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The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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SOUTHERN AFRICA

James Workman is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying the use, misuse, accretion and depletion of fresh-water supplies in southern Africa.

Cutting Edge Repelling 'The Invasion Of the Water-Snatchers'

James G. Workman

NOVEMBER, 2002

CONFLUENCE OF THE BLYDE AND TREUR RIVERS, South Africa—The lanky young man named Doctor Mashego has a license to kill, and he's good at it. The federal government equips and pays him to seek and snuff out dangerous infiltrators that no one else can reach, to defend his country against a crafty foreign enemy. The enemy is heartless, mindless and ruthless and will stop at nothing to break in and drain Southern Africa's lives and economic lifeblood. With uncontrollable avarice, metastasizing enemy pockets have overrun eight percent of the country; invading cells, like those here, will replicate overnight if left alone.

But Doctor is in no mood to appease. "Shoo, it is *too* hot," he announces, chugging from a canteen and wiping his mouth. He is impatient to get the killing over with, and then enjoy the weekend. It has been a long, scorching week; the day before, I watched him slaughter nine victims per hour — young and old, fat and skinny — breaking only for lunch and a smoke. Exhausted, but rewarded beyond his \$11 daily wage, Doctor slept soundly that night.

Today, looking straight into the start of earth's third largest chasm, Doctor identifies his target on the canyon floor 100 meters down: an Australian, guzzling on the narrow banks of the Blyde River. Doctor smiles. While demanding, this kill looks like it could actually be quite fun. Nothing personal, the obnoxious foreigner just doesn't belong here; never did, never will. Time to get whacked. Within an hour Doctor has fixed rope slings around solid protruding rock. He has tested knots, fed the line through his harness, and, joined by half a dozen other mercenaries on both sides of the gorge, leaps backward off the edge to carry out an execution in the abyss below.

Granted, South Africa has a xenophobic streak running through its national character, but isn't this going a bit far just to



Descending Into the Mayhem: Working for Water's cliffside crew kills enemies no one else can reach.



eradicate *Acacia mearnsii*, a.k.a. the black wattle, a.k.a. a weed?

* * *

It may not be going far *enough*, given the security risk posed by black wattle and 197 other plant species now officially classified as ‘alien invasive weeds.’ From around the world, these criminal species threaten to undermine South Africa’s fragile water supply, consuming 3.3 billion liters, or seven percent of South Africa’s water each year. That’s not water used productively, or at all. It’s wasted. Gone. Lost forever. Never mind inefficient farms, industry or households — invasive aliens like wattle are the fastest-growing water users in the country. Until, that is, they meet the likes of Doctor and other trained killers.

Another 17,593 trained killers, to be exact. For in a full-scale ‘weed war’, Doctor’s surgical mountaineering team of 20 is merely the cutting-edge crew, the Green Berets or *avant-garde* of a national army founded under the new government seven years ago. The unlikely army is poor, black, 54 percent female (often single mothers), one-quarter youths, and two percent disabled. Few have previously held a job down; some are ex-convicts. A motley crew, you think, until you try to keep up with their pace on the ground.

The campaign is called “Working for Water” (WfW), and with three-fourths of its budget coming from a post-apartheid ‘Poverty Relief Fund’, it is the kind of national public-works project that either warms the heart of liberals who look back with fondness on the glory days of FDR’s New Deal, or chills the spine of conservatives who feel America barely escaped the clutches of that 1930s form of ‘creeping communism.’ Here, the jury of public opinion is still out. Those familiar with WfW in principle or practice can’t decide how they feel. Yes it’s a kind of socialism or welfare work program, but even conserva-

tives concede that, Yes, something like it is necessary and long overdue. Further ambivalence may be because the program keeps evolving, focusing, adjusting and tightening its structure even as it expands from 1995’s pilot experiment with \$3 million in seed money into a \$50 million budget, Africa’s largest conservation experiment, and arguably the most innovative weed-eradication effort on earth.

* * *

Like its enemy, this weed-busting juggernaut did not just crop up overnight out of nowhere. WfW took root in a favorable political landscape but quickly met — and continues to meet — stiff opposition from several directions. Some concerns seem legitimate. Consider the predictable reaction of post-apartheid white landowners, already jittery about rising crime, government encroachment and erosion of their ‘my-house-is-my-castle’ property rights. They scrutinize with dread how 19-year-old armed ‘war veterans’ in neighboring Zimbabwe set up camp on game farms and industries and plantations with the Mugabe government’s blessing. They panic as neighboring Namibia jumps on the ethnic-cleansing-of-white-farmers-by-disadvantaged-Africans bandwagon.

And now, by God, even right here in South Africa, appearing overnight, knocking at electric-gated private properties wearing smiles and spanking-clean yellow t-shirt uniforms, come well-organized, state-sponsored teams of the nation’s poorest young blacks armed to the teeth with chainsaws and hatchets and machetes, vowing to “eradicate noxious foreign aliens” from the country forever. Yes, well. Hmm. It is a measure of racial progress and trust and stability in this country that after just seven years, so many white landowners are now actively *inviting* these black execution crews onto their land that WfW can’t keep up with demand.

Still, without scientific rigor, WfW could slide down

a slippery slope into chaos. Who decides when a foreign plant is 'good' or 'evil?' Narrowing down that recently published 'hit list' of the subcontinent's 198 'most wanted' has taken ten long years because the issue is so highly charged. Politically, WfW's campaign involves every acre in the nation, public or private property, and all residential or commercial landowners. Inhabitants of the otherwise dull capital Pretoria, popularly known as "Jacaranda City," were none too pleased to learn that their beloved, beautiful, ubiquitous violet-blossoming and tourist-drawing trees are, ahem, invasive Amazonian aliens; when Jacaranda die, regulations forbid replacing them. One might equally inform Washington D.C. that it must uproot its Japanese cherry-blossom trees, and I have already seen the resulting guerrilla tactics, despite threat of stiff fines: baby jacarandas planted as government counter-insurgency.

To defuse tempers, WfW hastens to clarify two critical words: alien and invasive. Since the colonial era, foreign ships have brought into the country 9,000 'alien' plants, including ornamental roses and tulips, commercially valuable timber and wine grapes, and such nutritional staples as potatoes and maize. These benefit the nation. Likewise, there have always been plenty of 'invasive' plants indigenous to the region that spread at any disturbance, including *Zyzyphus mucronata*, buffalo thorn. Local competition and pests naturally keep these native invasives in check.

Yet the unnatural combination of the two elements — both alien *and* invasive, like black wattle — can prove

explosive, expensive and even deadly¹ on several fronts. Because they have no natural predators or parasites, alien invasives have a massive Darwinian advantage. Until nature abhors this 'vacuum,' humans must step in alone.

Furthermore, within the 198-weed hit list there are (like a traffic signal) several tiers regulating reaction: roughly a third (red) are noxious and must be immediately killed and removed; another batch (yellow) can't be sold, traded or planted; and the remainder (green) are tolerated if closely watched, contained and don't exceed the speed limit. Jacaranda is in the yellow zone. Black wattle — a vertical-growing, greenish-yellow, thin-leaved bush from Down Under that grows into a dark-barked tree and is spreading across 2.5 million hectares — is classified in the red, earning it the death sentence.

Here on the Blyde River, this particular wattle's executioner is Doctor, who has by now descended 25 meters down the sheer rock face on the north wall of the Canyon. He is gliding unhurriedly, but still at several feet per second, using an 18-month-old rope that has .27 percent 'give,' armed with a hatchet and jar of poison. He pauses a quarter of the way down, adjusts his harness, looks up, then continues toward that rude, thirsty Australian invader. I cross a footbridge upstream over to the south bank, feed rope through harness, and, drunk with excitement about the mayhem to come, start to rappel down to join him.

* * *

I'm not a fan of violence, of heights, of dangling from used rope over sharp rocks, or of huge, collectivist government-works projects. I always used to rank 'killing weeds' with, say 'mopping floors' or 'swatting mosquitoes.' And to be sure, there is plenty of tedium to the labor. But it's hard not to get caught up in the *esprit de corps*, the public sense of purpose bordering on national crusade that imbues WfW. It really does feel like a 'good and just war,' turned on a deserving foe. Intentional or not, one genius of the program is to turn paranoid affluent whites and resentful poor blacks against a shared common third enemy: *the goddamn foreigners stealing our water.*

So I have spent many weeks in the field with the two most ambitious WfW crews, smack in the heart of the nation's hottest 'hot-spots' of invading alien plant cover — southwestern Western Cape and northern Mpumalanga — jumping into thin air, trying to get at the core of its strengths and weaknesses, and wondering whether this sort of combat could be replicated in other lands where alien in-



A partnership the author forges with 'Guardian Angel' Lawrence, at right, is based on trust and exploding racial stereotypes about black rock climbers.

¹ Because they compound fuel loads and risks of unnaturally intense fire, cause erosion and mudslides, starve areas of water, and in some cases drive animal species extinct by eliminating habitat.



Hi-Ho, High-Ho, It's Off the Cliff to Work We Go:
*Eradicating aliens at the source of the Blyde River eliminates
 seed-pollution spreading downstream.*

vasive weeds annually eat up billions of dollars in wealth, water and biodiversity. Places like Australia itself or, more severely infested, the USA.

* * *

As its name implies, the driving force of WfW is water. Water depletion, to be precise, in the most water-stressed nation of sub-Saharan Africa. Nationwide public-works programs are not unique in either time or place, and water projects are often the norm. These make-work efforts are the prerogative of any new administration, since 'to victors belong the spoils.' But WfW carries an ironic footnote: In the 1930s, during the worldwide depression, poor jobless whites were employed *en masse* by the state to increase water supply by building dams. Now, poor jobless blacks like Doctor are employed upstream to ensure that weed-free tributaries continue to fill those dams, keep dams from being choked dry by waterweeds, and don't fill up with weed-eroded sediment.

Still, with taxpayer funds scarce, some early skeptics (myself among them) wondered: Is this just a 'green mask' disguising a growing welfare state rife with corruption and favoritism? Isn't wood as valuable as water? Do in-

vasive aliens, really drink enough water to justify the cost of Doctor's labor?

First, I quickly found that WfW, like any large venture, has had its share of scandals. Every blemish that arises in WfW — from fraud, theft, gross mistakes, drunkenness and sloppiness — is readily and quickly and prominently publicized. Curiously, though, all these 'exposés' originated not from external investigations or muckrakers, but from WfW's own annual reports, interviews and press releases. It vigorously uses sunlight to self-disinfect any problems.

Second, WfW recognizes the real market-value of wood both to commercial pulp and timber factories and to rural communities. It has established criteria and incentives to try to co-opt both. To develop a secondary industry from woody weeds before or after removal, WfW trains curio-carvers (including dildos used in HIV-AIDS education), weavers, fence-makers and fuelwood hawkers to use and burn aliens yet leave indigenous trees.

To answer the third, I had to start thinking of a plant's evapo-transpiration system along the lines of human sweat, breath and urine. Like humans, thirst varies according to the individual's age, size, health, genes, and the seasons. Natives adapt, with small leaves, shallow roots, and lie dormant during the long dry season. Alien invasives don't adapt. Quite the opposite, aliens make native landscape adapt to *them*. In several studies, almost all high, vertical invasive aliens drink exponentially more water than slow-growing natives, and drink more at the worst possible time. During the dry season, aliens continue to sink deep tap roots; the roots sop up river beds and groundwater reserves and so dramatically lower the water tables that shallow-root natives are left high and dry and, eventually, dead.

To put numbers on this, I found that in contrast to indigenous shrubs and trees, which sip and retain a few dozen liters per day, the average American pine tree may gulp and 'sweat' 150-250 liters per day; poplar or wattle: 300 liters per day; a gum, or eucalyptus: 250-400 liters (90 gallons) per day. That's ten times as much as a family like Doctor's may consume each day in their home 50 kilometers downstream, water that won't reach them if this wattle remains. No wonder he's risking his life in order to kill invasive weeds; it's a matter of self-defense.

* * *

As we rappel down opposite banks, I count only a few dozen wattles growing in this upper section of the Blyde River Canyon. For *now*. But these are the seed-source, which, if carried downstream by wind or water, would infest the entire watershed. With an annual growth rate of five percent, it demands a pounding of prevention now instead of reaching an incurable stage later.² I

² In KwaZulu Natal to the south, landowners are walking away from farms sucked dry and barren by alien invasive *Chromolaena odorata*, or trifid weed.

do the math (before descent, not during): a relatively healthy area like this may have, say 50 alien invasive stems per hectare (roughly the size of two football fields), reduce the runoff by 10,000 liters and cost \$11 to clear. Neglected 10-20 years, that hectare will be infested with several hundred stems, drinking 250,000 liters per day (1/3 of the runoff), and costing \$120 to clear. Left two more decades, more than a thousand invasives will be highly infested in the hectare, drinking three quarters of the runoff and costing \$500 to clear. I multiplied that by alien invasive weeds already spreading on 10 million hectares. Gulp.

Starting in the late 1980s, African hydrologists and botanists put their heads together and calculated the cumulative national impact. Alarm bells started to go off, at least in this small academic community. "We knew the threat, and had written about the economic and ecologic dangers, but no one in the *apartheid* regime was listening," said Brian Wilgren, one of these scientists. "It is a fact we academics find hard to face, but publication does not precipitate political action. Then, in 1994, came the miracle."

With Nelson Mandela's government, a window of opportunity cracked open. Cabinet ministers were targeted, and Wilgren gave a shock-speech before a crowd that included African National Congress officials that said, in essence: Yes millions of poor blacks deserve running water. Yes you can and should build all the dams and pipes and taps you need to satisfy their thirst, as soon as possible. But at the current rate of spread and infestation, by 2030, there will be no water left to come out your newly installed taps. The post-apartheid government listened.

After the miracle came the catalyst. In April 1995, the government held hearings on how to tap the distant Palmiet River and transfer its water to fast-growing Cape Town. The city needed the water, and a dam seemed the obvious tool. But the project was astronomically expensive, and the new Water Minister, Kader Asmal, was exploring options. That's when a dedicated researcher named Guy Preston planted a seed. Before building this dam-and-transfer scheme, Preston argued, why not tap potential water first through demand-side-management savings (incentives to conserve), and milk the entire river basin to meet our needs in ways that are efficient, equitable and sustainable?

"What kind of 'ways' do you have in mind?" asked Asmal, intrigued.

"Well," Preston answered, "central to efficient catchment management would be *labor-intensive clearing of all these invading alien plants.*"

Magic words. Two top priorities for the new administration were 1) creating jobs to reduce poverty and 2) promoting water security and economic growth. It didn't take a genius to put those two stars in alignment. It took a shrewd opportunist. Asmal seized the occasion (and \$3 million of public-works money still float-

ing about), brought Mandela and other cabinet ministers on board, and Working for Water was born.

* * *

I can't write "...and the rest is history" because WfW has now come to a decisive crossroads. Founding father and champion Asmal has since moved to the Department of Education. The post-apartheid bloom is off the rose; its clarion call for 'Transformation' grows stale. Mandela, while still WfW patron-in-chief, devotes most of his considerable but waning energies to children's issues. President Thabo Mbeki appears more focused on forging an Africa-wide economic partnership than on securing water at home. So WfW, once a proverbial 'child with a thousand fathers' is now not quite an orphan, but at least a neglected adolescent. "2001/2 was the most challenging year," acknowledges WfW Executive-Committee chair Barbara Schreiner, "one in which the maturity of the program has been tested. It has been through a prolonged debate over optimal institutional arrangements and staffing needs."

Translated, she means it is now fighting harder than ever for political support. Hard-engineering infra-structure types within its home at Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF), jealous of WfW's publicity, privately belittle it as too 'soft' and 'bloated' (much as proponents of F-16 fighter jets might pooh-pooh funds 'diverted' from defense contractors toward USAID or the



Leaping Backwards Into the Chasm: *Expunging these Australian enemies of the state can be fun for Doctor (below), but post execution, we still have to climb back up out.*

Peace Corps). WfW's progress appeared nowhere in the pages of DWAF propaganda at the World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD) and, proving that no good deed goes unpunished, WfW's indefatigable shepherd, Guy Preston, was fired from his DWAF post (he remains WfW National Leader, funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature, an NGO).

All that insider-gossip seems dry, but has drier implications on the ground. Or 100 feet above it. As Doctor pauses in mid-air, halfway down the cliff, his coworkers with me on the opposite wall shout to him, alerting him and pointing to his anchor points: "Hey, Doctor! Someone above is untying your rope." They are joking. But figuratively speaking they're not far off base. No one at the political top is a rock for WfW and some appear to want its financial anchors untied. Hanging in the balance, literally, are people like Doctor.

When I first tried to join up with the crew they had not been paid in six weeks. In frustration, they waited until the paycheck arrived before resuming work. Vagueness about WfW's long-term backing leaves the crew's in-team contractors, like Ally Milanzi and Conwell Lamula, speculating about where they can lead their brothers-in-arms. This uncertainty trickles down to the crew, surfacing in bull sessions over lunch breaks or after work.

Worse, the lack of champions at the Cabinet level risks allowing WfW's 'sweat equity' to be co-opted or undercut by unscrupulous business interests. Private foresters have re-directed WfW teams from public work to doing for-profit chores. Illegal growers plant bananas in freshly cleared wetlands. "And when you report these infractions?" I ask.

"None of the higher-ups in DWAF seem to listen or do anything more than a slap on the wrist," says a frus-

trated Quentin Pretorius, Mpumalanga's regional director and rock-climbing instructor who got the team off the ground, so to speak.

Yet I sense that these high-profile surface ripples may mask a strong, deep current. Infighting among a few, albeit powerful, whites in the capital, Pretoria, may not be enough to slow or dismantle what seems an almost political force with nationwide support most fervent among poor blacks. It can also point to tangible achievements beyond simple employment. Indeed, at first I was puzzled to learn that the program has reduced staffing from a 45,000-person mid-90s high (.1 percent of the country's population) to 24,000 last year, to 17,500 today. But WfW's primary objective is not simply to reduce poverty and dole out 'dignity-of-work' cash to as many people as possible. The fact that it is paying fewer people more money per person to complete hectare-linked contract work (rather than daily wages) suggests that, rather than waning, WfW may in fact be hitting its stride, growing more effective and mature per-person at its task. To wit: in 1999, some 21,000 workers cleared 240,000 hectares; last year 17,500 workers cleared 608,000 hectares. If WfW were a corporation, it would report that as a 325 percent increase in earnings.

The reason for this efficiency? WfW now encourages incentive-driven work, shifting from wages-per-person-per-day regardless of progress, to group pay per-completion of work as contracted. This dramatic shift goes beyond efficiency to improve accountability and responsibility. The workers I joined in the Cape back in February, just learning new skills and lessons, were paid by the day, and were constantly awaiting orders and reassurances from white contractors (who might frequently sigh, shake their heads and speak somewhat patronizingly to the workers, as if to a child). In Mpumalanga, the more established and experienced mountaineering crew is almost entirely autonomous. It requires no white supervision and borders on perfectionism, picking up tiny bits of garbage after lunch, correcting whacking technique while Contractor Conwell barks out "Kapa, Kapa, Kapa, Kapa!" Chop. Chop. Chop. And they smile to be hearing orders from a black boss.



Hanging in the Balance: WfW Crews await the fallout of infighting in the capital, but the deeper political current seems to keep flowing regardless.

A crew run of, for and by blacks might just be a 'warm-and-fuzzy' for white liberal dogooders if not for the proof of the pudding. You simply can't clear five billion invading alien plants without people and nature noticing. Every few months comes a story about a dead spring 'miraculously' leaping back to life. After WfW went through, some tributaries in the upper Mutlumuvi Catchment have started flowing for the first time in 60 years. Around Lydenberg, where WfW has cleared 2,000 hectares, the region has been hit by a series of minor droughts, is feeling the pinch of El Niño, and from April to September recorded the driest winter in 81 years; yet water levels are at their highest in the past 30 years. "One new WfW criticism that

we welcome," says Preston, "comes from people who are complaining that there is now *too much* water returning to their formerly dry creeks downstream of our projects."

* * *

Like any job worth doing, WfW is best assessed in ways that can't be quantified. One way is in skill. Doctor has alighted on the canyon floor on the north side of the Blyde River. He's unhitched, heading for the Australian. I'm taking considerably longer, trembling and fumbling in jerks. But they remain patient with me. On my first day, when they started to teach me the ropes, as it were, I inched down a middle strand while on either side two self-appointed guardian angels, Lawrence and Justice, coaxed the butterflies from my tummy. Sweating bullets, working as fast as I could, it took me 20 minutes to lower myself 45 meters. It took the next three guys 20 seconds.

From skill comes employability. My experience of working with these experts would be akin to taking downhill lessons from a Rocky Mountain ski patrol plucked out of Harlem. They explode lingering racial stereotypes. They may be to ropes what Jackie Robinson was to baseball bats, and once certified to standard level 2 in the International Rope Access Training Association, they can sell their labor as construction technicians for a minimum of 500 Rands (\$55) a day, which in Africa is lucrative. Considering the fact that this is the first job for anyone on the crew, and an utterly demanding and exhausting one at that, none are complaining about their entry-level career rung.

Another intangible is motivation. WfW directors often fretted to me that the program was not doing enough to instill an 'environmental ethic' for the long run. In the beginning, I took the concerns quite seriously, for it hinted at whether WfW was sustainable. So I duly asked crews I was laboring alongside, "what are you working for?" First was the obvious: It's the paycheck, stupid. Crew members wildly applaud news of pay raises, and widespread jokes within the program josh that "We must remember that we're 'Working for Water,' not 'Working for Money'." Others, more cynically and unfairly, dub the program, "Working for Whites" because most weed-infested areas follow white economic activity.

Gradually, others say they also work for the challenge, "It's like a sport to us. You can't do this unless you like it." Others cite the growth and camaraderie: "We're living just like brothers here. No one else really understands what we are doing. We like the money, sure. But we also like a good job, you can do this if you're still young." Eventually we are all gathered at the end of the week, talking about women and how to spend or save what money we've earned. Some would like to go to Kruger to see their first elephant. Others to Cape Town for the first time. But all need to spread out the savings among several girlfriends, siblings, parents, children and wives.

This reveals a subtle but powerful motivation: communal peer pressure. "They're at the stage where they



Where the 'Baas' is Black: Autonomous crews border on perfectionism as where Contractor Conwell corrects the technique of his team member.

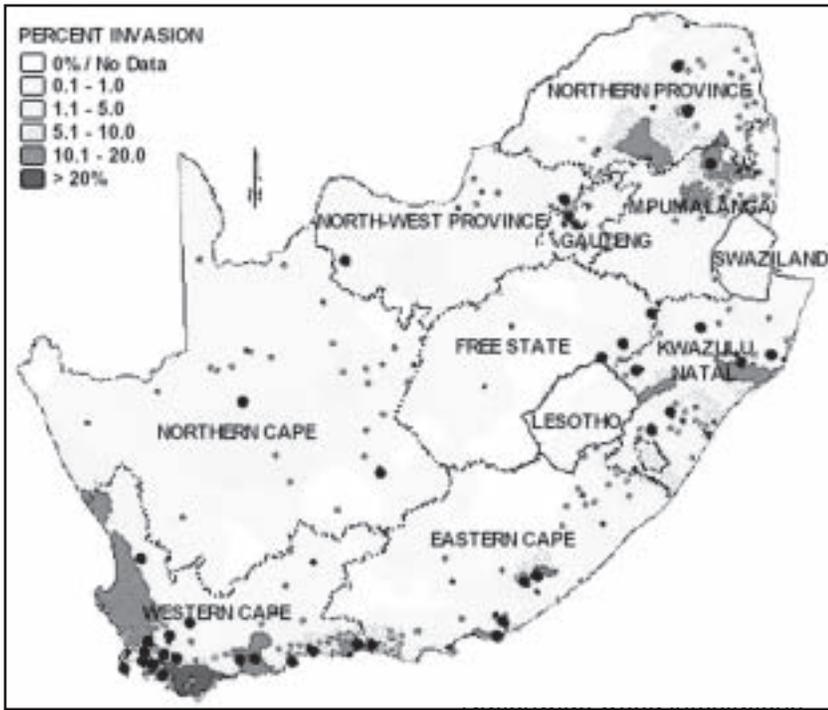
can compete with, and underbid rich white contractors for jobs that were exclusively theirs (whites) up to now," says Pretorius of the climbing crew. "Those white contractors have the equipment. They have the machinery. But the difference is, that coming from the outside and leaving when they're done, they just don't give a shit." By contrast, by hiring local people from the regions in which projects take place, WfW creates a built-in, two-way incentive: WfW crews will be accountable for their work to improve middle wetlands and catchment the village depends, and on; they are looked up to by village folk. The crews, in turn, will hold their family and friends in the village accountable for how it treats and maintains the work once it is cleared.

Whatever the motivation, the end result is death. A welcome, overdue death. There are many ways foreign weeds meet their maker in Africa: exposure, burned to a crisp, drained of fluid, hacked to pieces, spines snapped, eaten by hungry, host-specific insects. But Doctor knows his trade and his target. He decides the most efficient attack against the Australians will be to flay their skins, then spray poison: death, in other words, by lethal injection. As he starts to throttle that wattle, one is moved to cheer. There are no last rites, no pleas, no quarter asked or given. The battle over, Doctor emerges victorious.

Still, WfW is an army at war, and every war involves casualties. This high-risk mountaineering crew was celebrated for working 3,000 hours without injury or accident, right before disaster struck December 11, 2001. At around noon that day, while descending to 50 meters the escarpment, the crew stumbled over a large beehive. Moses was gashed open near a kidney, trying to escape. Justice had 1,000 bee stings pulled out of him, but survived. Thembe, however, did not make it. They heard him screaming, crying out in panic, until the bees poured into his mouth and nose, stinging from within, suffocating him after sending him into shock. When they managed to pull the corpse up five hours later it had swollen twice its size. "We are still recovering from that day," said Conwell. "It is like losing part of your family."

But the incident has not incapacitated them, and they

Source: www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw



continue work, knowing the risks. What does block them, at least slightly, is a phobia shared throughout the team. I notice it when we're down on the Blyde River, having completed the work. After coaxing me down a sheer cliff with aplomb, and dropping through 40 meters of nothingness suspended on what is a relatively 'old, used rope,' and bouncing from crack to ledge swinging away with hatchet and poison, I find them at the bottom, knees shaking, eyes wide, clinging to rocks. When asked what's wrong they point: "The water is too much."

On the irony. This team who has overcome so much, so bravely, gets nervous about crossing the very river they are working to increase. Now, it is my turn to repay their patience by helping to coax them back to the relative safety of a strand of dangling rope. We have a 40-meter rise still ahead, straight up. Though we're equipped with 'ascenders' — hand tools that hitch the rope allowing us to step, slide and brace our way up — this climb is extremely grueling; it takes all my strength trying to keep up, and not look down. But by now they are back to helping me overcome my phobias and my weaknesses and my vulnerability, making it back up, foot by foot, arriving at the top together.

Perhaps that's the best way of measuring the work of WfW, and this crew in particular: In the global and national arena where others have had the historic advantage, these young men and single mothers — born into a 'culture of dependency' — appear increasingly ready to prove themselves not inferiors, but equals. Even superiors. While proud of their work in the province and country, Ally and Conwell also have their eyes set on a broader horizon.

"I want us to get to the stage and confidence where we are the world's best," says Ally. "I mean, to show people in America and Europe that black guys can climb ropes too, and we can do it well, maybe as good as or even better than they do."

I think of the rock climbers I have watched in Yosemite and the Alps. "They are very good," I say. "But you might hold your own. Still, there is a big difference. They all climb up and go down rock faces with ropes, harnesses and carabineers for *fun*. No one else in the world, that I know of, is crazy enough, brave enough or skilled enough to do what you do for *work*."

The uniqueness of their labor sinks in, as if an artist realizes he cannot be compared to his peers. "Well," he says quietly. "Then we will have to prove it to ourselves." □

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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