

BASIC INSTINCT

The buffalo cow's rasping tongue and wet nose were her newborn calf's first tactile impressions of the world outside. In stark contrast to the comfortable darkness of her womb, his big brown eyes now blinked in the brassy sunlight, its warmth complementing his mother's loving attention. It felt good. Suddenly she stopped licking, lifted her head and let out a harsh snort. The next thing the tiny buffalo felt was an approaching rumble, which shook the ground of his strange new world. Confusion and terror caused him instinctively to lie flat. And not a moment too soon as the hooves and horns of a hundred tons of African buffalo merged into a grinding mass. Like a black cloud in a red sandstorm, a thousand hooves thundered past kicking up clouds of fine dust, which hung in the air long after the reverberations had faded. Black on red blended, now dark brown; the little buffalo's coat, which his mother had meticulously groomed only moments before, was one with its surrounds. Then, slowly lifting his head, the calf blinked the dust from his eyeballs and looked around: he was alone.

A successful breeding season in South Africa's big game country, like that in any wilderness area, is reflected in the sights and sounds of newborn animals. Vulnerable and wide-eyed with bewilderment, they begin the most testing time of their lives, a necessary process for any baby and its mother. And it is the outcome of this ability to cope as a unit that determines the status of the species as a whole.

As self-appointed guardians of wildlife, conservationists are aware of these processes. However, recent events on the reserve have seen

an increased level of ‘intervention’ in the natural order of things. Call it what you will, essentially well-meaning actions are often viewed as interference by man in the natural balance of an open system. Pundits, under the guise of science, argue against and criticise these undertakings, labelling those who advocate them as being ‘bunny huggers’ or professionally irresponsible. Others are moved by Gandhi’s words: ‘The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.’ Here’s my take on this.

Our knowledge of ecology and the complex processes that drive natural systems is continually improving. We learn, even from our arm-chairs, that similar scenes to those being witnessed on our reserve at any point in time are being played out in the wilder parts of the world in various forms every day, and that the science behind nature’s success is by definition a dispassionate sequence of events. Strictly speaking, human emotions – particularly feelings of empathy, pity and compassion – need to be taken out of the equation, or, at the very least, put into context. However, though we are constantly reminded that ‘nature should be allowed to take its course’, there is *nowhere* on earth that can be defined as ‘pristine’; nowhere has the hand of man not had some influence on the environment in one way or another. So it’s a question of what we define as natural, which in turn is determined by the degree of effect we have had on the environment. Needless to say, there will be a constant need to modify, manipulate and update this definition.

Most people on their first safari to Africa’s Big Game country want to see a kill more than anything else, preferably a lion kill. On the other hand, seasoned visitors to the bush are less driven to witness the process in minute detail. As our attention shifts, the brutal reality of predator–prey relationships – the ongoing struggle for survival, to eat or be eaten – gradually ceases to be an all-encompassing focus. Indeed some of us find we never really harden or get complacent about it. Most move on to discover myriad other facets that make up countless nuances and experiences the bush has on offer. Over time, the fervour to get in among the blood and gore of these often dramatic scenes wanes. Instead we immerse ourselves in the deeper layers of Africa’s

fascinating wilderness, absorbing more of its complex intricacies with each experience.

Of course there will always be those with a more macabre bent for whom the hunting process becomes a fascinating study in itself: the more gruesome and dramatic the kill is, the higher on the scale their viewing experience is rated. However, it has been my experience throughout my career as a game ranger, having dealt with people from all over the world, that the vast majority who fall in love with Africa never lose their fascination with its super-predators. I suspect this sentiment has more than a little to do with the fact that lions and leopards, for example, are well equipped for the task and generally kill quickly. But not all predators are as well built for the kill as these huge cats are; there are vastly varying degrees and ever-changing circumstances. So it comes as no surprise that over-confident lions, as well as lesser predators, will occasionally bite off more than they can chew ... or at least attempt to.

As game rangers, this complex subject is further complicated by our individual personas; there cannot be too many grey areas of intervention open to interpretation in our jobs. For example, do we turn a blind eye to an impala with a broken leg, and 'leave it to nature', but immobilise a limping rhino to remove a splinter from its foot? Do we leave a lion to die slowly from wounds sustained when it is mauled by others in a territorial battle, while we treat another injured by the train? Or is it acceptable to abandon an elephant with a broken foot knowing how poor the prognosis is? ... I believe not.

I advocate human intervention wherever and whenever it can prevent or alleviate unnecessary suffering, particularly where actions by man, deliberate or accidental, can be shown to have been directly responsible, and where it can be carried out with zero or minimal disturbance to the natural process being played out. So I believe we should try and do what we can, whenever we can. Even if this means having to put a suffering animal out of its misery, as in the example of the impala with a broken leg ... or, for that matter, any wild animal where there is no alternative but for it to be left in the bush to die in agony with

little or no hope of survival. However, going out to place a band-aid on every Bambi's bleeding buttock is not going to happen, nor will we be rescuing all the apparently orphaned animals we come across. Having said that, there will be occasions when we are faced with a decision that threatens to send this marriage of emotions off for some serious counselling.

Predictability and certainty are two words you won't find in the bushveld dictionary. In the wild, survival depends on evolutionary attributes that have been honed through the millennia, characteristics that include a strong territorial imperative, adaptive strategy and opportunism, to name but a few. In human beings many of these primal instincts have been lost altogether, but there are a few basic traits we all share and I suspect will always share, notably those that enable us to form relationships. Associations born of mutual dependence and friendship occur throughout the natural world in symbiotic relationships between different species, right down to those dispassionately fixed to survival, such as lichen. But there is another – one that irrevocably stirs a deep primal passion and knows no boundaries. Even science has been known to take a backseat in the face of this powerful force; indeed, most species living today owe their survival to it. I refer specifically to that of any mother's love for her young ... which brings me back to the baby buffalo.

Ever intrusive, often necessary, but occasionally entertaining, the two-way radio crackled, breaking the mid-morning lull with a tentative but familiar 'Mario, Mario, please come in'.

Although I could detect a lilt of urgency in the caller's tone, it lacked the usual irritation that most of the reserve's shareholders try to control but often find hard to hide, particularly when their gas has run out or their game-viewing vehicle has broken down. I immediately recognised the voice as that of Olifants' director Louise Cleary, and depressed the button on the microphone to answer.

'Hi Louise, I'm reading you. Go ahead. Over.'

A tentative ‘umm’ followed by the tailing click of the repeater as the microphone button was released to an empty silence. This was unusual for Louise, whose legal background instilled in her an authoritative confidence most of the time, like when on more than one occasion I have seen contentious issues and boiling testosterone reduced to a simmer while she held the floor and sagely put things in perspective at our board meetings.

‘Umm ... we’re at Sable Dam ... and there’s a tiny buffalo calf being harassed by three black-backed jackals.’

Another, longer, pause.

And then, her voice even softer now, ‘Is there anything we can do to help the poor thing?’

Having learned over the years that predators and scavengers do an excellent job of taking care of the weak, sick or injured in Big Five country such as Olifants, I replied in a matter-of-fact manner, glibly mumbling something about the jackals also needing to eat. But before waiting for a response, I quickly qualified what may have sounded callous, adding that the calf had probably been abandoned for reasons that may not be immediately obvious to us but were to its mother. Of course I had no idea of the drama that was unfolding in front of the people there, nor could I know that Louise’s ecological awareness meant her decision to call me in the first place had taken nearly an hour of soul-searching. And despite the predicament she knew I was being put in, her primal instinct was kicking in and involuntarily overriding all else. There was no question: Louise could not escape the fact that first and foremost she was a mother.

As I said earlier, to further complicate these already complex matters there is mankind’s consciousness, the basic instincts that have gelled into our make-up as human beings (scientists included, of course). So, like it or not, certain emotions are highly developed and ingrained in our genes, not least the primal power of motherly instinct, which is one we share with almost every other animal species on the planet. Whether you’re a cantankerous buffalo cow protecting your calf (of which I have first-hand experience and the scars to prove it) or a human mother, the

involuntary urge to protect your young, and sometimes even those of another species, is stronger than reason: it overrides logic and common sense. So it is understandable that this resignation to the inevitable, in this instance by a mother witnessing the drama unfold, would be thickly clouded with emotion. But as no two situations are ever identical in Africa's bushveld, I knew I needed to go out to the scene and assess things for myself.

Knowing what call to make under these circumstances can be very difficult. More often than not it has to be made on the spur of the moment ... and, as we know, there's no antidote for a bullet once it has left the barrel. Also, technically speaking, shooting a buffalo without a permit is against the law. But game rangers are tuned to run their best on a cocktail of practical science, emotion and circumstance ... a blended fuel, if you like. Vivid mental images of the buffalo calf being eaten by three determined but relatively small, hungry mouths was not painting a pretty picture in my mind. I knew the calf would take an agonisingly long time to die while bleating plaintively until its last breath. The least I could do was assist the process with a quicker, less painful death, I thought.

'I'll be there in 15 minutes,' I replied. Picking up my keys, I turned and walked over to the strongroom. I hardly heard the metallic clang of the lock on the huge door as I opened the gun safe, walked in and grabbed my .22 rifle. My mind was focused elsewhere in preparation and acceptance; for the rest it was mechanical. This would be the second time in as many days that the little weapon was going to be needed for humane work.

Arriving at Sable Dam, I saw three jackals standing in the open. Normally cautious and furtive, these little coyotes of Africa were quite unperturbed by my sudden approach. Apparently they had eaten the buffalo's afterbirth earlier, and clearly the taste of what could constitute the main course had their full attention. The jackals were now focused on what was going to prove a huge task for them; apparently they'd already been up to the calf, almost muzzle to muzzle, testing it ... sizing it up. Growing bolder, they were clearly determined to take it

on, but were also cunning enough to know they would need help. One of them howled repeatedly: its high-pitched call for reinforcements would carry a good distance across the bushveld; soon there would be more jackals arriving. Then, with their strict territorial imperative temporarily put on hold, they'd band as one, attack as a pack, kill and feed as a pack ... There'd be plenty to go around.

I was relieved to see the killing had not yet begun. Louise tried to look composed as I approached her vehicle. She was trying unsuccessfully to hide the tears welling up behind her sunglasses, which now looked like a pair of badly fitting scuba goggles, a picture of utter sadness. I drove up alongside to find her teenage daughter Jennifer and son Tim leaning across to my side. Gesturing to the base of an African wattle tree, they pointed out the shape of an apparently terrified buffalo calf that had taken refuge in the shade. Hmmm ... 'terrified', I mused ... not an adjective I'd normally use when referring to this species.

As I approached the buffalo calf, which had been lying in the cool, dark recesses of the tree's lower branches, it lurched to its feet. Standing up on little hooves that were only starting to harden in the dry air, it teetered on legs that until a few hours ago had been cloistered in the warm comfort and protection of its mother's belly. Then it slowly moved out into the sunlight, steadying itself on splayed legs. I could now clearly see the bloody remnant of its umbilical cord. The calf was no more than a few hours old, eight at the most. Even so, at some point in its infantile reckoning it must have realised its life was being threatened by the jackals and instinctively sought the thickest bush it could find to back into. In this case, the wattle tree with its soft green foliage had created a soft shroud that seemingly provided enough protection for the time being.

Despite being so young, and with absolutely no life experience to draw on, this tiny buffalo was born with an inherent never-say-die attitude, a trait indelibly etched on its genes, one this species is well known for the world over. However, as courageous as its defence was, deep down I knew resistance on this scale was futile and would only postpone the inevitable: the jackals would attack it relentlessly until,

weakened by lack of nourishment, the calf would no longer be able to stand – then the killing would begin.

As hard as this was to accept, there was also something about this little buffalo's determination and will to live that made me look at this situation differently. This calf was no runt; it appeared perfectly normal in every respect, and its coat had been lovingly licked clean; despite the dusty hue, it glistened in the sunlight as if recently shampooed. From the circumstantial evidence I was able to glean, I strongly suspected this calf had not been deliberately abandoned. So, acting purely on gut feel, I made a judgement call and decided there was 'reasonable doubt' in this case. Somehow we had to try and reunite the calf with its biological mother, fully aware that if we failed there'd be no option of adoption or 'rehab': we would then have to abandon the brave little calf to its fate – or, as the Spanish say, *Que sera, sera* ...

Calling out across the clearing to Louise, I asked her where the rest of the herd had moved to. From her explanation it was apparent they'd been seen more than a kilometre to the west of the water hole, relatively far away yet close enough to be worth a try, I thought. To compound our dilemma, baby buffalo don't wear name tags, nor do buffalo cows file missing calf reports, so how the hell were we going to find its mom among 50 others without getting severely gored or worse in the process? But there was no time to debate the issue; we needed to act quickly.

Confident that the herd, but more importantly the calf's mother, was far enough away to pose no danger to us, I climbed down from the Land Cruiser and, with my hand outstretched, slowly approached the little buffalo. The calf looked straight at me with its huge, confused eyes and then, still teetering on unsteady legs, moved cautiously towards me. Man, this was serious lump-in-the-throat stuff. Ever tentatively, the little buffalo came closer and closer, until it was within a few centimetres of my hand.

Ears flat and craning its neck now, the calf's broad, glistening nostrils flared as it audibly drew in the air around me. The smell of human sweat, mingled with a hint of the Paco Rabanne my kids got me for

Christmas, filled its infantile nasal receptors, causing it to retreat instantly. Incredibly, having no way of knowing other than instinct, and at only eight hours old, it already knew that the smell of man, however well masked, meant danger. The calf turned, trying to escape back to its refuge, but I had anticipated this move. Reflexively, my hand shot out and grabbed hold of one of its back legs. I called over my shoulder for Tim and his dad, Chris, to help me load the now-bellowing calf into my Land Cruiser. This done, we followed Louise's vehicle as she led the way to where the main herd of buffalo was last seen. We drove with purpose, and it wasn't long before we'd located the herd moving slowly through the bush on the edge of a seep-line.

Things needed to happen quickly; even so, it couldn't be a case of 'chuck and chance it'. There were a few important considerations to take into account: though I'd never done this before, at least I knew we needed to be downwind from the herd, then to drop the calf at precisely the right moment and distance from the herd, for this to have even a remote chance of working. Very importantly, the calf needed to bleat; to this end, it had to be literally 'dumped' out of the back. If its mother was within earshot, she would recognise her calf's call and come for her baby; at this point she'd be unstoppable, and I knew that. However, if even one buffalo in the herd saw anyone climb out of the Cruiser to try and gently offload the calf, it would cause the rest to stampede. With the herd spooked, we'd have to risk recapturing the calf and trying again once they had settled, and who knows how long that might take. There was no question: we were only going to get one shot at this.

The buffalo were moving slowly, grazing peacefully on the lush grass, totally unaware of what we had bundled up in the back of my pick-up. I slowly drove into the bush, getting in front of the herd; then, manoeuvring the vehicle in reverse, I managed to back up to within 30 metres of them. Unfortunately, it wasn't all going our way ... as luck would have it, two huge bulls were on the perimeter of the herd closest to us, and they lifted their heads curiously at our approach. Buffalo hunters will tell you that when you're looking for big bulls they're usually to be found tailing the herd or surrounded by sharp-eyed, radar-eared cows.

But Murphy had decided *this* was how it was going to go down today.

Undaunted, I was confident that somewhere among them was one particular buffalo who was feeling a little different from the rest. One who felt an uncomfortable ache from her swollen udder, an unexplained emptiness where only hours before was the fullness of a growing weight she had carried for months. Something was still raw and incomplete, and as the mother of a new baby, her hormones were ill at ease. I was reasonably sure this would be enough to keep her just that little bit more aware than the rest. She would be alert and on edge; I was banking on that.

African buffalo are extremely resilient, so don't get me wrong: within a few days or so, I believe she would have forgotten about the birth and the loss of her calf as she focused on survival. But right now I knew she was more than simply one of the most dangerous animals in Africa with a strong herding instinct: she was also the mother of a newborn baby.

Chris leaned over the tailgate of the Land Cruiser and, without showing too much of himself, managed to drop the calf onto the grass. Perfect, I thought, driving away as quickly as the terrain would allow; unfortunately it wasn't fast enough to leave the calf behind. Having now bonded with its 'captors', and not wanting to be deserted again, the little calf hobbled after us bleating pathetically. Thankfully, it didn't get far, stumbling headlong into some thick undergrowth and a small bushwillow, where it tripped and fell, halting its progress, but thankfully not the bleating.

The big buffalo bulls closest to us had hardly started to move in our direction when, from within the main body of the herd, a buffalo cow came charging in, followed closely by a young heifer. The cow, obviously the calf's mother, went straight in to rescue the baby buffalo from the tangle of undergrowth. Once done she gave the tiny calf a quick reassuring lick-cum-nuzzle, further proof that she had not deserted this calf of her own volition, then she spun around to face us. The look she gave us didn't say 'thank you for saving my baby' – far from it – it was more a look that said 'Bring it on!' Knowing them as I do, I would not have expected anything less from a buffalo.

African buffalo are neither endangered nor vulnerable; they don't need our 'help'. Truth be told, in relation to the available resources in our reserves, there are simply too many of them. So why bother saving one more, you may well ask ... Why not allow nature to take its course? Dispassionately speaking, if this had been shown to be a totally natural situation, where man's hand had no part or influence in what had occurred, then sure, we could have turned away coldly and allowed the fittest to survive. However, I can argue, with some conviction, that the predicament this calf found itself in was more likely to have been precipitated by man, to some degree, than by an entirely natural sequence of events.

Prey species such as buffalo are always a little edgy in the vicinity of water holes. These focal points create perfect ambush settings; they are relatively small areas of mass congregation that can sometimes lead to confusion or panic, and predators know this. A buffalo cow giving birth or having just given birth is at her most vulnerable. So, being in the proximity of a water hole exacerbates the problem, and this is all the more reason for not only her but the whole herd to be jittery; it is at this time that even the smallest scare could cause a stampede.

Once I'd seen the calf up close, it was clear in my mind that this apparently healthy animal had not simply been abandoned. This was later confirmed by the mother's reaction when reunited with her calf. Yet still the question remained, why was it on its own? Were the buffalo ambushed when they came down to drink? Or could the predator's strategy have been to coldly calculate and wait for the calf to be born, licked clean and up onto its feet before they attacked? These were just some of the questions that raised doubts about the predator hypothesis. It was highly unlikely that predators lying in ambush would exercise this degree of patience, and even if they had the calf or its mother, or indeed both, would have been taken shortly afterwards, while both were at their most vulnerable.

I believe that there is a more probable scenario. Given that there were an unusually high number of visitors traversing the reserve at the time, there is every chance the already nervous herd could inadvertently

have been stamped by a game viewer. Whatever it was, there can be no doubt that pandemonium ensued when the buffalo herd stampeded. The resulting cloud of dust, kicked up by hundreds of thundering hooves, would have been enough to disorientate the newborn calf, causing separation from its mother in the confusion. According to RD Estes' *The Behavior Guide to African Mammals*, buffalo mothers can be pulled in both directions, shuffling between the newborn calf and the herd. But sometimes the pull of the herd is stronger and young calves are abandoned.

Folklore tells of the slave Androcles who removes a thorn from a wild lion's paw. Years later he comes face to face with the same lion in a Roman arena; the lion recognises him immediately and instead of tearing him to pieces in front of the crowd, licks his hand. Needless to say, the Emperor spares both their lives ...

So maybe this was kismet ... Maybe one day when I am charged by a buffalo and my rifle misfires, when certain death is imminent ... Maybe out of the thick bush off to one side a huge buffalo bull will emerge, knocking the charging buffalo out of the way, saving my life ... Maybe the bull will turn around, look at me over its huge glistening nostrils, give me a wink and bellow ... 'Now we're even.' ... Maybe?

... Yeah, right!