



How TOP GAME RANCHER balances the books

IN BRIEF:

- Capital from a cell-phone company used as seed money to start a game farming venture and a hunting outfitter.
- Tienie Bamberger stays a step ahead of government and is expanding unperturbed, notwithstanding efforts to end the breeding of lions in captivity.
- The taxidermy business with which he is extending the value chain, also won awards this year.

Tienie Bamberger started his hunting concern 25 years ago with a dream, a handful of pamphlets and an income from his cell-phone business in Pretoria. Nowadays WRSA's Game Rancher of the Year for 2023 runs his farming and trophy hunting business, Warthog Safaris, on 10,000 hectares and he is expanding even while a legislation sword is hanging over the hunting industry.

Tienie doesn't beat about the bush. "I am striving for profitability. The fact that I am preserving habitat for my game, is a consequence of that."

Only after six years from a shaky start, could he obtain a small piece of land of 189 ha at Steenbokpan, close to Lephalale in Limpopo. These days it is part of the almost 10,000 ha on which he runs Warthog Safaris with his wife, Ananja.

His father, Ben, used to be a crop-and-dairy farmer near Ottosdal, where Tienie spent his formative years. Drought eventually forced the family to relocate to Bronkhorstspuit where his father eventually retired as a police detective.

That is where Tienie matriculated and then started a

business, installing gear-lever locks, with two friends at what used to be the Technikon Pretoria. It grew and morphed into a cell-phone business which relatively soon became a substantial venture for the three.

FROM 'BLUNDER' TO ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE:

After life took him on a number of side-tracks through South Africa and abroad, Tienie took steps to turn his dreams of a safari company into reality. This is when he registered Warthog Safaris and accompanied his first client, a pistol-shooting instructor, on a hunting trip.

The next step was to market himself on one of the extensive American hunting expos. He had no clue as to what the successful marketing of a hunting outfitter

entailed and his first campaign was a blunder, says Tienie. Nothing came of the stack of pamphlets he distributed.

It was January 1989 and in November of that year, he attended the Bass Pro Shops Hunting & Fishing Classic in America. There his former hunting client introduced him to an American hunting outfitter, Nicky Roth of Montana. That year Nicky and two other American visitors came hunting with Tienie and this gave Warthog Safaris the break-through.

Every year his business grew in leaps and bounds. Nicky invited him in 2003 to come and help with his hunting company – an opportunity Tienie seized. "I realize I will meet hunters who would possibly also want to come and hunt in South-Africa."



After three years of helping out during the American winter, Tienie's domestic company had grown to the extent that he could not afford to go and work in Montana during the South African summer.

This was when he sold his last cell-phone shop, contracts and all, and he and Ananja bought their first land – the 189 ha stretch of the farm Olifantskop at Steenbokpan.

Thereafter they bought adjacent farms when they came on the market, and later-on also land in the Free State near Excelsior. There he has just fewer than 1,000 ha on which he can easily accommodate black wildebeest, springbok, lechwe and other grazers for his clients. He also breeds lions in the Free State.

PROFITABLE SPECIES:

Even though there is a lot of controversy regarding lion farming, what with a ban on the importation of lion trophies to the USA, Tienie is expanding his lion-breeding enterprise. The

Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment in South Africa also aims to prohibit the breeding of lions in captivity for commercial purposes.

He says that notwithstanding the American import ban, 412 lions were hunted last year in South Africa and in spite of the controversy, it is still one of the most sought-after species, taking the highest revenue in the hunting field.

At Steenbokpan Tienie may keep six lions on 1,100 ha which he has set aside for the lions. After releasing the lions on the property, they have to roam freely for three months before he is allowed to have them hunted.

“Once we are allowed once more to export them to America, one is going to really cash in.”

As far as he is concerned, the soft pressure applied by government on the lion farmers to close down the industry, amounts to nothing less than

expropriation. “We are farming on marginal agricultural land and we create employment and prosperity where other industries just won't cut it. Instead of government supporting us, our industry is regulated to the point of it being almost impossible to farm profitably.”

It is this very profitability which encourages Tienie to offer colour-variant game like black, white-black- and saddle-back impala, golden wildebeest and white kudu to his clients.

“Just like tomato-, potato-, beef- or sheep farmers have a choice of what they want to do with their land, and like any other farmers who want to utilize their land optimally. For instance, I can keep 500 ordinary impala on a given piece of land, they being, for the sake of argument, worth R5,000 each. Black impala are worth twice that much and white-flank impala currently earn R20,000 apiece. Clearly that enables me to utilize the same piece of land, with the same resources, much more profitably. Why shouldn't game farmers be allowed to

farm optimally?”

THE HUNTING OUTFITTER:

The ranching is mainly managed extensively with intensive breeding camps occupying a small portion of Tienie's land. This where he farms species like sable antelope, saddle-back-, black- and white impala, golden wildebeest and white kudu.

At Steenbokpan the size of these camps run from 100 ha to 350 ha. In the Free State he has three breeding camps of 40 ha each. There he keeps sable antelope, roan antelope as well as a herd of white-and-black mottled springbok.

On the extensive farm, one would think you are in a national park with the great variety of plains game species available, including large herds of buffalo, rhino, hippo and even crocodile at the watering holes. The rhinos are monitored with the aid of radio-transmitter collars in an effort to keep them safe.

In order to keep lions, Tienie has to do a habitat evaluation of his



land every two years, for which he appoints an independent ecologist. He sporadically has his game counted by a specialist, but he also continuously monitor his game tally using cameras placed strategically on the farm.

The game census in conjunction with the habitat evaluation determines how much game Tienie can keep on his land. In addition he uses common sense and harvests more when he sees his animals struggling during dry seasons, while during

good years he will let the herds multiply.

His main source of income is trophy hunting by foreigners, and he explains that mature trophy animals don't necessarily breed any longer and have already done their bit for the game population. They, however, only represent 10-15% of the game on the farm. Therefore it is necessary to market this 15% to real hunters in order to glean 75% of the income from them.

The rest of the ranching income is from taxidermy, accommodation, self-drive safaris, ecotourism and local visitors who book the lodges for the holidays. For non-hunters Tienie offers special activities like angling expeditions, game drives, hiking trails and photography safaris.

"Then we also take our guests on excursions to other attractions like Table Mountain, the Victoria Falls and the Kruger National Park."

THE AFRICAN DREAM

Tienie believes that a great and important component of what you sell when marketing your hunting environment and animals, is the African experience as described by writers like Ernest Hemingway and former president Theodore Roosevelt in their books. "That Africa may no longer exist, but we have to offer our clients an experience which is as close to it as possible, but with modern conveniences."

In the array of lodges, Warthog Safaris offers accommodation to more than 60 people at a time, but Tienie says the greatest number they have accommodated simultaneously, was around 40, which included hunters, non-hunters and professional hunters.

Ananja does the cooking for the guests, but when more than one lodge have guests, she appoints freelance chefs to help.

"I knew nothing about cooking when we started. I could not even boil an egg. I had to read books to learn."

Even greater competitiveness. About three years ago Tienie and a taxidermist, Pieter de Klerk, started Nature's Mirror Taxidermy to add value for people coming to hunt with

Warthog Safaris. Pieter has been picked this year as the professional hunter's association, PHASA's, taxidermist of the year.

For hunters who prefer using their own taxidermists, the ranch now offers a complete hide-preparation service and packages it, permits included, for shipping. However, the main draw card remains the fact that hunters' trophies can be stuffed and mounted on the ranch.

Tienie opines that offering taxidermy services as part of Warthog Safaris' hunting packages, makes a substantial contribution to his competitiveness.

Q&A:

Where did you learn the most about game and the safari business?

During our summer months I worked for Nicky Roth in Montana, USA, and learned a lot there.

What was the biggest lesson you have learned?

The first time I went to America, I was completely unprepared. I thought one just had to walk around and hand out flyers at a hunting expo and the orders will flood in.

What technology is indispensable in your farming business?

Solar panels, inverters and lithium batteries. My entire concern is off-grid – including the 40 boreholes and the hunting lodges and even every, single motor gate on the farm.

What is your greatest obstacle?

The government and the failed state, as well as Eskom, crime and corrupt policemen stopping our visitors when they are being transported in the evening from the airport to the farm and harassing them for bribes.