

## **To the Bush with Carnivores**

The place: Central Kalahari Game Reserve, Botswana

The plan: To find out which, if any, Bushman/San communities have taken the opportunity of going back to their homelands after several years' exile, now that they've won the right to do so in a lengthy legal battle with the Botswana government.

The team: Travelers, translators, camp hands and a wise, elderly expert in Bushman culture. Meat eaters all, except me – and oh how much I was to learn from them about animal rights and conservation!

On the peripheries of the park, at a place called Phuduhudu, we spend two nights with a large settlement of Kua (as the “first people” are known in this area). The sad cost of their interaction with other cultures is everywhere in evidence. A couple of drunks weave around the huts, and old tins and plastic bags litter the pathways. The toothless elders are overcome with joy at seeing our old guide, a regular visitor to their community for over 20 years. But their proud self-reliance is nowadays replaced with poignant gratitude for a little tobacco and a bag of sugar. We're shown how, once upon a time, they made fire by rubbing sticks together. But the spark doesn't come, and they abort their attempt with shy, embarrassed smiles. Maybe we'd like to see them sing and dance? Sadly, the singing is lack-lustre and the dancing has none of the ebullient foot-stomping of days gone by. For hours these beautiful little people crouch around our campfire, eating from our bush kitchen and drinking deeply from our water tanks. And on the cold, dark edges of the festivities, three skeletal dogs skulk around, their sparse and brittle coats full of horse-flies which bury deep and bite hard.

Eventually, I can stand the dogs' parched, sidelong glances no longer and I go for a bowl of water. The Botswana cook chortles with derision at my gesture, the Kua snort with unmistakable disapproval and our white guide lambastes me for my “sentimental first-world values”. But the dogs drink, and drink, and drink. How can it be that these aboriginal wonders, revered for their almost telepathic ability to communicate with animals, and renowned for their deep respect for all living things, have no regard for the suffering of these craven creatures? If Gandhi is correct in claiming that one can judge a civilization by the way it treats its animals, then the Kua are clearly in the same melt-down as we Westerners.

Into the Kalahari Reserve we go, to find several abandoned Kua settlements, their earlier occupation signaled only by ghostly circles of sand where the huts once stood, and former goat kraals piled high with petrified dung. Days later, we come across a well-maintained but apparently unoccupied hut. Much noisy coaxing from us draws a small, stocky girl from the dark womb of her stick home. She has Down's syndrome, that's clear, and her terrified little brother tries, unsuccessfully, to hide in a folded mattress – we may be the police and they may be dragged off to an uncertain future outside the park. We leave them food, tobacco and water, and I ask the translators if they could please tell the girl to make sure that the dog (whose bones are surprisingly well covered) has some water too. Now I'm definitely pushing my luck, and the tone of my travel-mates gets stridently critical. "Don't interfere, don't impose, don't presume," they scold.

Well, those who know me, know that I will *always* interfere when the voiceless are at risk. As it happens, though, I have no more tests awaiting my too-tender heart as we move further into the relentlessly harsh Kalahari. To our great joy, we find several communities of ecstatic Kua, recently returned to their ancient hunting grounds in something akin to a biblical migration – albeit one facilitated by rattle-trap Toyotas. And the more remote the settlement, the healthier the dogs. Here the canines are robust, even rotund, and their care-givers provide them with juicy Tsama melons in lieu of water. Sure, the dogs are of use to the Kua in their hunts, but is it a coincidence that the more culturally intact the group, the more the weak and defenseless are protected?

The final few days of the expedition see me once again biting my tongue – and so hard that the Kalahari sand is spattered with blood for many a long road! My guides, you see, are all avowed conservationists.

"Ag shame" they lament, "those poor bokke, it's so hot out here and the waterholes are completely dry."

So they proceed to apply admirable effort to the rehabilitation of a defunct borehole pump in the middle of nowhere. Ah, I get it - dogs are to be denied water, but not gemsbok. Is that because they're edible? Or more beautiful? Or what?

The delightful Sandtonite in our midst trains her binoculars on the telegraph tail of a stiff-strutting warthog and sighs (much as I would have in my hypocritical carnivorous days): "I just don't know *how* anyone could shoot such a cutie!"

At lunch, half an hour later, she piles into a ham sandwich. You see, some pigs are more equal than others - and that's why it's all gone so, so wrong.