilderness camps with the Rock Girls (NGO). Photo CATHERINE KÜHN



The leopard is the apex predator in the fynbos mountains of the Cape. It is listed as vulnerable on the IUCN red list, and it is estimated that there are less than 500 free roaming Cape leopards left in the Western Cape.

By focussing on this iconic species, we are able to facilitate a wider conversation around the importance of protecting biodiversity. For example, we explore the reasons why we should ensure the leopards' survival and why a healthy prey base is necessary for this. It is important that we emphasize the threats to the leopards' survival and the resulting negative impact on the fauna and flora if the leopard were to become extinct. Additionally, we talk about why all of this would affect the lives and livelihoods of people.

In our programmes, we teach the importance of catchment areas and why we should save water. We take a look at the threats of alien invasive plants on natural biodiversity, and how alien invasives 'steal' our water. We explain the connection between fires and fynbos and how fynbos is adapted to fires, but only at the correct intervals. We expressly discourage the use of illegal snares by detailing the impacts this has on the biodiversity as well as the detrimental and far-reaching effects of indirect threats such as poisons and pesticides, habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation.

On a recent camp with adult farm workers and farm managers from the Kouebokkeveld area, when listening to stories of the participants, we heard about an incident in which some of the other



Our 21-seater which we use to transport all participants as part of the Cederberg and Cape Town programmes. Donated by the Lottery. Photo CATHERINE KÜHN

workers had trapped and killed a leopard for its skin. These workers knew of a buyer in the Eastern Cape. Sadly, these stories are not uncommon. They demonstrate the necessity for education on the value of this precious animal. This same group was totally overwhelmed by the beauty of the rocks when we took them to Stadsaal. I overheard one man saying, 'These rocks are absolutely beautiful.' Another sitting and looking up the Kromrivier valley towards Sneeuwberg exclaimed, 'This Cederberg and the nature is unbelievably amazing!' These men and women live and work in areas not so far away from the Cederberg and were able to explore and learn more about their local area. These special moments when we engage with the participants and receive feedback at the end of our camps are what make us realise time and time again that the work that we are doing is an unequivocally imperative part of conservation.

While taking a group on the Welbedacht walk in December 2016, we came across a dead puff adder, burnt in a recent bush fire. This sparked a discussion about the

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Participants from the Kouebokkeld Opleidingsentrum camp, enjoying the view from the rocks at Stadsaal. Truitjieskraal in the background. Photo CATHERINE KÜHN



Summitting one of the rocky peaks at Truitjieskraal on the Witzenberg Primary School camp. Photo CATHERINE KÜHN



devastating impact of the frequent and large scale fires on the fynbos. It is important that when we see something interesting like this on a hike, we talk to the group about the implications on biodiversity. We spotted a cedar tree sapling that was clearly dead on the Welbedacht hike, and we talked about the plight of cedar trees in the Cederberg, and the cedar tree planting programme that CapeNature have developed to try to save this critically endangered species. A baby horned adder on the Lots-se-Vrou hike was a fortunate find. These creatures can sadly often be thought of as ugly, frightening and

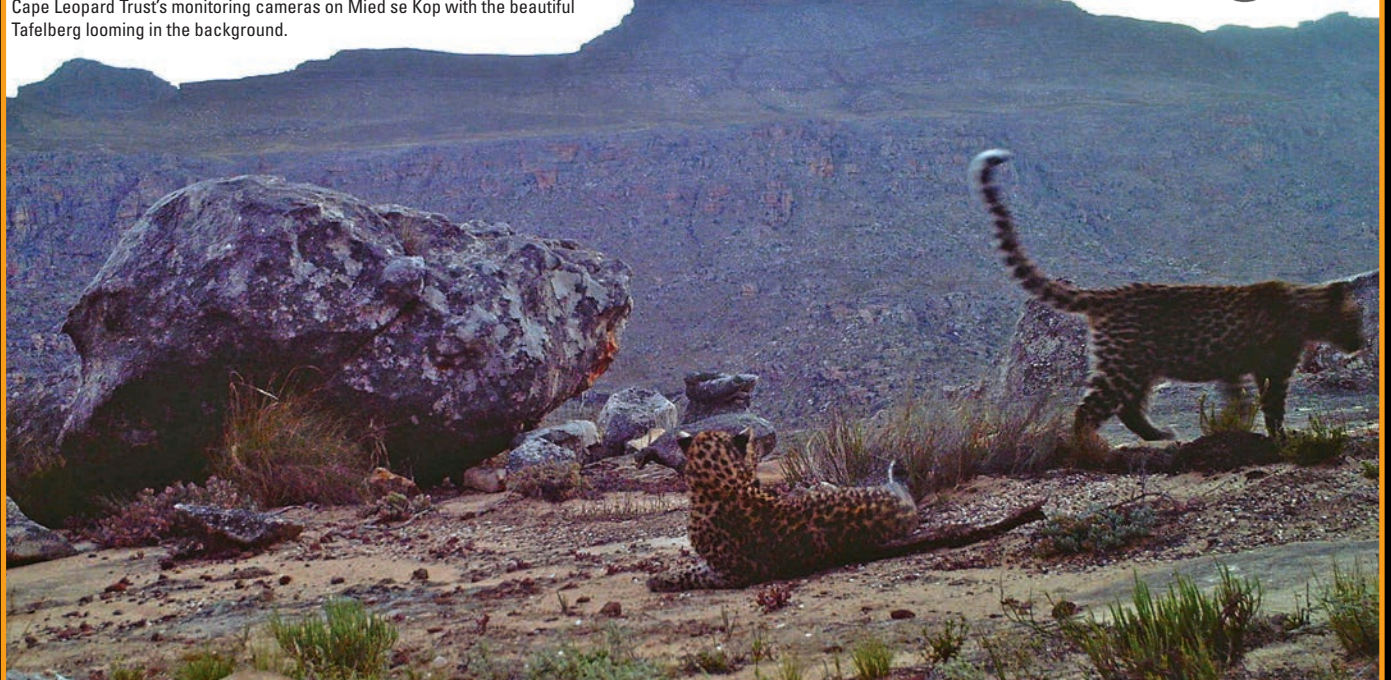
dangerous, but when seeing this beautiful animal up close in its natural habitat, it can often change the minds of those who have these preconceptions. Flowering disas at Disa pool really exhibit the raw beauty of the area and make the walk-in absolutely worthwhile. The call of a baboon sentry, and the screeches of young baboons playing (or fighting) give the feel of really being out in nature.

Otter scat and spoor, baboon tracks, porcupine quills, klipsspringer tracks leading to the water, termites going crazy after the first rains, armadillo girdled

lizards hiding under rocks, blou-kopp koggelmanders doing ‘push-ups’, caracal kill-sites, black eagle nests and pairs flying above us, rock kestrel nests at Stadsaal and genets visiting the campsite at night are just some of the highlights from our experiences in the Cederberg.

In October 2015, we followed leopard tracks all the way from our campsite at Matjiesrivier up the river to our camera trap, where we found the most exciting photo of a young adult male leopard. We came across its fresh scat, and found the most stunning tracks in the sandbanks. We

Female leopard, Spot (F10), held a territory in the Welbedacht area of Cederberg Wilderness Area, where she was recorded to give birth to twin cubs early in 2010. Patch, the male, and his sister, play in front of one of the Cape Leopard Trust's monitoring cameras on Mied se Kop with the beautiful Tafelberg looming in the background.







Fresh klipspringer kill a few metres off the path on the Maltese Cross hike. Photo CATHERINE KÜHN



Leopard spoor on the banks of the Matjesrivier. Photo CATHERINE KÜHN



Leopard scat, found along the path next to the Matjesrivier. Photo CATHERINE KÜHN

have come across leopard scat and tracks on numerous occasions on our hikes, yet have not been so lucky as to see one naturally. We were close recently; we came across a fresh klipspringer kill one morning on the Maltese Cross hike, and had no doubt that the leopard was somewhere close by. All of these encounters with nature are inevitably bound to ensure an unforgettable experience for our participants, and we are sure of this because we can clearly see in their faces, hear in their voices, and can tell in the way their attitude changes over the duration of the camp.

Not forgetting the beautiful sunsets and sunrises, seeing scorpions under UV light, hearing the eerie call of a barn owl at night, studying the intricate details of a fynbos plant under the microscope, standing in awe of the beautiful rock art left by the San and Khoi Khoi peoples and hearing about the way they had enormous respect for nature, their lifestyles and why the art is so fervently protected today.

A member of the group of farm workers, after hearing the talk on the rock art, said that he understands now why it is so important to protect nature and that the San people were the best example of this. It was a profound moment and one I will never forget.

Some of the activities really boost the confidence levels of our participants and so many fears have been overcome just by allowing oneself to be wild and free in the wilderness that is the Cederberg. Encounters such as reaching the end of a hike and surviving it, standing on top of a rock that looked so formidable, navigating a river crossing, seeing a waterfall for the first time, and swimming in the cold, dark water. Drinking fresh mountain river water, climbing or crawling on, into and through the amazingly carved sandstone rocks, being so close to a scorpion, holding a toktokkie beetle, hiking through the iconic Wolfberg Cracks and standing under the Wolfberg Arch are just a few examples.

It is through these experiences that children and adults alike begin to realise why litter and pollution is a problem, and why they cannot just throw their rubbish down anywhere; why it is bad to conduct illegal snaring, or promote the sale of skins. Why it is bad to set fire to the veld, pick flowers, kill innocent creatures, throw rocks at lizards, disturb nests, burrows, kill-sites, cut down trees and clear natural areas, write or engrave on the natural rocks, break the rocks, and make a noise whilst in nature. The list can go on.

Our camps and other activities are unique and incomparable to any other, and it is due to the fact that we still have places like the Cederberg to visit. It is important to convey our message across to the future potential custodians of this area and this beautiful country that we live in. We must also ensure that we are good examples of nature lovers, and custodians of not just the Cederberg but our environment and all that it is.



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Adult male leopard, M6 (also known as Max), jumping over a stream along the Uilsgat route in the Welbedacht area of the Cederberg Wilderness.

