

From farm kid to GAME RANCHER OF THE YEAR



Tienie Bamberger has just been nominated as Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA's) Wildlife Rancher of the Year.

He developed Warthog Safaris with a minuscule budget from a small farm of less than 200 ha to several game ranches of more than 10,000 ha in total, which today utilizes all aspects of the game value chain.

Meerkat and guinea fowl

Tienie grew up on the farm Rietkuil in the Ottosdal region in what used to be the Western Transvaal.

"My interest in hunting was piqued when my dad used my Tswana friends and me to control problem animals – from rats in the stables to meerkat, guinea fowl and porcupine which wreaked havoc in the mealie fields, to jackals catching lambs."

Upon matriculating from Hoërskool Erasmus in Bronkhorstspuit, he joined the civil service, but only lasted a few years before he and friends founded a cell-phone venture. Later he shed all but one of the cellphone shops and started looking for land to start a game farm. He also did a hunting- and game-capture course.

"I was in my twenties and wasn't necessarily looking for a large piece of land, but rather something with potential which would qualify me for a bank loan, but the banks wouldn't have any of it..."

Warthog Safaris

This did not stymie him and in 1998 he registered Warthog Safaris and did a professional hunter's course.

"Initially Warthog Safaris was just a hobby. I started taking local hunters in groups to game farms to hunt. It is cheaper if a group shares the expenses and at least they can shoot something for the larder."

Between 1998 and 2000 Tienie started trying to recruit clients in Europe and the USA. The first effort was a bust, but later that same year he got three clients at last. Through the years, the network expanded.

Tienie married Ananja Laubscher in 2001 and 19 years later their only child, JP, was born during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2004 a 189-ha portion of the farm Olifantskop in the Bushveld came on the market and Tienie bought it and the family still calls it home.

At the time an Ellisras lawyer subdivided the farm Olifantskop

and sold it off as smaller units. Those days there were just a farm house, two wooden cabins and a tin-roofed shed.

Tienie obtained other portions and neighbouring farms as they came on the market. It took proper planning and careful budgeting, but incrementally everything came together. Now, 20 years later, he owns 10,000 ha in the heart of the Bushveld, as well as the farm, Fransina, in the Koranna Mountains in the Free State.

Game Breeding

On both farms, game is bred to supply prey for hunters. In the Free State plains game like sable antelope, roan antelope, reed buck, black impala, black wildebeest, red lechwe and springbok, as well as lions, are being bred.

At Olifantskop, game native to the Bushveld is being bred. This includes a large herd of buffalo, rhino, mountain reedbuck and klipspringer, impala, blue wildebeest, zebras and especially kudus, as well as free-roaming lions.

"We farm with game species endemic to the two regions and for which the climate and habitat are favourable," Tienie explains. Male animals, which would improve the genetics of the existing game, are purchased. Game like blesbok or gemsbok, which do not thrive in these areas, is also obtained if requested by hunters.

"We purchase a paltry few animals, but rather use concessions adjacent to the farms used as base camps for the hunting safaris. Between these farms we have up to 90% of all the species available to hunt in South Africa."

The major component of the breeding is extensive, but there are a few camps where species, which do not adapt well or of which there are not enough for hunting, are being bred. "We have to protect our game against predators – there are plenty of leopards here!" Rhinos are also kept in a camp system where they can be monitored.

Challenges

The biggest challenges are drought, grazing and disease.



"My dad always said you have three seasons: 'One year you make your money, one year you break even and one year you lose. The secret is that the year in which you make money, you have to make more money than you lose during the other years.'

"Drought or disease contain risks for all sectors of farming, that is why we have to live so close to our Creator and should always be on our knees. There are a few elements you should always factor in and the only way you can provide for it, is to plan ahead. When you have money and storage, you have to collect and put away for the poor and dry years. This year, with the fires, many farmers are straining and those who made provision for feed, can last a little bit longer and keep their animals alive longer.

"All the natural elements present a challenge. In dry years, the animals are thin and they die of hunger; during wet years the parasite load is very high."

Every form of legal hunting is allowed, and foreign as well as

South African hunters hunt with a bow, a rifle or a camera.

"During the hunting season we use hides or hunter's cabins, which, out of season, are suitable for photographic safaris. The animals are used to the hides and come to drink at the watering holes right in front of visitors with their cameras."

Between 100 and 130 clients come to hunt in a good season. Up to 80% of the hunters are foreigners and come from all over the world. Most are Americans, but there are also Canadians, Danes, Germans, Spaniards and Pakistanis, to mention but a few.

"Trophy animals make up around 15% of the game being hunted and it is usually older, male animals which are no longer productive. Trophy hunting is mostly done by foreign hunters, but there are also South Africans who are interested - and enjoy a piece of biltong!

Between 20% - 30% of the yearly accrual must be managed, whether through

local biltong or venison hunters or management hunting, undertaken by the personnel itself. "Management hunting controls game numbers and prevents ranches from being overgrazed and the habitat disrupted and it protects other species of which the numbers are still too low to be hunted. No lambs or juvenile animals are hunted.

"Most of the biltong hunters come from the suburbs or cities or from regions where there isn't a lot of game available to be hunted. A local hunter looks at his budget and then hunts species like impala or wildebeest, which offer the best value for money - that is to say, how many rands per kilogram of meat can he take home. The price per kilogram of meat justifies the expenses of such a week or weekend's hunting."

Dangerous game

Six of the seven animals considered dangerous by foreign hunters, exist here, although not all of them are hunted. This includes the big five, namely buffaloes, rhino, leopards, lions, hippo and

crocodile, but not elephant. Because they may not be hunted, it is not profitable to keep them.

Kudus are top of the list for foreign hunters, but large and especially white kudus are rare, just like the king nyala, which is, like the white kudu, a colour variant and not a distinct species. The animals are being bred, but, for instance, a kudu takes ten years to mature and they are very vulnerable to drought and parasites.

Bushbuck and bush pigs to hunt are also in short supply, which is also the case with the so-called Bushveld oryx of which only the older bulls may be hunted.

There are red hartebeest, gemsbok and eland, but the latter species doesn't really thrive in the Bushveld with its high parasite load. The ticks damage the females' teats so that she is incapable of raising a calf. Treatment with aloe- or Ivermectin blocks is only partially successful. Natural fires can destroy the parasites, but it remains unprofitable to farm with these animals.



Ecotourism

Women and children accompanying a hunter, make up a large portion of ecotourism. Even though they do not hunt, they enjoy the drives, discovering the town and environment, or going on day trips to Pilanesberg, Sun City or Madikwe.

Members of photographic safaris settle in for between three and five days after which they can, besides the destinations mentioned above, visit the Kruger National Park or the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe.

The biggest challenges for the foreign visitor are the red tape at airports and the country's high crime rates. "If South Africa can see to it that it can create a friendly and safe atmosphere for visitors, many more foreigners will visit us."

Visitors can go fishing in the dam on the Mokolo River, go on game drives, or just relax in the luxurious bush chalets.

Taxidermy

Foreign hunters prefer to have all the game products processed: an

impalas hide is cured and a handbag, cushions and hassocks made from it, and the head mounted. The processed products may be exported, and in doing so, they make use of the entire value chain of the game industry.

All the venison is processed in cold-storage rooms on the farm. What is not taken home by the hunter, is used in the restaurants, shared with the staff or donated to a school. Whatever is left, is sold.

"WWSA's award is such a privilege. Without my wife and staff, this award would not have been possible. It is such a mercy and blessing from God that we arrived where we are today."

He is of the opinion that game ranching makes a great contribution to the country's economy and he aims to expand and develop Warthog Safaris even more. "The marginal land we use and the fauna we brought back to these regions from where it had been eradicated, were transform

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