

Endorsements for the Dutch edition

The incredible adventures of this courageous wildlife veterinarian remind us that humans are just a small link in a vast ecosystem. Follow in her footsteps and meet wild animals to discover what fascinating lessons they teach us about ourselves.

André Kuipers (astronaut, international speaker, WWF ambassador)

A heartwarming book full of adventures and love for animals. Martine shows how a veterinarian can make a meaningful difference to our relationship with nature.

Frans de Waal (primatologist, bestselling author)

Lessons from the Wild is a super inspiring book that reminds me once again how small we are within the immense richness of nature.

Joukje Janssen (Chief Operating Officer WWF-NL)

This book is about connection, inner strength, conscious living, service and love – a captivating guide to living fully and with purpose. A fascinating book and warmly recommended!

Irene van Lippe-Biesterfeld (Princess of the Netherlands)

I read this book on the plane and wow – it's so good, interesting, thrilling and really enjoyable! *Esther Verhoef (one of the most successful authors of thrillers in the Netherlands)*

A real page-turner – an incredibly exciting book from which you learn a great deal, not least about our shared humanity.

Chris Kijne (radio presenter)

This book is a reminder that humans and animals alike share a fragile existence as vulnerable, mortal bodies within the flux of nature. By observing the lives of wild animals, Martine discovers lessons about humility, resilience and interdependence – a vivid memoir of animals, adventure and compassion that leaves readers not only entertained and educated but changed.

Dirk-Jan Verdonk (director World Animal Protection NL, author)

In this book, Martine offers a captivating glimpse into the world of nature conservationists – a life that is far from without danger. It is a world still largely dominated by white men. Martine shows that women not only can but must play a role here. The result is a compellingly written and utterly gripping book.

Willem Schaftenaar (wildlife and zoo veterinarian, elephant specialist and research associate Elephant Care International)

The wilderness is not only found in remote landscapes – it lives within us. In this book Martine takes you beyond the beaten path and back to the essence of who we are. She beautifully reveals how nature mirrors our inner world. Let go of control. Listen more deeply. Live more fully – because the wild is always calling.

Sonja van Meerbeek (director Sustainable Scale-up Foundation, founder of the Wildlife Forensic Fund)

Martine has made a stunning debut as a writer with this book. What a brilliant narrative and great writing style. It's as if you are there yourself. In addition to her breathtaking adventures as a wildlife veterinarian, this book is also a compelling call to drastically transform our all-consuming lifestyle into a sustainable society, in which ecology and economy go hand in hand. Must read!

Roeland Wessels (veterinarian, communication specialist, author)

I read this book in one go! Martine describes her life as a wildlife veterinarian in the African bush in a clear, inspiring, and down-to-earth manner. The book is full of extraordinary, exciting, and sometimes hilarious experiences among wild animals. She takes the reader on a journey through what unspoiled nature teaches her about being human and our place in the bigger picture. This deeper layer inspires us to take responsibility and contribute to nature conservation, not only for the sake of nature but also for the sake of humanity.

Nienke den Os (facilitator Foundation for Natural Leadership)

LESSONS FROM THE WILD

Martine van Zijl Langhout

LESSONS FROM THE WILD

A wildlife vet's journey into the African wilderness

Warden Press

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This edition is an expanded and revised version of the original Dutch book, *Over leven in het wild* (2020, AmboAnthos), including additional detail, maps and photographs.

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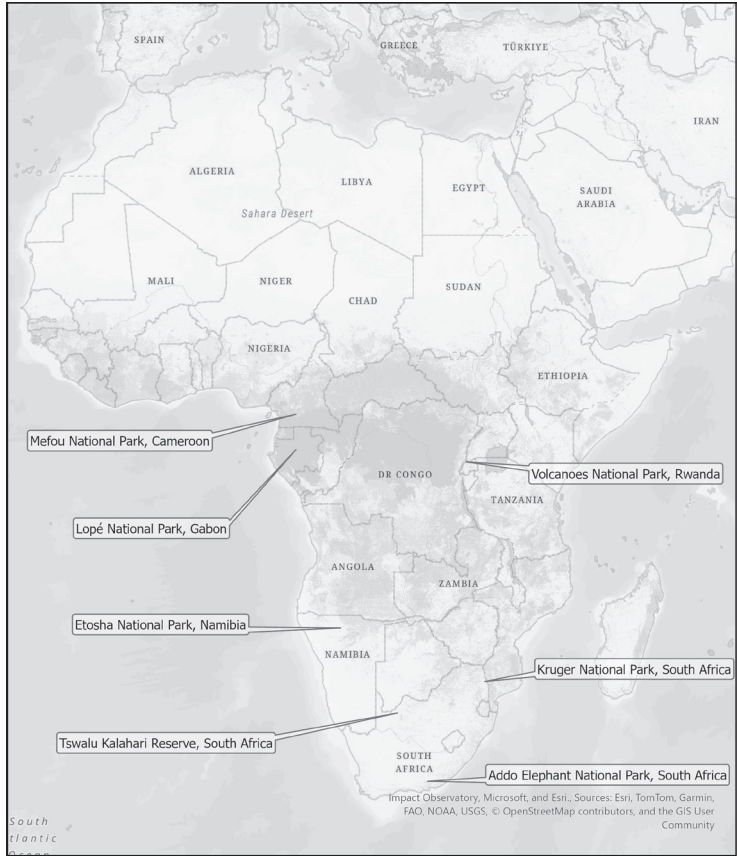
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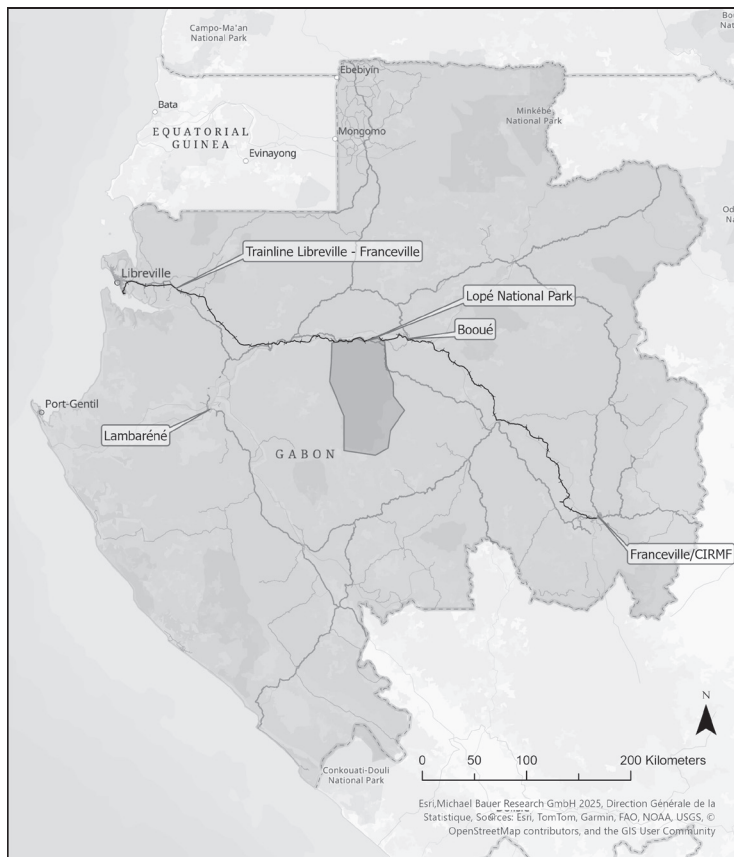
*I dedicate this book to all the big, small, dangerous,
innocent, flying, swimming, crawling,
jumping and walking wild animals on this planet.
Long may they survive, as they have done
undisturbed for many millions of years.*

*To all the rangers, anti-poaching units, wildlife park managers,
detectives, helicopter pilots, lawyers, vets and other warriors
who risk their lives on the front line to
protect wildlife and their habitats.*

*Every day, many men and women put their heart and soul into
caring for rhinos, gorillas, elephants and many other wild animals,
often for low and uncertain wages.
Although many have already dedicated their lives
to fighting injustice, greed and indifference, they
continue their hard and risky work tirelessly.*

They are the world's greatest heroes and heroines.







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Run for your life!

Through the sights of my tranquilliser dart gun, I see a huge African buffalo, charging at full speed towards me. The pounding of hooves makes the ground tremble. He is so close, I can look right at his snorting nostrils and massive horns. I keep still, look straight ahead and lower my rifle. Is this really happening? Am I dreaming? I blink my eyes. No, it is really happening. I feel the adrenaline pump through my veins. My instincts scream at me to run but I know I need to have a plan first. My years in the South African bush and the Gabonese rainforest taught me vital survival lessons. In an instant, my brain analyses the situation practically: a buffalo bull storming towards me - a large open field - no strong trees around - the buffalo enclosures nearby - no other options. Conclusion: run! As the adrenaline kicks in, my body reacts automatically. I turn around and start running as fast as I can. My heart beats in my chest and my legs do what they need to do. My right hand, holding my army-green dart gun, swings next to my body. I have no time to think, I just run. Suddenly, I hear hysterical screams coming from the direction in which I am heading: 'Go, go, go!' Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my entire team behind a high fence, all screaming at the top of their voices, jumping and frantically waving their arms. I am alone in a vast field, on the wrong side of the fence.

Seconds earlier, the buffalo and I were staring at each other, with no more than forty metres separating us. The buffalo, with his nose in the air, looking for my scent. Me standing with my loaded dart gun pointed at him. Both of us silent and perfectly motionless, as if we had all the time in the world. Only the buffalo's broad head and horns were visible through my gun sight.

It was impossible to shoot a tranquilliser dart into his muscles. So I waited, calmly, for the animal to turn and run away. In the wilderness it is all about being patient, concentrating and trusting your skills.

In this job, it is crucial to shoot the dart containing the anaesthetic at the first opportunity. After a missed or unsuccessful attempt, it is often impossible to find the same animal and its herd again. Wild animals learn from every experience and they teach each other about potential danger. Contact with humans must be avoided at all costs. Once they realise we are there, they run away. When you are shooting at free-roaming wildlife on foot, you usually only get one chance, so it must be perfect. It is better not to take a shot than to take a bad one.

A tranquilliser dart needs to hit the target at a 90-degree angle, in a well-perfused muscle, so the anaesthetic is absorbed quickly and distributed throughout the body. This precision is essential to knock out the animal correctly and prevent unnecessary stress to its body. A poorly placed or half-injected dart may cause the animal to run too far, resulting in overheating and muscle damage. Prolonged induction times also make it difficult to find and approach the animal to monitor the anaesthesia. This significantly increases the risk to the animal. Once I pull the trigger, the responsibility of preserving that magnificent animal's life is in my hands. The safety and survival of each animal I sedate is my highest priority. So I waited until the buffalo turned around to hit him in his buttocks. I had plenty of time, or so I thought.

Fifteen minutes ago, this large bull and five other African buffalo charged through the fence of their enclosure in Mpumalanga, a province in the North-East of South Africa, and ended up in a large open field. The region is known for its bushveld of long dry grass and acacia bush. The six buffalo, closely related to domestic cattle, are to be moved to a private wildlife reserve on the other

side of the country. To avoid any outbreaks of contagious bovine diseases, the South African authorities require all the animals to be sedated and checked for all relevant diseases. However, before I could sedate them in their enclosure, they charged right through the electric fence. An electric fence does not stop excited African buffalo from running through it at full speed, particularly if they are in a herd and encourage each other. The leader of the herd went first, the rest followed automatically. For herd animals, staying with the group is vital. They know that this keeps them safe. Now these wild and aggressive bovines are running free in this area, close to some villages. They are agitated and anxious, which is a dangerous combination. We need to catch them as quickly as possible, test them and return them to their enclosure.

Having sedated many African buffalo in recent years, I am very familiar with these impressive, strong animals. Dominant leaders often seize the opportunity to strengthen their position in the herd by attacking sedated fellow buffalo. Occasionally, resentment from past conflicts comes into play. In an earlier capture of another herd of African buffalo, the leader of the group suddenly impaled an anaesthetised herd member on its massive horns. My attempt to shield the sedated animal from this aggressive bull ended with an 800-kg buffalo on the bonnet of my 'bakkie', or pickup truck. Fortunately, I managed to chase the bull away and to my surprise both buffalo were completely fine. This incident taught me a lot about the strength, intelligence and opportunism of wild animals. It was, however, harder to explain what had happened to the mechanics at the repair shop.

This time, to avoid a similar conflict, I decide to sedate the dominant bull first and separate him from the herd. Standing at this distance, I pose no threat, but things do not go as planned. The giant in front of me suddenly starts to attack!

I run as fast as I can. As the adrenaline pumps through my body, I feel my muscles tense and I am hyper aware of my surroundings. I can still hear my teammates yelling from behind the fence. Why can't they keep quiet, I think, as I sprint as fast as I can. The noise is making me nervous and probably the buffalo too. Silence or soothing words work best to calm aggravated wild animals. Noise and stressful behaviour make them nervous. I do not have time to think about it. Boldly, I sprint straight towards the high fence behind which my team is standing. I round the corner, approaching the buffalo enclosures, which are surrounded by wooden posts. Quickly, I look over my shoulder to check whether the buffalo is still following me. He is racing after me, at full speed, his horns still pointed downwards, ready for the attack. His strained neck and bulging eyes focused on me, betray his mood.

African buffalo are one of the most dangerous and deadliest animal species in Africa. They are provoked once they have anything in front of their horns and they continue attacking until the object stops moving. The base of their horns, called the boss, is massive and indestructible and their necks are rock-solid. The only way to survive an attack is if you are lucky enough to be thrown so high in the air that you end up on the other side of a fence. There are only a few people who have lived to tell of being attacked. Sometimes, even lions are killed. There is no negotiating with an African buffalo. Ever.

I keep running. As fast as I can. There is no time to be scared. After about fifteen metres, I bolt down a three-metre-wide passage between the buffalo-enclosures, which has closed wooden fences on either side. This direction is the only possibility, as straight ahead I see a high fence that I will never be able to climb fast enough. I glance back again, hoping that the bull has changed direction, but no, he is still charging straight at me, with a cloud of dust and the thundering of hooves right behind me. The bull clearly knew that I had a gun pointed at him. There are six large

enclosures along this passage, three on each side. At the end stands a high fence. The passage comes to a dead end. The gates of five of the enclosures are closed. Other groups of buffalo are kept in them. Only the first enclosure on the left is empty. The six buffalo that escaped and are now running freely came from this one. Luckily, the gate is open. My instincts take over. I run inside the enclosure, immediately realising that I now have nowhere to go. In a split-second, I stop and turn towards the fence on the right side of the entrance. Holding my dart gun in my right hand, I fall into the sand. At the same time, I push the sturdy metal gate hard with my other hand. Fortunately, this heavy piece of iron-work hovers just above the ground and is easy to move without much effort. The gate swings shut. I stand up quickly and push the slide on the bolt. At the same time, my pursuer runs past the fence. I smell his sweat and my own. My sand-covered clothes are sticking to my skin. My rifle is full of dust. I am unharmed. Just in time. Did this just happen? I brush down my clothes and breathe. Oh, my goodness, that was a narrow escape. Totally surreal. I am in shock and my legs are shaking. But I am alive.

‘Clap ’m, shoot ’m.’ A voice shouts from a distance. It is one of my teammates, calling out to me from his safe position behind the fence. ‘He’s in the passage. You can shoot him now,’ he says dryly, as if nothing has happened. Someone has closed the gate to the open field, enclosing the agitated buffalo. He is running back and forth along the corridor, snorting and sweating. He is clearly not happy about the situation. As a leader he wants to return and protect his herd. He runs around in the passage, looking for a way out. I take a few deep breaths, wipe the sweat from my brow and tuck a loose, blonde curl behind my ear. I take another deep breath and regain my focus immediately. The job needs to be done. This is an emergency. I watch the anxious buffalo and follow the pattern of his movements. The tranquilliser dart pre-

pared for this buffalo is still in my rifle. With his rapid turns and unpredictable movements, it is difficult to get a clear shot. I climb the wooden fence of the enclosure in which I am trapped. The moment the buffalo turns and runs away from me, I take aim and pull the trigger. The pink plume of the dart lands in his gluteal muscles.

The spectacular animal continues to storm back and forth for a few more minutes. Eventually his pace slows down and his muscles relax. After about six minutes, he lies down on his belly and falls into a deep sleep. His massive head with its wide horns lies flat on the ground. Slowly, I approach him and place a blindfold over his eyes, tying a knot behind his ears. In the dark he will stay more deeply sedated and the blindfold will protect his eyes from the bright sun. For a moment, I gently shake his gigantic horns back and forth. The weakness of the strong muscles in his neck and the lack of a response to stimuli confirm that he is deeply sedated. The dangerous giant looks quite sweet now. He breathes deeply, even snoring a little. To prevent regurgitation of rumen fluid, I gently extend his tongue so it hangs outside the mouth. Then I carefully pull the empty dart out of his buttock and put it back in my safety case. The anaesthetic in the dart is extremely dangerous, so I always make sure that I am the only one who touches them. Quickly I take a blood sample and inject a tuberculosis test into a shaved area of skin on his neck. Then I secure the blindfold with duct tape to make sure it cannot fall off and I wrap the noose of a long rope around his horns, with the knot in the middle of the horn base. Meanwhile, three rangers have come up to me from behind the fencing. One of them holds the rope and the other two hold either side of the buffalo's horns.

When everyone in the team confirms they are ready, I inject a light-acting antidote to the used sedative into a blood vessel in the ear. After several minutes, the buffalo starts flapping his ears, a sign that he is now only slightly sedated. He gets up, unsteady on

his feet, and walks slowly, as we lead him by the rope around his horns. He is still sufficiently sedated for us to walk around with him at minimal risk to our own safety. As always, I hold the tail as a brake. Step by step, we guide the buffalo back to his enclosure. It is fascinating how anaesthetics, and their antagonists, allow us to work so calmly and safely with such incredibly powerful wild animals.

In the past, anaesthetised buffalo of all sizes were lifted onto a stretcher by pure manpower, even into high trucks. Carrying young buffalo and cows was hard work but possible. Loading several large adult bulls this way for transport was almost too much for my team. When I was asked to move twelve massive bulls, each weighing 800 to 900 kilograms, 'sedated walking' seemed the only way. This method was developed to walk rhinoceroses into containers for transport and I have used this technique many times with white rhinoceroses. This method was not yet widely used for African buffalo, but we had no other choice. Our team would never be able to lift so many large bulls at one time.

It turned out to be an exciting morning, as African buffalo react differently to the anaesthesia and its antidotes than white rhinoceroses do, and they are more agile and aggressive. The first attempts proved risky because the buffalo were far too awake. Fortunately, we were able to get them into the truck safely. Since then, my team and I have regularly practised and discovered how useful the art of 'walking buffalo' is. A few scary cases also taught me the importance of the blindfold. These bovines wake up completely the moment they see any light and immediately go on the attack. Once, a buffalo's blindfold slipped off, but fortunately I was able to quickly tie the rope around its horns to a pole. Then we could replace the blindfold and continue our work.

Over time, we realised just how useful this innovative and efficient loading method really is. On another occasion, we were able to 'walk' an escaped African buffalo bull right next to an old

railway line into a trailer. To our surprise, a train unexpectedly passed by a minute later, even though the railway line was almost never used. It was a huge relief that the buffalo was already safely loaded. These moments give you goosebumps and a feeling of gratitude that you have enough experience to be able to help wild animals.

Luckily today, 'walking' this escaped buffalo is going smoothly too. The moment we let the lightly sedated buffalo stand in the enclosure and leave him alone with the blindfold over his eyes, he lies down at once. Since there are no other available enclosures, this works perfectly. We safely walk the remaining escaped buffalo, one by one, back into the same enclosure without causing them any stress. In the meantime, someone else is busy repairing the broken fence. Looking at the six buffalo sleeping side by side, you could almost forget how dangerous they are. Once we are ready, I give all the buffalo the full antidote by injecting it into the veins in their ears and remove their blindfolds. Waking them up simultaneously prevents them from attacking one another. Minutes later, the six buffalo are wide awake and running around in their familiar enclosure. An hour and a half after the break-out, it is as if nothing has happened.

It is only later, at home in the evening, that I have time to reflect on how lucky I have been and how stupid I was to approach such a dangerous wild animal on foot. Looking back, I realise we should have cut open the fence so that an off-road vehicle could get through. No matter how much experience you have, you always run the risk of a wild animal suddenly attacking you. Like humans, animals have unique personalities and can be unpredictable. Wild animals also need their personal space and have clear boundaries. Seen from the buffalo's perspective, I came too close and had a weapon pointed at him. Also, these particular buffalo had been kept and fed in enclosures for a while, which probably

meant they had lost their fear of humans. Afterwards, I realise it was only logical that he decided to attack. As was often the case, I was more focused on solving a problem than thinking about myself. The buffalo could have seriously injured or even killed me. Luckily, I managed to keep my wits about me, so I was able to get myself to safety. It was as if time slowed down, giving me more time to react. I am amazed at how my body was able to do what was needed for me to survive. I have always had a fear of 'freezing', of not being able to focus or act in a life-threatening situation, when action is crucial. Staying calm and trusting your body increases your chances of survival. Remarkably, my body knew exactly what to do.

Nature works in wondrous ways. Most of the time, we create fear in our minds, which is often not realistic. I have learned that in truly perilous situations, there is no time for fear. When danger looms, we become like wild animals, driven by our instincts. Our body releases the hormone adrenaline, our staunchest ally in such situations. Adrenaline helped me to perform at my best. I ran faster than I had ever run. For the rest of the day, my colleagues laughed and teased me: 'Martine, she can certainly run!' A good sense of humour is the most effective way to face challenges and danger. Like most people, I enjoy a good laugh and it seems to work in most situations. To my surprise, after the attack, no one asked me if I was all right. For seasoned wildlife professionals in this part of the world, this was a minor incident. Fatal accidents and attacks happen regularly. Here, you often hear people say, 'Africa is not for sissies', and it is so true. Of course, it is physically tough but even tougher mentally.

As I sit and reflect, I think back to my life in Amsterdam four years earlier. I have a pleasant social life, with friends and family around me in our small country, the Netherlands. During this period, I have recurring, anxious dreams about being attacked

by an African buffalo bull. Soon, I will be moving alone to South Africa to take on a new job as a fulltime wildlife veterinarian and I am obviously incredibly nervous about it. In this new role, my patients will include all species of African wildlife, such as African buffalo, rhinos, antelope, elephants, giraffes, zebras and lions. Wonderful yet extremely dangerous animals. I will be preparing dozens of tranquillisers darts every day, using one of the most dangerous anaesthetics in the world. These opiates are thousands of times stronger than morphine and, as primates, we are very sensitive to them. Even a small drop of it in the eyes, mouth or a wound is lethal if not given the antidote in time. I will be shooting tranquilliser darts from helicopters, tracking rhinos on foot, treating elephants and catching lions at night. Fortunately, I have already gained quite a lot of experience by assisting wildlife vets as they carry out their work. However, this position will be my first as an all-round, independent wildlife veterinarian.

I will be entirely self-reliant and will be expected to find solutions to every challenge in the field. My patients will be completely wild, highly alert and fast, much more at home in the bush than I. In addition, I am all too aware that daily life in South Africa is not without its perils. Honestly, I am quite anxious about embarking on this solitary journey. In the weeks before departure, I have the same recurring dream. In it, I am running as fast as I can, trying to get away from an attacking African buffalo bull. He persists in following my every step, pushing me, making me desperately run for my life. The moment his colossal horns hit me, I wake up, shocked, drenched in sweat, my heart pounding. I begin to wonder whether these nightmares are a sign that I should reconsider. Will something go wrong? Why do I want this? I could just stay at home. I have an exceptionally good life and have no reason at all to leave. Perhaps I should call the whole thing off. But I have come so far already. I am committed to this path. After all, didn't I promise myself I would never give up?

I know from previous experiences that with any exhilarating undertaking, doubts are normal, so I try to focus on the positive aspects. All my professional life, I have been striving towards this dream job. To gain experience with wild animals, I wrote endless letters to organise internships. I have embraced many adventures along the way and accepted numerous jobs, including working as a cook, dishwasher, babysitter, courier and administrator. Anything to earn money, so I could pursue opportunities around the world, at wildlife parks, sanctuaries or wildlife rehabilitation centres each year. I did not feel like I had a choice, my interest was simply all-consuming. As a third-year veterinary student, I was given the opportunity to assist with anaesthetising and taking samples from wild rhinos, African buffalo and elephants in South Africa's Kruger National Park. I found myself reluctant to take a shower ever again because the scent of the wild animals clinging to me made me incredibly happy.

The way I see it, animals are considered 'wild' if they live completely autonomously, independent from humans, and can fend for themselves physically and mentally. Not long ago, human beings lived in the wilderness as hunter-gatherers and we still bear a strong resemblance to these ancient men and women. That is why wild animals are such a huge source of inspiration to us. When people say that 'the world is coming to an end', as many of them did during the Covid-19 pandemic, they do not realise that they are thinking only of the 'human world'. The lives of all wildlife species continue as normal. Sadly, multiple factors, like the destruction of natural habitats, environmental pollution, construction of roads, poaching and the wildlife trade, have caused a severe decline in many wildlife populations. This decline has reached such a critical point that it is now imperative that we humans intervene to protect endangered wildlife species and their habitats. This need for intervention is one hundred percent a consequence of our actions. Most species have been on this planet

for many millions of years, long before people emerged and they possess an innate ability to survive. It is fascinating to me that so many of us consider ourselves the centre of the world. Modern day humans have only walked on this planet for approximately 300,000 years, which is a noticeably shorter period than most wildlife species. Rhinoceroses have roamed on earth for over fifty million years and crocodiles two hundred million years. They know how to live, reproduce and survive on this planet. All that wild animals really need is enough natural space and a secure habitat where they can coexist with their own kind. They are self-sufficient in all other aspects of life.

Wild animals are my greatest passion and source of inspiration and I have no favourites. Spiders are just as extraordinary and inspiring to me as elephants. All living creatures, including humans, are vulnerable, intertwined and interdependent. Our origin is rooted in biodiversity and we depend on a healthy ecosystem. I believe I will find immense fulfilment as a wildlife veterinarian by actively contributing to wildlife conservation and the survival of species.

Whilst browsing in a bookstore, just weeks prior to my emigration to South Africa, I come across the book *Coach Your Life* by Fiona Harrold. Intrigued by the title, I buy it and read it eagerly. The central message of the book – living a remarkable and fulfilling life means stepping out of your comfort zone – resonates deeply with me. Wherever there is fear, there is an opportunity for growth. Choosing to confront what scares you, can make life interesting and exciting and it is in those moments that you learn. When you are feeling nervous, it is often a sign that you are on the right track.

I am all too aware of my two main concerns: working with dangerous animals and handling even more dangerous anaesthetics. Also, as someone who thrives on social interactions and relationships, the idea of venturing into a perilous and challeng-

ing environment all on my own is exciting and daunting at the same time. However, my love of wild animals and my unwavering determination to become a wildlife veterinarian are much stronger than these worries. I have come to terms with the prospect of not having a partner, of extended periods without seeing my friends or family, of dealing with solitude, not having a solid pension, children, a house, savings or a salary. Having no security is not a problem for me. These sacrifices, though significant, do not deter me. Yet I do find myself grappling with one important question: is it worth risking my life to fulfil this dream? Am I prepared to sustain injuries or even death in pursuit of this goal? My answer is a resounding yes.

As an advocate for wildlife, I believe that protecting nature and the preservation of biodiversity represent humanity's most important responsibility today. I feel strongly compelled to embark on this journey, believing wholeheartedly that this is what I must do. If I suffer injury or death along the way, so be it. I decide not to burden my friends or family with these thoughts. Fortunately for me, no one in my circle has any experience of travelling in Africa or working with wildlife, nor are they aware of the dangers involved. If I consistently keep up the front of being fine and reassure everyone that everything is entirely safe, my beloved parents, friends and family will have no cause of concern.