

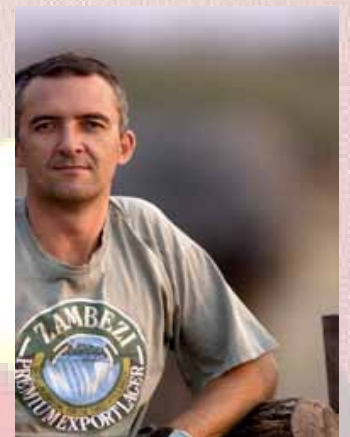
- **Wilson's fight against poachers and intolerant farmers is powerful and moving**
- **Written by the well-known Tony Park**

THE STORY

This is non-fiction. On the borders of Chobe National Park Clay Wilson is an embattled wildlife veterinarian. Not only does he experience great adventure and heart-rending episodes tending to the wild animals that fall victim to accidents and disease, but increasingly he finds himself up against the ravages of poaching and the forces behind this. In the great stand-off between the need for a developing country to expand its agriculture and to preserve its unparalleled wilderness, Wilson sides with the animals and makes powerful enemies in the process. This is no longer the pastoral paradise but a battleground which lands Clay in life-threatening situations. In the end, he is unceremoniously arrested on fabricated charges in December 2011, and deported.

Who Is TONY PARK

The author of *Far Horison*, *The Delta* and *African Dawn* (2011) among other novels and co-wrote the wildlife autobiographies *War Dogs* and *Part of the Pride*. He was born in 1964 and grew up in Sydney. He has worked as a newspaper reporter in Australia and England, a government press secretary, a public relations consultant, and a freelance writer. He is also a major in the Australian Army Reserve and served six months in Afghanistan in 2002 as the public affairs officer for the Australian ground forces. He and his wife, Nicola, divide their time between their home in Sydney, and southern Africa, where they own a tent and a Land Rover.



Excerpt From Book

We've got a wounded leopard, let's go," Mogau said. "I'll come to your place." I ended the call and got my veterinarian's bag and my dart gun and went outside to the Land Cruiser to wait for Mogau. It was my first day back on the job, and man, it was good to be back. I had just got back the night before from Botswana's capital, Gaborone, where I'd met with my lawyer and, after much toing and froing, the permanent secretary of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks. My status as an honorary game warden had been suddenly revoked three months earlier, at the same time as I'd been told my visa and work permit were being cancelled.

The letters had come like a lightning strike at the beginning of the rainy season - malevolent and without warning - and they had exploded my world. I had been given no reason why the government of Botswana wanted me gone, Edmond Mosweu, the permanent secretary and spokesman for the Minister of Wildlife and Tourism, Ketso Mananga, had now told my lawyer, Leezo Nbane, that it had all been a mistake.

Mosweu handed me a letter that gave authority for Chobe National Park to reinstate me as their voluntary veterinary surgeon and this was all I needed. It didn't give me my game warden's position back, but I didn't care. The guys from Chobe had been asking for me constantly in the three months I'd been in limbo and now I had the green light to go back to doing what I loved.

Mogau pulled up in a national parks bakkie with another ranger driving as I was loading my gear. He was one of the good guys and probably my best friend in Botswana. He was bright, caring and a man of integrity, and he took no shit. We'd had our issues but we had sorted them out man-to-man, the way it should be, not like back-stabbing bureaucrats and two-faced politicians. I would have trusted Mogau with my life. We shook hands. "It's good to see you back, Clay." .. "It's good to be back."

On ninety-nine out of a hundred calls Kabo Mogau, who was head of research at Chobe National Park and the guy I reported to, didn't bother coming out with me but on this occasion he said he would ride with me, in my vehicle. He seemed excited about this one, though; or perhaps, like me, he was happy that at last we were back in the business of saving wildlife.

His excitement was infectious and I was pumped. I drove from my house on the plateau above Kasane to the T-junction up the street and turned right on to the main road to Ngoma. We passed through the barrier indicating where the national park began and I signed the book and exchanged smiles and handshakes with the rangers on duty.

It was October and the air was hot and heavy, expectant with the promise of rain. The grass on the side of the road was long and yellow, almost brittle from the months without moisture. The mopane trees' butterfly-shaped leaves had turned red gold, but soon the whole park would be rejuvenated and cloaked in lush emerald green. A fresh start.

Although the road was wide and tarred smooth the speed limit was eighty kilometres an hour and I stuck to it. I had treated too many wild animals that had been seriously injured on this main route through to the Namibian border crossing. I took a left, onto the dirt road heading south towards the famous Savuti plains. We were heading for a hunting camp, in a concession somewhere on the edge of Chobe. At the time Botswana's government embraced sustainable hunting as part of its wildlife management plan.

As in some other African countries, local communities benefitted from the revenue and meat from big game hunts and hunting concessions provided a buffer zone between rural communities and the protected national parks. That's the way it worked in theory, although I knew some hunters were not ethical and the government wasn't really serious about policing the hunters or, for that matter, protecting its wildlife.

Soon after the government started banning hunting and while some people applauded this, the fact was that if the ethical hunters left there would be fewer eyes on the ground and fewer people to assist with anti-poaching in the areas adjacent to national park. Whatever. I was back to doing all I wanted to do in life—saving animals.

It was an hour and a half's drive on sandy roads to reach the hunting camp and on the way we saw elephant – of course, as Chobe National Park and its surrounds are home to about half of the remaining population of African elephants – and ostrich, which was not all that common.

“Let's stop and get a coke,” I said to Mogau as we approached a cluster of huts, a ramshackle mix of mud brick and thatch and corrugated iron. We were on the edge of the park and I pulled over to a little open-sided structure that served as a store. We got out and I stretched, feeling the sun on my back and the smell of the bush ease away the stress of the last few months.

Mogau wandered to the roadside store and shook his head at what he saw. When I joined him and looked at the smiling storekeeper's wares I saw the ivory. He had small, curved tusks lying on a table. They had come from a juvenile elephant and they were for sale. Mogau questioned the guy in rapid Setswana and I could tell the national parks man was not happy.

I didn't speak more than a few words of the language, which was a mistake on my part. Mogau said he was going to start an investigation into this guy. It lowered my spirits, thinking of the small elephant that had died and then had its teeth hacked out of its head. No doubt the guy had a story and an excuse about where the ivory came from. The hunting camp was set on a dry riverbed. Its guest accommodation

consisted of a line of semi-permanent green canvas safari tents, each covered with a thatch roof supported by poles. The hunting season was over for the year due to the heat and the approaching rains and the camp was manned by a skeleton staff of security people and cooks. When we got there we were met by a few guys toting rifles, and a policewoman who cradled a shotgun protectively across her chest.

Mogau confirmed the report that a leopard had got into the cook house and was trapped there. It had happened four days earlier and the camp staff hadn't eaten since then, as all their food was stored in the kitchen. They led me to the kitchen cum storeroom, which was a timber framed structure with canvas walls. The top third of the walls was mosquito mesh and chicken wire, to allow air to circulate, but keep out curious critters such as hyenas and honey badgers.

Leopards, I knew from personal experience, could get in and out of just about anything they wanted to. It seemed this one had waited until it saw a door ajar and then snuck on in. “The leopard is in there,” Mogau said. “They say that someone shot and wounded it, and it wandered into the kitchen.” I went to the cookhouse and climbed up on some boxes stacked outside and I looked through the mesh screen. I peered into the shadows, my eyes taking a little time to adjust from the bright sun and glare of outside and could just make out some whiskers and a part of its face. “I see it.”

The guys and the woman behind me were tense, their fingers curling inside the trigger guards of their weapons. The leopard, however, was not moving. “Somebody get a me a ladder.”

I went back to my truck and opened the back and got out my vet bag. I loaded a dart with Zoletil, a tranquiliser and general anesthetic I usually used on cats. Zoletil's a dissociative drug, which means the brain is temporarily cut off from the rest of the body. When I darted it, the leopard would be conscious and its eyes would be open – it wouldn't go to sleep – but it would be unable to use its limbs.

It's kind of like the animal's paralyzed. It can't be reversed, however, so I would have to sit with the leopard until it came around, which would probably be about an hour to an hour and a half. The ladder arrived and I moved to a different vantage point where it was possible to see the cat's rump poking out from under the table where it was hiding. I saw its long curled tail twitch. I couldn't just walk into the kitchen armed only with a dart gun; it would be on me and killing me before the drug could take effect.

It was going to be a difficult shot. The mesh ventilation panels were narrow, and high up on the wall, and by forcing an opening where the mesh met the canvas I was able to push my gun through, but I had to crook my arm over the wall and couldn't put the butt of the weapon in my shoulder and sight it like I normally would.

I guesstimated the dart's trajectory and squeezed the trigger. It was a good shot, or lucky, depending on which way you look at it. The dart hit the leopard in the rump. It wriggled a bit, but not as much as I would have expected.

The Zoletil was fast acting so I got down off the ladder and went to the door. With the shotgun brigade backing me up I went in, grabbed the leopard's tail and started to drag it. As I pulled I saw its blood being smeared on the floor of the kitchen.

When I had it clear of the table where it had been hiding I saw that it was a young female. I rolled her over and saw that her right shoulder was a mess of matted, bloodied fur. There were numerous puncture wounds, which told me she had been hit by a blast from a shotgun.

I palpated the area around the wound with my hand and I could feel the bones in there were totally shattered. My good mood from the morning was suffering, but this leopard was suffering more. According to the frightened camp staff she had lain in there, bleeding, for four days, and hadn't moved.

She was probably all but paralyzed. If I had a rehabilitation facility back at Kasane – it was still my dream to set one up – I might have been able to nurse her through the long process of treating and mending her wounds. She would need x-rays and reconstructive surgery, daily shots of antibiotics, and room to slowly recuperate. All I had back in my clinic to keep a leopard in was a cage and it was, I had learned, impossible to rehabilitate a predator that way. I dragged the leopard out of the cookhouse and through the dust into the bush at the edge of the camp. I fetched my rifle and knelt down beside it. I touched its beautiful coat, running my fingers through the fur patterned with black rosettes.

"Lord," I said to myself and the cat, "thank you for this animal's life and please watch over it." I stood, aimed, and shot the leopard between the eyes.

Visit Dr. Clay Wilson's Website "International Wildlife Rescue"

<http://www.internationalwildliferescue.org/>

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DR CLAY WILSON



About Dr Clay Wilson Biography

Dr Clay Wilson was born in Johannesburg, but moved with his family to Mexico when he was two. He graduated in Zoology from the University of Florida and qualified as a veterinarian from Onderstepoort. He owned and operated a veterinary clinic in Florida for 18 years before moving to Botswana to operate and volunteer as primary wildlife veterinarian for DWNP in Kasane for 5 years. He now lives and works in the USA saving local wildlife and is in the process of establishing a Mobile Veterinary Unit with Kenya Wildlife Services. He is a worldwide wildlife consultant through his non-profit organisation, International Wildlife Rescue, and volunteers his services to assist Sheldrick's elephant orphanage with veterinary cases