

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Diamonds on the Soles of His Feet: Stories about Dr. Pete Morkel.** By Michael Morkel. Reach Publishers, Westville, South Africa. 2019. 356 pp. ISBN 0620844973. US\$15.99 (Amazon), Kindle version US\$9.99.

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*Review by David A. Jessup*

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This little book is about Dr. Pete Morkel, a wildlife veterinarian of considerable repute, who has worked in as many or more nations of Africa on megafauna conservation projects as has anyone living. He is particularly experienced in African rhino conservation and has worked with international conservation organizations to help them by dehorning, implanting transmitters in their horns, translocating them to safer areas of Africa, and relocating voucher populations for captive breeding to Australia and the US. He is recognized not only for his decades of outstanding African rhino work, but also for capture for conservation research of both forest and savannah elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis* and *Loxodonta africana*, respectively) and various subspecies of giraffe (*Giraffa* spp.).

This book tells of his growing up in the latter days of Southern Rhodesia during and after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence from the British Commonwealth, and the guerrilla war that followed. His early fascination with birds and biology in general resulted in an abounding love of nature and wildlife, which developed into a fascination for biology. Although quiet and studious, Pete was also a strong long-distance runner and got along well in the all-boys boarding schools of the era. The pressures of the war for

Rhodesia/Zimbabwe resulted in his family moving to South Africa and Pete, torn between pursuing biology (where his heart was) and veterinary medicine (where his head and parents encouraged him to go), eventually entered veterinary school at Onderstepoort, Pretoria University. Upon graduation, and to fulfill military obligations, Pete went to work in Namibia and got his first opportunity to work on wildlife. Fate and fortune (or maybe a calling?) led him into the game capture and wildlife veterinary world.

His early work in Namibia with mentor Louie Geldenhuys allowed him to quickly learn the many tricks of the trade. This is where I first met him, catching gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*) with a helicopter in drive nets and sedating them with a British-made commercial combination of etorphine and acepromazine. In our conversations, it soon became clear to me that despite the fact that I had 10 yr more experience, his knowledge of game capture and creative pharmacology exceeded my own. He was doing full time and in volume what I did only a few weeks of any 1 yr. Pete's crew were professionals with greater access to custom-built equipment, experienced crews, and a wider array of drugs than we had. They were pros, we were amateurs. It was during my few but illuminating days with him, as we drove across a seemingly endless desert landscape, that we ventured into the subject of how hard the calling for wildlife veterinary work could be on relationships. Serving two masters, even two you love, is not easy.

The book goes on to chronicle Pete's marriage to his amazing wife Estelle and a relatively peaceful stint at Etosha National

Park in Namibia. But, ever restless, he decided to strike out on his own in the brave new world of private commercial game capture. Some amazing stories of innovation and animal care take us farther into his life's work. When the widely respected Dr. Anthony Hall-Martin asked Pete to set up a game capture unit for South African National Parks, operating out of Kimberley, responsible for all the game capture in South Africa outside of the Kruger National Park, he accepted the job, despite the family hardships. As noted throughout the book, Anthony played a special role in mentoring and inspiring Pete.

Protocols were developed for immobilization of difficult species like giraffe, and he helped perfect the methods of poleaxing them with a high dose of narcotic, blindfolding and ear plugging them, attaching a padded collar and ropes, and then immediately reversing them and leading them to special transport vehicles. During this time, he also improved on black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) immobilization and pioneered the dehorning process used to decrease their value to poachers. The book traces his growing recognition of the difficult balance between commercialization of wildlife and their conservation.

It was around this time that a professional-level wildlife capture training course was developed, and a requirement established that those licensed to capture wildlife must periodically pass it, came into being in Zimbabwe. It was initiated by Drs. Mike Kock and Chris Foggin and based on a printed manual and similar courses developed in California and taught across the US. Pete quickly became a stalwart instructor at the Zimbabwe Veterinary Associations Wildlife Capture Course, something he continued for more than 25 yr. He shared his knowledge and humor, quiet confidence, and a simple, honest approach to the work with hundreds of students over the years. This course, which regularly includes a Who's Who of wildlife capture vets and professionals, is definitely a big dog's course, not for its complexity but for the wealth of field experience (the good, the bad, and the ugly) that is shared, in a spectacular setting at Gonarazou National Park, and the opportunity to work with real wildlife.

In the mid-1990s Pete and Estelle (now with youngsters) moved to Tanzania to head up the East African operation of the Frankfurt Zoological Society. They were based at the Ngorongoro Crater and for 6 yr were involved in wildlife management and a variety of conservation issues in the Crater and other parts of East and Central Africa. With support from the Frankfurt Zoological Society, Pete was able to provide critical assistance, without having to charge for much of it, to several very high-profile but precarious efforts to conserve highly endangered megafauna such as the northern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) at Garamba National Park and the giant sable (*Hippotragus niger varians*) of Angola. It was during this time that people in conservation began to see that his dedication was to the welfare and conservation of wildlife and that he would not let funding limitations, dodgy equipment, or physical hardship stand in his way. The book documents story after story of Pete's collaborations on management of threatened wildlife populations in countries such as Angola, Gabon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Botswana, Malawi, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, and others. It also documents the several close calls with death and the injuries that are part of this work.

The stories in this book include contributions from Pete's network of colleagues from over the last 30+ yr of fieldwork. Also, there are accounts of his occasional encounters with world figures, including England's Prince Harry in Namibia during October 2015, showing him how to work with wildlife and wildlife conservation in action. One can only speculate what this investment in mentoring has meant and will mean to conservation in the future. As a lesson for us all, the young folks you teach, mentor, and inspire are a major part of any legacy we might leave.

During July 2017 Pete was awarded the Lycaon Award by the Wildlife Group of the South African Veterinary Association for his considerable contribution to wildlife conservation over many years. As recognition from his peers, the President of the South African Veterinary Association noted that Pete had

worked tirelessly to save endangered wildlife populations in over 20 African countries and was considered the “best black rhino vet in the world.” In November 2018 His Royal Highness, Prince William, conferred the Prince William Award for Conservation in Africa, a lifetime achievement award recognizing Dr. Morkel’s exceptional contribution to the conservation of wildlife and wild places in Africa. This experience is related in the final chapter of the book. In August of 2019 Pete was the American Association of Wildlife Veterinarian’s Al Franzmann Memorial speaker at the Wildlife Disease Association’s meeting near Lake Tahoe, California.

In the words of Estelle, Pete’s wife, “Pete has really walked a million miles for

conservation, and that has been the wealth of his life.” *Diamonds on the Soles of His Feet* shares with readers some of Pete’s experiences and stories, is written in an accessible manner, and illustrated with many photographs. It’s hard to overstate what one quiet but humorous, focused but restless, incredibly tough but tender, simple living but ever innovative wildlife veterinarian has contributed to Africa and to our world. *Diamonds on the Soles of His Feet* is an inexpensive good read and is available from Amazon.

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