



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
ATTENTION: NEWS/ENTERTAINMENT
DATE: 3 DECEMBER 2013

Master Tracker, Karel Benadie celebrated by 21 Icons

Sunday December 8 marks the penultimate episode of the first season of **21 Icons South Africa**, the series of short films and portraits that celebrates iconic South Africans who have left an indelible mark on the country and even the world. This time round, it features a man of whom few outside the conservation community would have heard, yet he possesses some of the scarcest skills that enable him to preserve precious indigenous knowledge.

The 50-year-old Karel Benadie is a master tracker, one of only a handful of people in South Africa accorded this status. "Karel Benadie is basically a magician of the bush," says photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn, the creator of 21 Icons. "I see grass, I see rocks, I see sky; he sees a complete wonderland and he can read that location like a book."

For the short film and portrait, which will be screened on SABC3 at 6.57pm on **Sunday 8 December** and published in the Sunday Times respectively, Steirn took Benadie back to the place of his birth — the Karoo National Park, near Beaufort West in the Western Cape. It was here, on the farm Stoltzhoek, that Benadie joined his father as a young child looking after sheep and tracking the jackal and caracal that had escaped their traps. Walking the arid Karoo with his dad instilled in Benadie a love of nature that would set him on the path to a career that includes contributing to a scientific paper on the highly endangered black rhino – even though, at the time, he could not read or write.

At the age of 14, when the farm he lived on was incorporated into the Karoo National Park, Benadie joined what is today known as the South African National Parks authority (SANParks) as a general worker. Soon, however, his apparent knowledge of

animals and the veld took him away from mending fences and into work as a field ranger, researcher and tracker.

He would work for SANParks for 33 years, 16 of which he spent tracking the black rhino. This is how he met his mentor, Louis Liebenberg, co-founder and executive director of CyberTracker Conservation, a nonprofit, public benefit organisation that promotes a worldwide environmental monitoring network. Liebenberg realised that it would be of great benefit to conservation and scientific research to capture the observations of trackers, yet most of them, like Benadie, were illiterate. The solution was an icon-based user interface on a hand-held computer that allowed Benadie to capture as many as 100 minute observation details a day. These included the black rhino's behaviour and the seasonal variation in its feeding pattern — which Benadie had suggested exists in the first place because of his year-round observation of the animal. The result was a scientific paper in the journal "Pachyderm", and as far as Liebenberg has been able to ascertain, it was the first time that an illiterate tracker co-authored a paper based on data he had collected himself, independently with no supervision, to substantiate a hypothesis he himself had proposed.

In 2010, Benadie joined the Tracker Academy as its principal trainer. The academy is a division of the South African College for Tourism, which operates under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation. Based at Samara Game Reserve near Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape, this is where Benadie now shares his extraordinary knowledge with young trackers from disadvantaged rural communities. He is extremely proud of his work at the academy, and rightfully so — almost 95% of the graduates find permanent employment in the tourism and conservation fields. Perhaps more important, though, is the transfer of extremely scarce indigenous skills to a new generation.

And for Benadie this is vital. "People must get involved in nature," he says in 21 Icons, "because if



you look at all the things in nature sticking together – the plants and animals, and human beings – we are all one, it's our family.”

Steirn's portrait of Benadie shows him in a leopard crawl position, as he would when he tracks wildlife, on the terrain that he has walked his whole life and on which he reads stories hidden from the untrained eye. Caught in soft dawn light, his weathered face, in a close-up frame, is testament to years of hard work in an extremely inhospitable environment.

“Shooting a portrait of Karel where he was born, in his own environment and in an almost animalistic pose is a simple, beautiful representation of who he really is,” says Steirn. “He is one of the few practitioners of an almost dying art, and without people like him passing on this tradition of showing others how to track, how to understand their natural environment, we will lose a part of us.

“And therefore, as an icon, he represents the unsung heroes of the conservation community.”

The original, signed portrait of Benadie will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to a charity of his choice.

Public participation is invited on **Twitter: [@21icons](#)**; **[www.21icons.com](#)** and **[www.facebook.com/21icons](#)**.

21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Nikon and Deloitte and supported by The Department of Arts & Culture as a nation-building initiative.

PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

Photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn learns how a tuft of kudu hair caught in a small bush in the Karoo National Park represents a magical story that plays itself out in nature all the time. This lesson he gets from master tracker Karel Benadie, who has been on the spoor of animals and plants his whole life, and

whose contribution to their conservation is almost impossible to measure.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait of master tracker Karel Benadie shows him leopard crawling in the veld in his beloved Karoo. His weathered face, in close-up frame, reflects the backbreaking hours he has spent to intimately know nature so that he can conserve it.

ENDS