

# Tracking Dangerous Humans

Louis Liebenberg

Tracking dangerous humans in a nature conservation context usually involves tracking down poachers. In national parks in Africa, for example, poachers may be armed with automatic rifles and pose a formidable threat. Dealing with armed poachers requires tactical tracking, often involving setting up an ambush along a route known to be used by the poachers. Setting up an ambush involves gathering intelligence based on tracks and signs, as well as human intelligence, gathered from informants in local communities. To obtain reliable intelligence from communities requires that conservation agencies develop and maintain good relations with local communities. In a broader socio-economic context this means that communities should benefit from conservation. The most effective anti-poaching methods involve a community game guard approach, such as that pioneered by Garth Owen-Smith in Namibia. Often the best trackers are those who were the most effective poachers, but who were employed by the communities as community game guards. One example is the legendary “Piet Renoster” (his nickname can be translated as “Pete Rhino”) in the Kaokoland, who was renowned for his skill as a rhino poacher, but became one of the best community game guards.

Another threat is that posed by armed criminals who target visitors in national parks. This has been an ongoing problem in the Table Mountain National Park in Cape Town, South Africa. Criminal attacks include armed robbery, assault of visitors and rape by gangs of two to four men, usually armed with knives, who do not hesitate to stab victims who resist them. There have been incidents where criminals were armed with guns. These criminals are often under the influence of drugs (such as methamphetamine, also known as “crystal meth” or locally as “tik”), making them more dangerous and unpredictable.

Rob Anderson, a marine biologist and resident of Noordhoek, was assaulted and robbed on Noordhoek beach while collecting sea water samples for marine monitoring:

*I knew there had been muggings on the beach at Noordhoek, where I live, but I considered myself strong and fit enough to take on anything - and of course it would never happen to me.*

*On a beautiful winter day, with warm sun, a gentle wind and not a soul on the beach, I went down to the rocks at Noordhoek. I'm a marine biologist, and was doing research on the effects of sand on intertidal life. It was spring low tide, and when I had finished measuring and collecting specimens, I decided to use my old bicycle to ride across the narrow belt of hard sand to Kommetjie, to see if the sand was having similar effects there.*

*As I approached the southern end of the beach, I saw a man moving fast across the sand, and I became uneasy. I turned around and started to pedal back to the Noordhoek side of the beach. As I drew level with the wreck of the Kakapo, two young men ran across the sand and stood some distance in front of me, blocking my path. In that moment I knew I was about to be mugged, and it simply felt unreal.*

*I surf there regularly, and had always said to myself that if I was mugged I would swim into the sea and move parallel to the beach to safety. Perhaps it was because I was on a bicycle, but it did not even occur to me to go into the water. On my bicycle, I could not leave the narrow belt of hard sand, so I tried to fight my way through. I drove the front wheel into the groin of the one man, but the second one tackled me off the bike. All I remember was lying on my back on the sand, holding the knife-wrist of one man and kicking at the other man, who was prancing around threatening me with a screwdriver.*

*"Give me your cellphone" the first one kept saying. I kept holding his wrist and kicking off his accomplice. "I don't have a cellphone". The accomplice took my satchel, my bicycle, my beanie, my sunglasses, and even tried to remove the diving boots I was wearing. All this time I was lying on the sand holding the first one's wrist, while he held*

*my head between his knees. “I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you” he said. At this point I remembered that I had R 130 cash in my pocket, and I told them. “Which pocket?” I told them and the accomplice quickly removed it. At this point they decided they could not get anything more off me, and I was released, to lie for a moment while they picked up the bike and fled with my few possessions.*

*As soon as they hurried off, something changed. I now felt anger, and because they were trying to leave as quickly as possible with their booty, I felt that I had some kind of advantage, and decided to follow them at a safe distance, so that they would at least have to sweat to get away. I also hoped that they would discard the samples that were in my satchel, as I knew these were useless to them.*

*I followed them at a safe distance for a kilometre or so and found my samples next to the path. I now stood in open veld (field), and they had disappeared into the dense bush that surrounds Masiphumelele. I could see their tracks, and could have followed them, but realised that would be dangerous and stupid. I remember standing for a while, and wondering if I should backtrack to the safety of the beach and simply go straight home. I felt absolutely powerless – there are no other words for it. I felt like a small child.*

*A crazy desire to salvage some dignity made me continue into Masiphumelele, but I had the sense to take a different path through the bush from the one the muggers had used. I must have looked like a mad man, striding through the township in diving bootees, boardshorts and a tattered T-shirt, and carrying a heavy stick that I had picked up. Perhaps it is not surprising that nobody would lend me their cellphone to phone my wife. Eventually a chicken-vendor from the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) gave me R5 and directed me to a phone-container.*

*What were the after-effects of the attack?*

*A week or two later I entered a period of emotional flatness that is hard to describe. It lasted for several weeks. Maybe it was depression (I’m not sure of the clinical description*

*of that), but I could not summon up enthusiasm for anything, and felt as if I was simply going through the motions of life. It was disorientating, very unpleasant, and lasted a few weeks.*

*The assault affected a month of my life and have ruined “The Dunes” for me – the area of Noordhoek Beach where I had surfed for 20 years, and which I now cannot visit without unpleasant fantasies of fear and violence.*

*I believe that the R 130 that I happened to be carrying made them leave me sooner than they would have, and this leads me to suggest a principle to make muggings more pleasant. Certainly, don't carry real valuables, but carry enough cash to make your mugger happy. That R 130 was probably worth more to those youths than my rusty bike and a few items of used clothing.*

*Finally, if car-guards from DRC wonder why I give them twenty bucks, its because the only man who helped me in this predicament was one of their kin, and he refused repayment, saying “One day you may help me”.*

*Rob Anderson*

In the year 2000, shortly after I moved to Noordhoek, I read about an attack on Noordhoek beach in one of the local newspapers, and went to the Fish Hoek Police station to offer my assistance as a tracker.

When I first moved to Noordhoek, which falls within the Table Mountain National Park in Cape Town, armed robberies and assaults took place on average two to four times a week. Due to the remoteness of the area, the police and park rangers were unable to apprehend suspects. Criminal gangs would walk through the wetlands to the beach, where they would hide in the dunes, or inside the Kakapo ship wreck that is a popular destination for tourists. When victims are attacked, their cell phones are usually stolen, leaving them to do a 20 to 30 minute walk to get help, by which time the criminals have

been able to run back to their settlements, disappearing into the crowds. This made it impossible for police to catch them after an attack had been reported. So the attacks were relentless. When police tried to stage stake-outs, criminals would see them in the dunes and simply walk away.

After volunteering my services to the police, I was called out one day after an attack was reported. From the tracks I could see where they were hiding in the dunes, how they stalked up to their victims and surrounded them so that they could not get away. I then tracked them back to the settlement where they came from, where I established the point where they entered the settlement. Using the CyberTracker software to plot their movements and hiding places, I was able to provide the police with a detailed map which we could use to plan an operation.

An essential part of the strategy was to get to know the area, to gather information on the criminals by studying their tracks, their movements and where they were hiding. When tracking dangerous criminals (especially when you are working alone), your first priority is to be alert for danger, scanning the environment around you on a continuous basis. You need to spend 90% of the time looking for danger and 10% of the time looking down at the ground for tracks. Even when studying tracks in detail, measuring them and taking photographs, you need to be constantly alert for danger. When you are on the trail of dangerous criminals, there is a very good chance that they could be on their way back and find you on their trail.

When moving through the landscape, you need to visualize where the criminals may be hiding and move in such a way that they will not see you from where they are. You also need to hide your own tracks so that they do not find out that you are tracking them. To do this I resoled my boots with a smooth sole of soft crepe rubber. This enabled me to step on top of small bushes and scrubs without leaving any footprints. Sometimes it may simply be impossible to hide your tracks, for example on barren dunes. But then you need to move through areas where the criminals do not go, so that they will not notice your tracks in the sand. So instead of following the criminals' trail, you sometimes need to

leave their trail, loop around a dune and pick it up further ahead, so that it is not obvious that you have been following them. You track their trail from a distance, you never walk on it, or never closer than ten meters from it if you can help it.

Knowing the movements of the criminals made it possible for me to plan strategic observation posts from where their movements could be monitored. I hollowed out a hiding place hidden in the tall grass on the top of one of the tallest dunes, and would lie there and wait for the criminals, who would then hide themselves right in front of me in the dunes closer to the beach. I could then alert the police when the criminals were active. I got to know them so well that I could predict which group of visitors they were going to attack.

Individual criminals were monitored by photographing their tracks. Tracks also made it possible to establish associations between criminals by comparing groups of individuals who walk together on different days. For example, several smaller groups ranging from three to five individuals were associated with each other, indicating that they were part of a syndicate of at least eight men. Criminals who got away from the crime scene, but were arrested later, were connected to the crime scene with footprint evidence, identifying distinctive wear patterns, cracks and cuts in the soles of the shoes. CyberTracker data plotting their trail from where they attacked their victims to the point where they were arrested also connected them with the crime scene.

Potential suspects can also be identified by the way they walk. For example, criminals often loiter and drag their heels in a way that hikers do not. They may also wear worn-out shoes, while hikers usually wear hiking boots. The context of tracks may also indicate potential suspects. For example, suspects may hide behind a bush away from a path, from where they wait and watch for potential victims. Their footprints may indicate that they were crouching, looking towards the beach. Or further back from the beach, where visitors never go, any footprints found in a specific area most likely belong to suspects walking through the wetlands on their way to the dunes on the beach. Identifying fresh footprints in paths only used by suspects make it possible to monitor when criminals have

moved into their hiding places in the dunes. It is therefore important to establish where suspects came from and where they were going to, in order to plan operations.

Tracking suspects also enabled me to discover hiding places in thick bush that park rangers were unable to detect. One trail disappeared into a thick bush, and inside the bush suspects had cleared a hiding place where they made fire, drank beer and were able to watch the Kakapo ship wreck for potential victims. This hiding place was so well hidden that rangers walking a few meters past it would not have seen it.

On one day I was asked by one of the local horse riders to investigate suspects he had seen on the beach. It was very windy that day, so most tracks were obliterated by the strong wind, making it difficult to find tracks in spots shaded by bushes and tufts of grass. Tracking alone with my Border Collie Cleo, I struggled to follow the trail, but at one point Cleo gave a soft bark, warning me of danger hidden in the bush nearby. I immediately backed off, but the criminals saw me. I have spent months gathering tracking information, being careful to move through the landscape in such a way that the criminals would not see me and taking precautions to hide my own tracks. With hindsight it was maybe not a good idea to go out alone on such a windy day, but the horse rider was very insistent that I must investigate these suspects, and there was a danger that someone could be attacked that day. For the first time I found myself confronted by the criminals themselves. And what happened took me by surprise – I was suddenly gripped by a level of fear that was very different from what you feel when you encounter dangerous animals. When confronted by a dangerous animal, you experience a natural fear that is somehow neutral – there is nothing personal about it. The animal is doing what you would expect it to do and it is perfectly natural. But when you are confronted by humans who carry knives and who relentlessly pursue you until they have cornered you, especially when you are alone and know that no one can help you, there is something very different in the fear you experience – the intension of humans who attack you with knives somehow creates a quality of fear that is much more intense than I expected. I had to get a grip on my emotions in order to deal with the situation. Fortunately, as they closed in on me and I drew my firearm, they backed off and walked away.

One of the biggest problems I initially experienced was that no one seemed to understand what I was doing – they simply could not understand what a tracker can do. Initially the police were skeptical, and did not think that I could help them to catch the criminals. It was only after ten months of gathering tracking data, when Inspector Heinrich Smith accompanied me into the wetlands and dunes, that the police finally understood how the tracking data could help them. The tracking information allowed us to plan an ambush within an ambush – we ambushed the criminals within their own ambush. Once all this tracking information was gathered and mapped out, I could show the police exactly where to hide, so that the criminals would not spot the police as they moved in from behind the dunes into their own hiding places. Once the criminals settled into their hiding places, they were already surrounded by police, who simply had to wait for them to attack their next victim.

After the first successful arrest, however, the criminals knew that the police were hiding in the dunes. One day I noticed tracks of a single individual who was moving in the dunes in a suspicious manner. This was unusual, since they usually operated in groups (except for one man, whose footprints I knew, described by his victims as having a Rasta hair style and carrying a very long knife). I followed the tracks of the single individual, and then realized that he was scouting the dunes – he was looking to see if there were police in the dunes, before they decided to attack their victims. By this time, after a spate of new attacks threatened to get out of hand, I had employed Senior Tracker James Minye (JJ) to help me track the criminals, since I could only volunteer a few hours in the late afternoons. JJ had been on patrol with Marlyn Joseph, one of the park rangers, when he found a group of suspects moving into the dunes, and called me on his cell phone to give them backup (park rangers in this park are not issued with firearms, so they depended on me and Inspector Smith to assist them). To counter the new strategy of criminals scouting the dunes, I identified a dune further back from the beach, where I suggested the park rangers should hide and wait for the criminals to settle down. Once the criminals settled down in their ambush site, JJ and I stalked up to them, hiding right behind them in the dunes. While JJ monitored the criminals and signaled to me when it was safe, I signaled

to the rangers that they can move into position. By careful stealth and coordination, we were able to once again set up an ambush within and ambush. For this particular operation, we called in Inspector Smith, who by then has been working closely with me for over three years and therefore knew what I was doing. He rushed over to the beach, in civilian clothing, and acted as a decoy, walking into the criminals' ambush.

What happened next surprised both Inspector Smith and me. We had to wait until the knives come out, otherwise we would have no case against them. If we showed ourselves too soon, they would simply walk away. As they closed in Inspector Smith identified himself as a police officer, showed his badge and drew his firearm. But they kept on going for him. They were under the influence of drugs which gave them a false sense of invincibility. Even when Inspector Smith fired warning shots in front of them, they still went for him. Two of them walked into his line of fire, the one got himself wounded in the foot and the other in the groin. Only when the rest of us came rushing out of the dunes to capture them, did they turn to run. This incident was a serious cause for concern. I realized that if the same thing had happened to me when I was confronted while I was alone, they may well have tried to kill me, unless I managed to shoot them first (criminals have killed armed police officers to steal their firearms). Inspector Smith and I were also concerned that after this shooting incident, future attacks may escalate – instead of carrying knives, they may carry guns. However, fortunately this arrest effectively put an end to the beach attacks for at least two years. The shooting incident must have given all the criminals operating in the area something to think about. But I suspect that an additional deterrent was that they did not know how we caught them. They scouted the dunes and thought it was safe, but then found themselves surrounded by rangers who appeared out of nowhere.

When initiating a tracking operation against dangerous criminals, especially in a small community like Noordhoek, a whole range of factors needs to be considered. In addition to applying your tracking skills, an operation can have various impacts at different levels, including your personal safety, the safety of the rangers and police who work with you, as well as the emotional impact it may have on people who are close to you. When you

have immersed yourself in the tracking and have a detailed understanding of what is happening, you may feel that you have a high degree of control over the situation. But other people may not understand what you are doing, so it may impact on them in unexpected ways. Days after we made the last arrest ranger Marlyn Joseph told me how he feared for his life when they saw the criminals, and how his heart lifted when he heard over the radio that I was coming to assist them – only when I joined them were he able to pluck up the courage to go through with the operation. For the first time I realized that by initiating such an operation you take on a responsibility for the safety of others who are less experienced and who look up to you for leadership. And one day, as I rushed out to assist JJ, Jessica (my partner at the time) reacted with intense anxiety, saying “you go out to fight people with knives!” while gesturing violent stabbing motions with her hand – only then did I realize that my volunteer actions were having a serious emotional impact on the woman I loved. Some time after he was released from jail, one of the criminals rode past me on his bicycle – he nodded and gave me a friendly smile, and I smiled back at him, as if in a moment of mutual recognition – even criminals have a human side. And the saddest thing is to go to court and see their elderly mothers, reading their Bibles and praying for their sons.

Over the next four years we picked up tracks on several occasions, indicating that criminals were probing to see if there was an opportunity to attack potential victims, but intensifying the ranger patrols deterred them. Only three attacks, (as far as we know), slipped through our fingers on Noordhoek beach over the last two years. Noordhoek beach will always pose a potential danger for visitors. Ranger patrols can never provide guaranteed safety and there will always be the risk of serious attacks. Only continuous monitoring by expert trackers will keep Noordhoek beach (and the rest of the park) safe.

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