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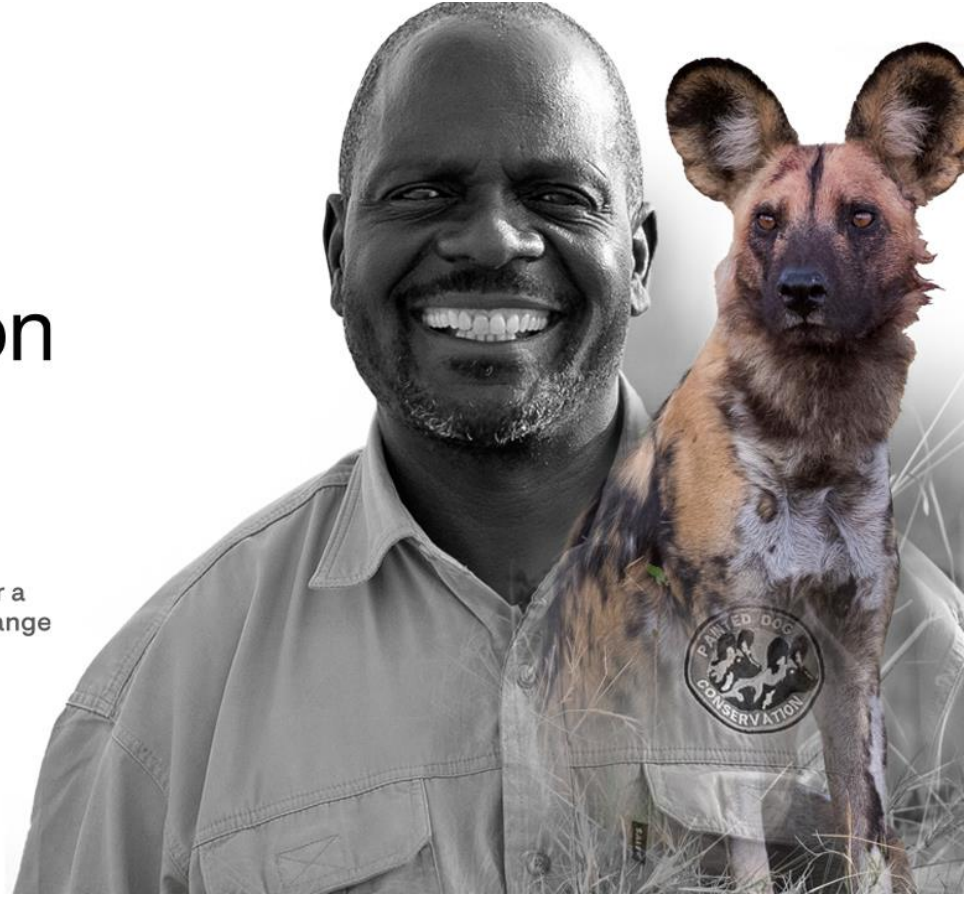

Tusk Talks Podcast

Episode One: A Life with Painted Dogs – Jealous Mpofu

Jealous

They come back and then they feed the alpha female. If the puppies are growing up, they also feed the puppies with the lungs, heart, soft meat. And then if the puppies keep on begging what they do is they've got special toys.

Bea

Welcome to Tusk Talks. I'm Bea Karanja and this is Tusk Talks, a podcast exploring the life stories and extraordinary experiences of Africa's most inspirational conservationists. This is episode one, A Life with Painted Dogs. Today I'm talking to Jealous Mpofu. Jealous is chief tracker at Painted Dog Conservation in Zimbabwe. His passion for painted dogs is truly infectious. You'll hear this throughout the episode. Described by his organisation as a homegrown hero, Jealous has dedicated his working life to protecting the dogs in and around Hwange National Park.

He monitors five packs with a combined territory of more than 3,000 square kilometres. For those of you in the UK, this is roughly the size of Cornwall. Driving out each morning bright and early, ready to deploy his inherent bush skills and intimate knowledge of the dog's behaviour, often staying in the bush until he sees them. I was inspired speaking to Jealous; he's someone who's really found his calling and his fondness for 'his dogs', as he calls them, is palpable. I think you're going to love hearing from him. Here we go.

So, Jealous. We were talking earlier about me never seeing Wild Dogs. So, could you tell me when you first met your first wild dog, when you came across your first pack?

Jealous

Okay. Myself, I joined the Painted Dog in 1998 and my first dog I saw, it was in May during the denning season. They named the pack, the pack was called Iceboat. When I saw them, we saw them just by the den and I was the most excited I would say because I was given a tea with my boss, Peter and Greg. They give me a big mug of coffee. So I just like accepted a coffee and then I drink and drink and drink. And then they said, oh, let's go to the den we want to see and to monitor the pack and see what's going on, on that den.

So I … myself, I, we stayed about one hour, 30 minutes. So I was pleased with and I wanted to go to the toilet. Then they said ah don't worry we want to see the dog. They are almost there because the signal is going ping, ping, ping, you know - very heavily. And then I saw the alpha male, Iceboat.

He was going for the hunt. That was my first time. I was so excited and I just like laughing, laughing you know, because I just stay right at the edge of the park and I didn't see any wild dog, any painted dog. And I used to see hyenas, lions, leopards, but not wild dog.

Bea

Wow. Would you say that was your most memorable or is there another memorable story about the dogs?

Jealous

Yes this is my memorable one and as I'm working now we go to another pack. I'm following five packs and then we got another pack we have been following for three years now. But they have a lot of challenges with the… in the communal land because they are being pushed by other packs, so they are going right to communal land and the farmers as well. So far we have counted them - maybe each dog has been snared 6 to 7 times. So lucky enough because the pack is collared, we always monitor them every morning, every afternoon. So if we see them, we hear the signal is still the same place, instead of driving in because the bush is so thick, we end up like walking in. I found the dogs just in a snare. And then we just call maybe the guy who darts the dog come and dart the dog and release the snare or sometimes what we do we just cover the eyes, the head, and then we remove the snare.

Bea

And so how do you track the dogs?

Jealous

The first thing I can tell you if I'm tracking, if I'm driving early in the morning, the most important thing is I put my radio receiver on and then also when I'm driving, I'll be looking on the ground, looking for the spoors. And if I pick up this spoor, I know roughly that the dog… If there's no signal,

I'll try to drive around the roads - because we need a person to use the road - so I drive in the blocks until I find the dogs.

Bea

And when you when you do find them, how does it feel Jealous?

Jealous

The first thing I will be really excited, but not really smiling a lot.

What I do is I first check the numbers of dogs in the pack, and then if I see that every member is okay, then this is when I get more excited.

Bea

Excellent. And do you track them through the alpha dog who has a collar?

Yeah, it depends… truly speaking, when you are collaring the dogs like a new pack the first thing you need to do is check for the alpha female and the alpha male.

Especially when they are going towards the mating season because if you dart one of the alphas and then something goes wrong, then you have disturbed that pack.

Okay. Okay. All right.

So, tell me something amazing about wild dogs. Tell our listeners something amazing about wild dogs that you wouldn't think that we would know.

Jealous

The Wild dog. They are very different beasts. You cannot compare them to hyenas, or lions. But I will tell you that the Painted Dogs, they look after each other. If one dog is injured, they go… if they're going for hunting, they leave one guy who is looking after the injured dog and cleaning the wound and monitoring the enemies, if you like, lions, hyenas – if they see them, they go into a hidden place. When they come back, they killed something, what they do is they feed the injured one first. And then they feed also the guy was monitoring the injured dog.

Bea

Oh, fantastic. Oh, that's really that is amazing, that is really cool to know. So then are there any particular packs or dogs that you feel connected to? Is Iceboat still around?

Jealous

Unfortunately Iceboat is not around because it has been a long time now. The lifespan of the dog is nine years to eleven years old. So Iceboat is gone, long back.

The ones who I am talking about, they were pushed from national parks to the communal land. So they used to take goats from the communal land and we went to the place and then the people told us that if there are dogs they will shoot, they will kill them.

Then we said, You guys, listen, these are endangered species we need to talk about this.

Then because I know the local language a lot, I talk to them and then they end up understanding and say to you guys, what you need to do - you need to wait until the denning season comes.

When they go into the den, you let us know. Then we will monitor the pack and we know that if the the pups two months old, we can capture the adults and also we will take out the puppies. And for sure those people are were, they grew up just near the park, so they listen to us.

We managed to capture the alpha male and alpha female. And then with the seven puppies, they were brought to our rehabilitation centre. And we managed to raise the puppies to an age of six months. And then what they did, they came all the way to our main offices and then they took the right road. Where they came from – it's about maybe 50 something kilometres. Then in five days time, we had some messages that oh there are some dogs with puppies here and they are collared!

Bea

So they came back home, essentially, they came back home!

Jealous

Yes, because it's a safe place where they wait, it was easy for them to get some food, some goats.

Bea

So they're very smart animals. Very, very smart animals.

Jealous

They are.

Bea

Yeah. So I look forward to coming to meet the alpha female called Bea. Because I know you're going to name a dog after me, so I will come and I will see my wild dog.

Jealous

Yes. It'll be really brilliant. Yeah. I'll be looking forward to see you again.

Bea

Excellent Jealous, excellent. So now, Jealous, tell me - I know your son is following in your footsteps. So can you tell us what that means to you and to the family?

Jealous

I'm very, very, very impressed. To tell you the truth, I'm very impressed about my son. I can remember he was doing his Grades at primary school, just close by our place. We when he was going to school, he used to sight the dogs. He used to count the dogs and see how many dogs are collared and then how many puppies there is, are there any snared dogs.? I was just really happy with him as far as I see my son is going to be more advanced than me, because he's good. Myself, I didn't finish my O level. He did. He did the upper six, and now he's doing University. And also I taught him a lot of things and now he's doing the anti-poaching, also he's doing the media so he's going to communicate with the local people. If he's following my footsteps it would be really good, because my intention is to look for the wildlife, nothing else.

I don't want any job in the industry, but what I want is that I want to keep this wildlife going so that the future children can see the animal not in the pictures.

Bea

Which brings me back to, you know, if we can go back to when you were a child growing up in the areas that you grew up, can you tell us how has it changed over time? You know, is the environment that you worked in the same environment your son would work in?

Jealous

Myself, I grew up in the Hwange National Park, and I was staying with my uncle. So anyway, it was very lucky for me because I grew up living and going in the park looking for the animals and it was really easy for me to identify the animals in English, my local language, in the scientific name, because my uncle was working in research and my first job when I joined in the national park, I used to work with rhinos - black rhinos – I enjoyed a lot because we used to track the rhinos, but sometimes we used to have difficulties with the rhinos and the hippos. They are almost like similar spoors. But if you look at it properly, the rhinos have got three toes, the hippo has got four toes. Different shapes as well – the toes of a rhino are more rounded. So I was told by my friends the differences of spoors and I was very eager to do to learn about all those things.

Bea

So has the park changed a lot from when you were a child to where it is today?

Jealous

Yeah. The park has changed. Yeah, a lot. Because when I grew up there, we used to have loads of thick bushes but now, as you know, maybe a way that the elephants… the numbers of elephants have grown up a lot, so they've destroyed the habitat of the bush. So even the danger of the dogs in the park, it's a bit of a challenge because the dogs the dens where it's more thick. They need a really big place, thick bush where there's no roads. And if you drive around, you pick up the spoor and then you see where the spoor is coming from during the denning season, you can just walk and find the den.

Bea

Could you tell us a little bit more about wild dogs and their personalities and their importance to the landscapes?

Jealous

They are really good animals and also the Painted Dogs, when they den, the alpha male and the alpha female, they are not the ones who are looking after the puppies, the whole pack is. They work as a team: They go and hunt, they come back and then they feed the alpha female. If the puppies are grown up, they also feed the puppies with the lungs, the heart, soft meat. And then if the puppies keep on begging, what they do is they go to special toys, the ears. If they kill the kudu, they bring the ears, the give the ears to the puppies so that the puppies can keep on playing with those ears and then they get tired.

Bea

Amazing. And is it just for the kudu or any of the other herbivores?

Jealous

Oh any others. If they kill, they bring the skin, they bring the ears, they do the same thing. It's sort of like toys.

Bea

Wow, I'm still stuck on the communal parenting element of it. That social, very strong community ties and then. And that pack will stay like that until it disintegrates by nature or by virtue of nature.

Jealous

No, what happens is that they have puppies, the females and the males. The females can stay for three years with the babies, with the pack. And then some females, they decide to leave the pack and look for other males somewhere because you know that they don't mate with their relatives, so they move somewhere else.

Bea

And then that female and that male will start a whole new other pack.

Jealous

The females, only females – they join up with maybe three, three females move from this pack and then they join up with four males. They join up and then the females, they choose who is the best alpha male.

Bea

Wow. So it's proper democracy?

Jealous

Yes, it is.

Bea

I love that. And then I know struggles between communities and the wild dogs, where the wild dogs are hunting or predating their livestock, so eating their goats or their cows or their domestic livestock. So, what are you and your team doing to address the human-wild dog conflict in your community?

Jealous

Oh, what a great question. What do we do ourselves? We know that we are weak right at the edge of the park. And that's the area as well. What we do is we have some people educate, to educate people. You need to educate people about wildlife. And then also when you are working with the animals, you need to share what you get.

So what we do ourself like the Bush camp, they go to the communal and teach people about wildlife. If you look at an animal, you are not supposed to say that you see meat; you are supposed to see this is US dollars. So what they do is they go and see what's going there in the communal land, there's a lot of challenges in Zimbabwe. So if they don't have a borehole, we always help or we help the school. That's the way how we help - we work with them so you help each other.

Bea

So you're in the schools educating the children about the importance of the wild dogs, you're in the communities talking to the communities about the importance of the wild dogs so that they can see the economic value to their livelihoods rather than just snaring them and eating them for food.

Jealous

What I know about painted dogs is that they move long distances. One dog, one pack can move 750 square kilometre. So people will be targeting Steenbok, Common Duiker, Impala, Kudus. So the dogs are moving long distances, they end up going into the snares. And when they find out that a dog is killed, they just remove the snare and leave the dog without touching it.

Bea

Wow. So your educational work is having some impact with people realizing, okay, let's stop snaring these animals.

Jealous

Yes, and also it's very important for them because now people are taking the painted dogs like… they were putting them in a bigcategory of like hyenas, lions. But the lions eat the dogs, they don't do that. Even if they go to the community, like now, they don't stay there. If you disturb them, they move away somewhere else.

Bea

I didn't I didn't know that they cover such big territory. They move fast. They're very fast movers.

Jealous

Very fast. In fact, if they move in first light, they can move even 20 to 30 kilometers in the morning, in one morning.

Bea

So does that mean that their habitats are shrinking then? You know, because if they have such a big habitat, and you know, human interference is a common thing around the continent - are we seeing their spaces dwindling?

Jealous

Yes. As I said before, the habitat has been destroyed by elephants. So they used to use their habitat in the park and also there’s less competition. But as far as you know, you read newspapers, the numbers of lions, they've gone up a lot, and hyenas. So the competition is so heavy in the park. So they end up going to the farms. That's why they get hammered by snares.

Bea

And hence the importance of the education, which then can reduce and mitigate that conflict. Because once people know, then they're less likely to put out more snares and things like that.

Jealous

Yes, they used to do that. But now I think we have been doing the cleaning, building the clinics, we've been doing the gardens for nutrition to get vegetables, onions, tomatoes, and now they put the painted dog species as important animals, very important animals to us. Because a long time back they were not even reporting to us, but now even if they see a jackal, they're just like 'Oh, the dogs are here' and then you go and find out that it's a jackal.

Bea

Fantastic. That's good to hear, Jealous. So is there any particular dogs or pack that you feel connected to and what does that bring into your heart, into your soul, when you see those particular dogs?

Jealous

There's this pack of five and it's called the Mpindothela pack and it's got three puppies. We started from three years ago up to now. We've been following and following and following - we had lot of challenges with the snares, but now what is amazing about our project because everybody stand up and then they said we want to be volunteers. We got about 200 and something volunteers who are looking for snares right now on the ground.

Bea

Brilliant! Well done!

Jealous

Thank you! So it is a really good thing. Everybody stands up with his foot and says okay let's look for snares. And the project itself is trying it's level best by putting the signposts on the road, putting all the pamphlets everywhere so everybody is behind talking dogs, dogs, dogs. All the people they see our cars passing, they say 'Oh, we saw your car. What's wrong with your car? It's going the wrong way, is any problem with your dogs?' So everybody's focusing on dogs.

Bea

That is so good to hear Jealous. That is really encouraging and inspiring to hear.

What advice would you give to young rangers or young people around the continent in terms of the work that you do and what can the young Africans do to preserve, conserve and protect their natural and national heritage?

Jealous

Right. The first thing I can tell everybody is about being patient at work. If you are working, don't think about salaries, pay rise. You need to be focusing on what we are doing. You know, I can say I'm religious, but God is giving the opportunity in the last minutes. It's like me - even myself I didn't know that I would be talking to you. I was nothing. But my patient has paid a lot to me, because all my life has changed. I didn't have any relatives went to America, Australia, or whatnot. But my patient pays back. I still remember my boss – when I trained in my job in 1998, he said 'My friend. If you keep doing your work, one day, I'll take you to England.' Then I just like, Oh my God, this guy is trying to, you know, to keep me at work. But I talked to my wife. My wife said, 'No, you never know what to get in the future'. And then I was so patient enough, I worked there for ten years and then my boss said, 'Oh, do you have a passport?' And I said 'no. Then he said, 'Oh, can you go and get the passport?' And then I got the passport and 2008 I went to Europe.

Bea

See, there you go. Patience. Patience.

Jealous

Yes. Patience pays! Yes, yes.

Bea

You really are testament to that resilience and to the patience and, you know, for fortitude of impact. Because I think that's the most important thing - we forget our legacy in impact and yet that should really be the only thing that we think about is what legacy do we leave behind in the impact that we've created for our beautiful continent and for our brothers and sisters around the continent and around the world.

So I think, you know, we can we can take a lot of learning lessons from you, Jealous, in patience and resilience. And as I said, we are here today because of that patience and that resilience. So, congratulations again to you.

With that, I would like you to leave our listeners with something inspirational, something that they can do to help you do your work better or to just make sure that the dogs are surviving and growing and doing what they need to do. So what words of inspiration would you like to leave us with?

Jealous

Okay, myself, I'm so good on ground work, but on computers I'm not so good in fact, new technology. I'm a Bush man. People are educated and I want them to work with me to share the knowledge so that in future we need to help these endangered species, painted dogs. Instead of 200 dogs in Hwange National Park, we will want more than that. I know in the whole world there's about 6000 something - we need to have more than that! So please listen up and do our job and help the

poor guys like me. You know, I want everybody to stand up in Europe - the people in Europe can help by donating some money to the project so that we can extend our research. So that people can educate people in the communal land. We can also bring the kids to the park - the people with the kids right at the edge of the park, they should have to learn about animals a lot because if you don't educate people, the people won't understand why we're keeping this?

Bea

Indeed, indeed. And we need to drive towards getting the alpha female Beatrice so that I can come and see my namesake. And if you find another alpha male, my husband is called Mohammed. We can have the Beatrice Mohammed pack.

Jealous

Yes, it would be brilliant. You are supposed to tell me. I found a new pack, so I was going to name the pack after you.

Bea

We can call the pack Tusk, the Tusk pack.

Jealous

Yes, no problem. I'll make it my time to look for the pack, then I'll let you know.

Bea

Excellent. Then we'll all have to come down and see our pack? Fantastic, well, Jealous it was absolutely a joy and a treat speaking to you. When I get to speak to the winners it makes me realize not only how important our job is as judges, but it also inspires me to find more Jealouses year after year after year and to show young people, young conservationists across the continent that we can do it. We are able, we are capable. And with the support of partners like Tusk, we can go so far, we can go really far. And you are the perfect testament to that, Jealous. Perfect testament.

Jealous

I'm really happy about that, thank you so much.

Bea

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Thanks again for listening. Stay tuned for a trailer of episode two of Tusk Talks.

Ekwoge

So my colleague was bitten yesterday by a snake and unfortunately, you know where he was bitten, in the forest, to bring him out of the neighbouring village and then to the city, took us more than 12 hours to get him, you know, assistance. But one thing that comforted me was that he was brought into a village that lives close to nature. And I knew the local people who have something for this situation.