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# Trackers the elite of Safari crew

No African safari could get very far without native trackers. These men are proud professionals, indispensable to the Professional Hunters (PH) they assist, and their talents are admired even among their own people. They are the elite of the safari crew.

Having hunted with some of the legendary trackers of North America, including the Seri Indians of the Sonoran desert, I'd say that in their own country the best of them may match the Africans on hoofed game. But tracking dangerous game like lion, elephant and Cape buffalo places the latter in an entirely different league.

As an aside, there is no such job description in today's Africa as "gunbearer." That became obsolete at the end of the muzzleloading era in the 1890s. The big black-powder rifles of that day were mostly single-shots, and the hunter rarely had a skilled rifleman backing him up against dangerous animals. Today that's the responsibility of the PH. In the early days, the only way to have emergency firepower quickly available to a hunter was a second (and sometimes a third) fully-loaded rifle in the hands of a courageous, dependable gunbearer at his side.



Photo by John Wootters

**Author Wootters poses with his nine-foot, seven-inch Botswana lion, killed at 30 yards on the third day of an intense hunt he calls the high point of his adventures. Beside him, the consummate professional Mambakush trackers to whom, he says, the lion belongs to as much as to him. Tracker "John", left, and Soacong at center, worked with PH Lionel Palmer for more than 30 years.**

On my first safari, in 1972, I didn't know all this, and my party of six men was taken by surprise by a brace of old Cape buffalo bulls that sprang up out of their beds in the long grass no more than 20 steps away. The world seemed to stop turning while they decided whether to run or charge. Our rifles were being carried by trackers. There was no hope of their using the rifles effectively, and even less chance that they could place

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John Wootters

them in our hands in time to stop a charge. If the buffalo wanted us, they had us.

After a very long minute, the bulls whirled and crashed away in the bush. Suddenly the sun was warm on our shoulders again and the birds sang, and all of us inhaled once more. From that day, more than 30 years ago, to this, nobody else has ever carried my rifle.

A profound relationship develops between a professional hunter and his trackers, based on mutual respect and confidence. These partnerships, forged in the fires of shared dangers, often last for a lifetime. There is about them nothing of the master-servant relationship, either, but one of co-equals. My friend the late Finn Aagaard during his 10 years as a professional hunter in Kenya had a famous tracker named Kinunu, whom the Aagaards still regard as a member of the family.

In 1974, while hunting in Botswana with Lionel Palmer of Safari South, Ltd., I met a pair of remarkable Mambakush tribesmen named Soacong and "John" (because no white man could pronounce his native name). They daily performed feats of

tracking that bordered on the magical, and Lionel often consulted them about tactics. Thirteen years later, I hunted again with the same trio, and the trackers greeted me like an old friend.

The reason may have been our lion hunt in '74, when Soacong and John tracked a lion for me for three consecutive days, on soft earth and hard, in rocks and tall grass, never faulting on the spoor. The last three hours of that tracking came after the lion was wounded and aware that he was being followed, during the heat of the day in thick bush, where we expected a charge at any moment.

Twice we found ourselves crossing our own tracks, meaning that the lion had been behind us and could have taken us from close range. During this intense hunt, Soacong and John, unarmed, walked in front of us, eyes on the ground, more confident than I was that we could protect them in any emergency.

In the showdown at the end of that trail, John actually called the lion to us, imitating the call of a lioness. Just before the animal walked out of a thicket into the sunlight 30 yards away, John grabbed my arm with a vise-like grip and whispered "He's coming!" the first words of

English I'd heard him utter.

A charging lion covers 30 yards in less than three seconds, but this one barely started before my 400-grain .416 bullet shattered his heart.

In the huge letdown after three stressful days, the two trackers warmly shook my hand and slapped me on the back, and congratulated me in two languages. I was honored, their demeanor showing that I'd passed a test in their knowing eyes. We'd faced a wounded lion together and I'd done my part ... all the more meaningful because Lionel and his trackers were at that time probably the most experienced lion-hunting team in the world.

At that moment, I treasured the approval of those two black men even more than I did my trophy, because the lion rightfully belonged at least as much to them as to me.

**John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.**