

Wild Shots Outreach is sparking a passion for wildlife in young people by teaching photography skills

By SARAH MCPHERSON

An initiative in South Africa is using cameras to nurture the conservationists of tomorrow

PHOTO

OPPORTUNITY

“I NEVER COULD HAVE imagined this is how my life could turn out,” says Melody Mnisi. “Now it’s my dream to introduce young people to nature and to inspire young African women like me to believe anything is possible.”

Melody is a 23-year-old South African and has just qualified as a field guide. Despite growing up very close to Kruger National Park – a world-renowned safari destination – she never had the chance to see or enjoy its wildlife. “This was something for white people, not poor black people like me,” she says. “I always wondered what was on the other side of the fence.”

But everything changed for Melody when she completed a Wild Shots Outreach (WSO) photography course, learning how to use a camera and going on her first-ever game drive. “I could not believe my eyes, seeing all this wildlife and capturing my memories and stories,” she says. “It was such a privilege to be in nature.”

WSO is the educational outreach arm of Wild Shots, a photography conference in Africa that ran for nine years prior to 2020. Its aim is to engage disadvantaged young Africans in wildlife and conservation through photography and by providing an introduction to the natural world, helping to nurture the conservationists of tomorrow.

The initiative came about in 2015 and was the passion project of Mike Kendrick, a life-sciences teacher and photographer. Moving to the Greater Kruger area to live in the bush, Mike was dismayed to see the lack of engagement between young South Africans and their natural environment. Not only that, in six years of helping to run Wild Shots, he had not come across a single wildlife, landscape or outdoors photographer of colour in South Africa.

Like Melody, most young South Africans live within a few kilometres of protected areas, yet rarely have the opportunity to

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Founder Mike Kendrick (right) with students



A game drive allows students to practise what they’ve learnt

explore them and experience their wildlife. With youth unemployment running at more than 60 per cent, very few can afford or aspire to do so, and as a result are not introduced to conservation or wildlife tourism. “How will we save Africa’s wildlife and wild places if there is such a disconnect with local communities?” says Mike. “You cannot love what you do not know.”

MIKE KNEW THESE YOUNG people needed to engage with their natural heritage, and that photography could be the way to do that. “The camera is an incredibly powerful tool to immerse yourself in nature,” he says.

And so he got to work, launching WSO with a trial programme in a local school.

Seeing both the speed at which the students learnt to use the cameras, and the resulting photographs, he knew the project had enormous potential. “I will never forget taking those children on their first-ever game drive,” Mike recalls. “They were photographing everything – trees, animal tracks, birds – they loved it, and were so engaged.”

Initially, the WSO kit store comprised a collection of second-hand DSLR cameras donated by photographers. They were all different models and makes, which made teaching all the settings tricky. Now with Canon on board as a sponsor, all the cameras are the same, meaning teaching the technical side of things is much easier.

WSO prioritises pupils aged 15-17 and unemployed young people living adjacent to Africa’s national parks. It delivers up to

“With youth unemployment at more than 60 per cent, very few can afford or aspire to explore protected areas”



African elephants shot by Vusi Mathe on a work placement at a safari lodge

● BEHIND THE LENS

Vusi Mathe

Age: 24

After completing the WSO course while still at school, Vusi Mathe was determined to develop his photography and videography skills. He joined a non-profit solar-powered cinema network, showing wildlife film screenings in his local community. Since then he’s set up a successful videography business and is working in the wildlife safari industry as a photographer.

ALL IMAGES VIA WILD SHOTS OUTREACH

30 courses per year, with each consisting of five conservation photography workshop sessions (sometimes within a residential weekend), culminating in a game drive. Conservation themes underpin the courses, with discussions about poaching, snaring and poisoning, and the images are exhibited in communities and used for education and outreach.

The images can convey powerful messages. Student Megan Mashigo, for instance, managed to capture a rare shot of a white rhino with its horn intact. Many



Vusi speaks at a WSO exhibition held in a South African school

reserves are dehorning their rhinos to deter poachers, and Megan’s image was used to inform local communities about poaching and the associated decline in rhino numbers over the past decade.

The students are also proving themselves as artists. Emily Mathe captured a striking motion-blur portrait of a leopard after just five photography lessons and one game drive; Karabo Magakane’s close-up of an

elephant’s eye clearly showed her potential (see box, p55). Several ex-students have had their images featured in the national press.

“There is a passion that burns in these kids,” says Mike. “They approach wildlife photography with a very fresh perspective. They have no inhibitions and are not afraid to experiment. They have an affinity for nature, but no opportunity to exercise that affinity. Photography can change that.”

● PHOTOGRAPHY



Emily Mathe took this dramatic image of a leopard after finishing a WSO course

Cameras enable young people to transform into active participants and become connected to the wildlife around them. “Photography is a celebration of what they’re observing – they are doing more than just viewing the animals,” says Mike. “The kids say that they are never asked about how they feel about things, so that’s what we focus on during the field trips.”

BACK IN THE CLASSROOM, EACH course culminates in a discussion session in which the students review their work. “Sharing is an important part of the course,” says Mike. “Students talk about each image constructively and review each other’s work as peers.” They are also introduced to best practices and contemporary examples of wildlife photography. Finally, there is an awards ceremony. Students are gifted prints of their images, and each school or youth foundation



White rhinos are often dehorned, which makes Megan Mashigo’s photo even more special

retains a camera so that the students can continue to develop their photography skills.

From small beginnings, it seems WSO is making its mark. More than 1,200 young people (more than half of whom are female) have now attended a course, and plans are afoot to extend the workshops into Kenya, Botswana and Namibia, as well as elsewhere in South Africa.

The organisation also supports young people in accessing training, studies and

employment through its bursary fund. There are currently 22 former students in further training; many others have already benefitted from the scheme and have gone on to find jobs in conservation. Melody is one such success, and has secured a position as field guide at a local tented camp. Melody was inspired by Queen Manyike – a former graduate from four years ago who went on to become one of South Africa’s first black female guides, now leading tours in the prestigious Sabi Sands Game Reserve. “It is wonderful to see this ripple effect,” says Mike, “with former students inspiring the next generation.”

Another rising star of the bursary scheme is 25-year-old Light Ngomane. He heard about WSO through friends and joined the waiting list. “It was the first time I’d ever held a camera,” he recalls. “It triggered my love for photography and storytelling, and opened my eyes to new possibilities.”

Light was able to enrol for a BA in film-making at the University of Johannesburg – a long way from the dusty streets of his home village – and is currently in his third year. In July, during his holidays, he returned home to give a talk to unemployed youths in his community. “I wanted to inspire them to reach for their dreams,” he says.

What happened next was an unbelievable stroke of good fortune. Light was invited to join a BBC Natural History Unit team on a work placement in South Africa. “It was an

● BEHIND THE LENS

Karabo Magakane

Age: 23

Karabo took this portrait of an elephant on her first-ever game drive. This catalysed a passion for wildlife, and Karabo has since been on assignment with a number of conservation NGOs and is now an international ambassador for the Girls Who Click photographic initiative. With support from WSO, she has qualified as a private pilot, and her dream is to fly for conservation. “I want to break ground in the world of aviation and photography, and do things that no black female has ever done,” she says.



Big animal, small detail: the soft background in this intimate image draws attention to the eyelashes, offering a fresh perspective on the iconic African elephant

amazing experience, working with this expert crew, and using all sorts of specialist high-tech filming equipment that I’d only ever read about,” he says. “I’m now determined to make it as a film-maker.”

The ripple effect is seen in other ways, too, with former students now teaching the workshops. Rifumo Mathebula, who met Mike while still at school, is one such example. Rifumo enrolled onto the WSO

course because he thought it would be fun – he had no idea what a game drive actually entailed. But seeing wild animals in the flesh changed his life. “I knew from that moment on I wanted to share this experience with other young people,” he recalls, “and make a positive change in my community.”

After leaving school, Rifumo volunteered for WSO and was eventually promoted to programme director in 2021, overseeing the organisation and delivery of the workshops. He is assisted by four WSO graduates – all previously unemployed, who teach the course in the local language, Tsonga. “Rifumo is a natural teacher,” says Mike. “The programme team are real role models – and far more appropriate for the task than an old white English guy like me.”

● BEHIND THE LENS

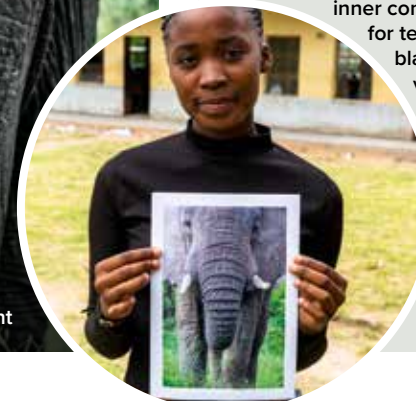
Nothando Mkhombo

Age: 21

Nothando was unemployed when she took the WSO course in 2020. She has since risen through the ranks and is now part of the team delivering programmes. She has surprised herself in finding an inner confidence and passion for teaching. “Not many black people have visited our country’s game reserves. We must help young people to learn about conservation. I want to be the change that’s needed in our communities.”



Nothando’s portrait of an African elephant



Students are inspired and empowered to share new skills with their communities

WILD SHOTS OUTREACH has evolved to be about much more than just photography. It is a vehicle for young people to connect with nature, tell their own stories and inspire their communities. “Conservation, wildlife tourism and nature photography are still seen by some as a white man’s game in South Africa, with few young black, let alone female, role models,” says Mike. “WSO is flipping the script by fostering and catalysing young black environmental champions.”

Find out more at wildshotsoutreach.org