

# **Journey into the Inner Self and Encounter with the Other: Transformation Trails with Militarised Youth of Katorus**

**An Assessment of the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project  
of the National Peace Accord Trust**

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### **Abbreviations**

ANC	African National Congress
CSVR	Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation
EMHC	Ekupholeni Mental Health Clinic
F	Female
I.	Interviewer (Stephanie Schell-Faucon)
IBI	Independent Board of Inquiry (Johannesburg)
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
M	Male
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NPAT	National Peace Accord Trust
SAPS	South African Police Service
SASCO	South African Students Congress
SDU	Self Defence Unit (affiliated to ANC)
SPU	Self Protection Unit (affiliated to IFP)
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission

### **Introduction**

Over the decades, state repression and opposition to apartheid have resulted in high levels of militarisation within South Africa.<sup>1</sup> During the negotiated transition of 1990-1994, the nature of political violence changed. Whereas previously the focus was direct conflict with security forces, this shift exhibited a higher rate of intra- and inter-community conflicts. With the unbanning of political organisations and the growing possibility of democratic elections the competition between different political parties increased. In particular, the rivalry between ANC and IFP alignments, fuelled by the security forces, precipitated this rapidly escalating conflict. This contest over political power claimed more lives and a wider range of victims than before.<sup>2</sup> Communities split into different camps, neighbours who had once been friends became bitter enemies, and families were torn apart.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1980s, township youth had been among the most active participants in the revolutionary struggle. They identified themselves as key agents of social and political change. In the 1990s, a number of youth became involved in Self-Defence Units (SDU), affiliated with the ANC, or in Self-Protection Units (SPU), affiliated with the IFP. These informal structures often provided youth with a sense of belonging in times where families and communities were breaking down. Their status was one of 'defenders of their community'.<sup>4</sup>

With the elections in 1994, the political motivation for the struggle was removed, but enmities, as well as economic and material interests rooted in the social conflict, remained largely intact. Many of the militarised youth, highly trained in the use of weapons and lacking an immediate income, became involved in criminal activities. Their leadership role vanished and communities started to reject and marginalize them. Thus, the heroes and protectors of yesterday became the social outcasts of today.<sup>5</sup>

The psychological and social effects of these experiences are multifaceted and immeasurable. Addressing the social and emotional scars means more than integrating militarised youth in police and defence structures. As the experience has shown, parallel approaches are required that include opportunities for healing on an individual, interpersonal and communal level.<sup>6</sup>

Various NGO-driven interventions at the grassroots level try to take into account these particular needs of militarised and criminalised youth. This study examines one of those initiatives: the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project of the National Peace Accord Trust (NPAT). This project begins from the premise that the transformation of trauma is the first step to a peaceful society. It is also based on the experience that militarised youth often refuse conventional counselling methods. Consequently, a seven-day Transformation Trail in the Drakensberg Mountains of KwaZulu-Natal was developed. The aim of the project is the empowerment of the youth through the facilitation of new connections between them and their environment, others, and self. In order to build a 'culture of peace' within the community, the trail brings together former enemies involved in the violence. A post-trail support programme in the township seeks to facilitate their re-integration in the community. This initiative of the NPAT was first implemented in the Katorus region on the East Rand of Gauteng Province, one of the areas the most affected by inter- and intra-community conflicts.

The primary aim of this study is to draw a comprehensive picture of the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project and to assess some of its impacts and challenges. It begins with an overview of the research base and approach (Section 1) and some background information about the particular conflict in the Katorus region (Section 2). The major focus of this report, however, is a description of the Wilderness Project and its Transformation Trails (Section 3), the exploration of key concepts underlying the project (Section 5) and an analysis of the experiences of participants, the perceived challenges and possible impacts (Section 6). Finally, the potential of the project will be indicated (Section 7).

## **1. Research setting**

### **1.1 Objectives**

This study is part of a larger project being conducted at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), to survey some of the practical intervention work currently taking place in South Africa that could be broadly framed as addressing the theme of 'reconciliation'. All the organisations examined as part of this project frame their work as contributing towards the creation of a 'new' democratic South Africa. The ultimate aim of this survey project is to conceptualise an interpretative framework for reconciliation in South Africa by outlining the spectrum of different ways organisations define and

implement their intervention measures.

In this context, the Wilderness Therapy Project - with its Transformation Trails and the follow-up activities in the Katlehong Resource Centre - serves as one example of grassroots interventions that the South African context has generated. The process of transforming trauma in the wilderness raises a range of questions around interventions that aim to foster individual and community healing and try to bridge the deep boundaries apartheid has carved over the decades.

Since the question of how wilderness therapy impacts on human nature is still regarded as new territory, the current study is quite explorative and heuristic. It concentrates on a description and analysis of the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project. The main objective of the interviews was to capture and comprehend the range of experiences, challenges and impacts perceived by the different persons involved. Notwithstanding my critical evaluation of the project's various implications and impacts, I do not seek to cast doubt upon the fundamental value of the intervention. Rather, I merely attempt to outline some of the lessons learned and to stimulate further debate around the potential and challenges of similar approaches, with the active support and personal contribution of former participants, Trail Assistants and the NPAT office.

## **1.2 Methodology**

The research was mainly conducted in June and July 2000 and comprised three stages: preparation, participation and evaluation of preliminary results.

### ***Preparation***

- Analysis of existing documents (videotapes, press releases, reports and articles).<sup>7</sup>
- Discussions/interviews with the Project Manager of NPAT and the Co-ordinator of the trails in Katlehong in order to clarify questions and to finalise the interview guidelines.

### ***Trail participation and presence in the Katlehong Resource Centre***

- Participation at a trail with disadvantaged youth in the Suikerboos Mountains organised and conducted by four former participants/ Trail Assistants of the Transformation Trails.
- Informal conversation and formal interviews with trail participants and assistants over a period of two weeks in the Katlehong Resource Centre.
- Several visits to the Katorus region guided by interviewees (to see the three townships, the hostels, places of violence and combat, and the Thokoza and Katlehong memorials).
- Attendance at activities in the Katlehong Resource Centre (e.g., rehearsals of *Ubuhle bentsha and Togetherness as One*, cultural groups initiated by trail participants).

### ***Discussion of first impressions and preliminary results with different experts***

Several experts were asked to comment on preliminary results gleaned from experiences

with and interview responses from trail participants. They included key personnel at the National Peace Accord Trust and other individuals who work in the Katorus region and have an overview of different programmes initiated since the beginning of the 1990s.

The qualitative interviews with participants and Trail Assistants were based on open-ended guidelines focusing on three sets of questions:

- contact and experience with the Transformation Trails of the NPAT,
- re-integration in the community and impact of the trail experience, and
- understanding of key concepts (forgiveness, reconciliation, forgetting, talking about the past, etc.) and the participants' subjective impressions about their significance in the South African context.

### **1.3 Sample set-up**

In total, 17 former participants, including Trail Assistants, and five experts, including the Director and the Project Manager of NPAT, were each interviewed for between one and one and a half hours. To establish contact with the participants, I depended on the Project Co-ordinator, a former SDU commander. The collection of interviewees was heavily influenced by the existing network and contacts that were less difficult to re-establish.<sup>8</sup> It does not constitute a representative sample. Nevertheless, we tried to take into account a range of criteria, including:

- the diversity of experience during the period of violence (e.g., involvement as SDU, SPU or in other supportive roles; residence in hostel or location),
- the diversity of experience with the Transformation Trails and the follow up programme (e.g., positive and/or negative experiences, different years of participation, number of times of participation, role as long-term volunteer or Trail Assistant),
- age,
- gender,
- cultural affiliation,
- educational level, and
- employment status.

Altogether, a wide range of different cultural and educational backgrounds was reached. The employment status varies and the age ranges between 21 to 33. Since the number of women who went on trails was significantly smaller, fewer were interviewed. Nevertheless, former SPU-members and hostel dwellers are underrepresented. This is due to a number of reasons: fewer participants over the years, less knowledge or confidence in English and less contact and long-term involvement with NPAT. For a detailed breakdown of the sample group, see the Appendix.

### **1.4 Limitations**

Assessing the impacts of processes that work towards the transformation of trauma is a complex research task. The optimal approach would include a long-term study with participant observation and several interviews with the same respondents at different times (e.g., before, during and after the intervention). Such an extended research basis was not

given in this case. Certain limitations of this study and its methodology need to be acknowledged:

#### *Participant observation*

The Wilderness Project started in 1996 and most trails were conducted in 1997 and 1998. Today, new types of wilderness and adventure therapy focus on a wider range of target groups (e.g., juveniles, abused children and youth). During my stay in Johannesburg and Katorus in June/July 2000, I had the opportunity to participate in a new type of trail that was conducted by four former SDU and SPU activists who were trained as Trail Assistants during the previous years. This was an opportunity to get in contact with them and to experience parts of the methodological approach originally developed for the Transformation Trails. However, participant observation or a case study - with interviews before, during and after the trail - was infeasible. For all of the respondents, between one year and three years had elapsed since they had participated on a trail.

#### *Language*

Of the 17 respondents, 14 choose to conduct the interview in English, even though it demanded a great effort for some of them. In a few cases this severely limited the capacity to express nuances of their various experiences. The translated interviews on the other hand implied the disadvantage that they tended to be influenced by the presence of the translating Trail Assistants.

#### *Ethics of research and methodological adjustment*

The whole research experience reinforced the assumption that the interview itself is an intervention. It recalls past and present pain, grievance and losses that need to be dealt with. Furthermore, ongoing trauma due to socio-economic exclusion, exposure to crime, family violence, etc., compounds the fragile position of many interviewees. In a positive way the interview might be used as a catalyst or opportunity to reframe past experiences and one's story. At the same time, it risks opening wounds without supplying the necessary support afterwards. In order to avoid the risks of this intervention, the participants' social and emotional needs must be addressed and their right to determine and control the process should always be preserved. In the end this fundamental ethical requirement implied certain constraints concerning the methodological approach and research questions. (Re) - adjustments were often necessary. Sometimes it was for instance impossible to follow the guideline. Some interviewees wished to tell their past experiences in detail, others preferred to concentrate on their trail experience, only. In two cases, talking about the past was so painful and the current problems of the respondents were so urgent that it became a priority to simply take the time to listen to them. Continuing the interview was inappropriate.

#### *Position as researcher*

Inevitably the research is also impacted by various dynamics involved when coming as a "white German woman researcher working in the field of peace education" into one of the most criminalised townships of South Africa to interview men and women of Sotho, Zulu, Venda and Xhosa origin about their experience as comrades and community defenders. In my interpretation of the interviews, I tried to take these influences into consideration. I

know that I was approached woman to woman; coming from a rich country; from a country with a difficult past itself; a country that supported the struggle (referring to East Germany), but also as researcher living in safety and comfort. In an informal conversation, one respondent put his finger on this particular problem:

You know for us it is like this: there come these rich white researchers who live in safety and want to know all the horrible things you went through. And then they go back and make books out of it and you still have nothing else than your township world.

## **2. Conflict and political violence in the Katorus region**

To understand the impacts of the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project, the specific context of the conflict (2.1), the active involvement of the youth during the violence (2.2) as well as their fragile position in the aftermath (2.3) needs to be considered. This historical approach allows a better insight into the tasks and challenges that the NPAT encountered when it started to work in the Katorus region. Since the youths' perceptions of the violence determine the educational approach and its success, priority is given to their voice.<sup>2</sup>

### **2.1 Causes and escalation of the violence**

#### **"Before everybody used to be in the hostel: Xhosa, Sotho, Venda, Zulu ..."**

During the 1980s, widespread internecine violence seemed to plague only KwaZulu-Natal, but in 1990 it rapidly spread to the Transvaal, including the Katorus region on the East Rand of Gauteng Province. Katorus comprises the townships Vosloorus, Thokoza and Katlehong.

Characteristic of the whole area was the rapid extension of informal settlements and overcrowding of migrant hostels during the mid-1980s with the abolition of influx control. Driven by rural poverty, more and more men and families came here to search for work, despite the fact that they continued to live in extremely poor conditions. Many of the hostel dwellers were men from KwaZulu-Natal. Since they often retained strong links to their families, the political polarisation of KwaZulu-Natal also impacted on them. Hence, the hostels became the ideal places for an intensive IFP recruitment campaign when it entered the national arena as a formal party in 1990. This marked the start of the violence in the Katorus area. Exacerbated by township politics that frequently marginalised hostel dwellers, and by ongoing feuds and politicisation of the local transport industry, the conflict escalated. Attacks and counter-attacks became the norm (TRC 1998 Vol. 3/ Ch. 6: 670-675, 699-701; IBI/Peace Action 1994: 4-7). Several respondents named the so-called "taxi war" as the starting point of the violence:

The violence only started with the taxi wars ... because the Xhosas [of the location], they sided with other taxi organisations than the hostel dwellers ... . So all of a sudden it was like hostel dwellers now being under IFP because before everybody used to be in the hostel: Xhosa, Sotho, Venda, Zulu ... . Zulus were the most dominating race in the hostels so that [an]other taxi organisation was headed by Zulus ... . Zulus were now being identified as the enemies.



Zulus have to identify their enemies too, which were identified as Xhosas ...  
But it's a long story. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

A crucial component of the conflict escalation was the emphasis on ethnic and political boundaries through territorial control of particular areas. This polarisation led to the politicisation of ethnic origin, as described by the interviewee above. Ideological, ethnic and territorial fortresses were created: non-Zulus (or Zulus who refused IFP membership) were driven out of the hostel, while people of Zulu origin or IFP affiliation (or those who were simply suspected of either of these) were forced to leave their houses in the location.<sup>10</sup> Some of those displaced found refuge in the hostels, others left the township.<sup>11</sup> For Zulus who had lived in the Katorus area for a long time it became a vital issue to clearly associate themselves with the situation of the township residents and the ANC. They also tried to distance themselves from the Zulus in the hostel through their language:

I'm Zulu myself, but I don't speak their Zulu because their Zulu, it's original. So our Zulu here in the location, it's mixed with many languages - mixed with Afrikaans, mixed with English, Sotho. You know, it's a nice language.  
(Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

The term "hostel dweller" came to imply Zulu ethnicity, IFP membership, SPU activities, rural and traditional culture and vice versa. On the other hand the residents of the location were often referred to as Xhosa and associated with the ANC membership, SDU activities, and urban ways of living. None of the interviewees escaped this classification of factions and its consequences:

In 1992, because I am a Zulu, I am coming from Natal, that's why they [send me to the hostel]. Every people who came from Natal were IFP. I didn't like that because from my younger stage I didn't belong to anyone of the parties. I haven't got a membership card, even today. (Interview with participant, July 3, 2000)

Most of the interviewees who found themselves on the side of the hostel dwellers had been in hostels since the early 1990s. Women entered later, and life in the formerly male hostels was particularly difficult for them. Two respondents mentioned how they ended up in prostitution in order to feed themselves. One Sotho-speaking participant who came as teenager from KwaZulu-Natal to live in the location described how she was classified as "Zulu". Finally she sought refuge in the hostel where she felt not only insecure as a woman but also cut off of the daily township life:

People didn't have anything to eat, did not have any clothes to wear, people were murdered like chickens ... and ended up being eaten by dogs ... We couldn't go to school anymore because we were attending schools at the locations, so we ended up like being isolated in the hostels. (Interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

Although the people of the location were less isolated than the hostel dwellers, they also noticed and suffered from the consequences of the growing violence around them:

Then this violence kept like growing now, becoming stronger day by day. We started being

very scarce around the location because most of the people ran away from the houses to go and live with relatives wherever they feel they were safe. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

One interviewee who had to move several times indicated how the escape to relatives often brought with it constraints and feeling of discomfort.

You have to clean, you have to wash dishes, anything, I mean, you go to shop even though there are children that they used to send maybe. Now they relax because you are here and you have to do this because you begged a place for sleeping. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 30, 2000)

Altogether, it is difficult to draw a satisfying picture of this complex conflict and its escalation because a variety of divisions - personal, economic, generational, etc. - affected the form of the violence. Some respondents experienced the violence in Katlehong also as a conflict between different ANC 'generations'. In their informal settlement, SDUs threatened members of the ANC Youth League. The rivalry between these two ANC alliances led to the Muleleki massacre, where twelve ANC Youth League members were killed in one night. Between July 1993 and April 1994, around 1,200 people died in the region. Thokoza and Katlehong became known as "war zones", with forced colonisation of different kinds and so-called "no-go areas" between the hostels and the adjacent location. This is the time where it became almost impossible for township and hostel dwellers not to take sides.

## 2.2 Involvement of the youth

### **"I was involved because I was a hostel dweller"**

The named divisions became deeply implanted in the people's mind and had direct impact on the lives of the youth. Participants mentioned a lot of different reasons and dynamics for getting actively involved in the violence or for supporting one of the alliances. In general, all of them felt the need to protect life, limb and home. In some cases, family disruptions and losses triggered their involvement.

During the violence, I experienced a lot because I was here the time there was a fight. People were killing each other. Even my father was lost at that violence; my father was killed there. That's why I was getting a problem of going to school and all those things because my father was a bread winner then ... . Then after we got a place around F-Six. There it became a game, something like that, because each and every house must get somebody that is going to patrol outside and then at my home there was no person, I was the only person who was old then. Then they say I must go there and I would go there patrolling at night, coming late in the morning then, going to sleep, then late go there again. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

In fact, for me to be involved in violence, it was because even my father, he committed suicide because of politics, so some people they didn't understand what makes him to commit suicide, but it is the only thing. IFP was involved for my father's death, so I must try to prove he was not some sort of a coward but because of the politics he committed suicide, you see. (Interview with

participant, July 1, 2000)

At the same time, some of the participants linked their involvement explicitly to their political conviction and allegiance.

There were the members of IFP and the members of ANC within the section, so what happened, the members of IFP, they used to force people to go to their meetings whereas people they don't like to go to their meetings. At the end of the day the members of IFP they start beating other people. During that time I was a member of SASCO, being political, so I tried by all means to tell the guys: "You see, these people they are trying to push us." Then we as young people, we decided now we will chase them out of our section ... . Therefore, we start the SDUs.

[I.]: So it was really your personal decision.

Yes, that was my personal decision because we were facing a huge problem, we tried to change the situation. There was no one who pushed us. I have to talk the truth, I don't want to say something [that] people didn't do. (Interview with participant, June 30, 2000)

Most interviewees, though, declared that they had not been very informed or politically engaged.

He says he was not being involved himself in politics, he just got caught up because he was basically in the hostel, so he had to defend himself. He says that he even does not know a lot about politics, about the roots of politics and what's going on in politics ... sometimes he used to ask himself in fact who am I fighting with, those days he didn't have any insight but he had to go because of his residence in the hostel. (Translated interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

Many interviewees say that they got used to the daily shootings and burnings. Some mention ambiguous feelings of curiosity, excitement and enjoyment that attracted their attention and motivated their participation in the violence.

I remember this one guy whom I watched, a very close friend, his stomach was open, the intestines were out and his eyes were just open like as if he was alive. Now we were curious ... . We go and look, lots of bodies just lying around. I mean that was like a normal thing to me in fact and I really enjoyed seeing that stuff - I really enjoyed seeing somebody being burned, somebody being chased and being killed ... the environment automatically got me involved in the whole thing. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

For many youths their involvement had severe consequences on their life style and their daily habits.

In the context of their militant units herbals medicine for power and strength (muti)<sup>12</sup> as well as drugs and alcohol often bolstered them against danger and fear. Several respondents reported of their growing addiction in order to suppress painful experiences and memories.

I had to smoke dagga and I had to smoke pills because you wouldn't go there sober-minded to fight or you wouldn't get a rest there to sleep. I mean you sleep here, nearly outside that door there's a corpse and it's burned in ashes and there are dogs eating it, it has been there for two weeks. You saw the person when they hold him, you saw the person when they start torturing him up until he's dead, up until he was burned – that person is still there. So there was no way that you will be sober and pass by. (Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

In search of guns or money to purchase weapons, a lot of youth were drawn into robbery, violent attacks and murder. By supplying money for their protection, the neighbourhood confirmed and acknowledged the youth in their heroic role as community defenders.

Only one guy had a gun and it was our commander. We were only having petrol bombs and home-made guns for defending ourselves and then we usually go to the tar road here to ask for some donations ... to make those petrol bombs and then later on we even have guns ourselves.

[I.]: Where did you get the guns?

We got the guns following the person who is having a gun. Immediately when they shoot someone who is having a gun, we had to run for a gun ... . Our guys were killing police for guns, disarming. So while they were disarming they were coming back to us and selling it. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 30, 2000)

The distinction between criminal and political motivation for violence became increasingly blurred. Political violence depended on the support of criminals who had access to weapons, and numerous criminal activities shrouded in quasi-political motivation.

(..) they used the word 'politics', that means that politics is the protection word, they make it a protection word to say I've done these things because of politics. There are people who have done these things because of politics, there are people who have done these things because they want to serve their personal interests. (Interview with participant, June 30, 2000)

### 2.3 Situation after the 1994 election

#### **"But now in our mind, in our blood we still have this feeling of war"**

The psychological, emotional and social effects of the people's experiences during the violence are multifaceted and immeasurable. They manifest on an individual level, within families and throughout communities. It is estimated that 60 to 80 percent of the population of the Katorus region suffer from some kind of post- traumatic stress symptoms (Seiler 1997: 114). Everybody has to deal with different kinds of scars. A couple of respondents bear lasting physical injuries and/or mourn the loss of family members and friends of whom some still do not know what happened to them. In general, the symptoms differ, but many respondents mentioned that they suffered from nightmares and flashbacks, but they were mostly unwilling to attend formal counselling, conceiving a therapy as something that is designed for "mad people" only.

In addition the situation of the youth in the aftermath is also characterized by educational

and socio-economic disadvantages as well as the sudden change of status hit them in a harsh way and often resulted in an exacerbation of the trauma experienced during the violence. For a lot of the youth who had found a frame of reference and the acceptance they desired in street gangs and formal or informal political structures, it was very difficult to find a new place and sense of belonging in their community:

'94 to '96, by then the violence was over - I can say over in the way that we didn't stay up in the night on guard ... . But now in our mind, in our blood, we still have this feeling of war, especially those people who were really involved in this kind of stuff. So they became drug addicted, they became alcoholics through the time of violence. They even just hung around all day drinking, all those kinds of stuff. During the time of violence, it was very easy for one to get money, but by then it was becoming difficult, so what they tend to do now, start doing crime in their very own communities. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

The formal school education of most interviewees had been severely disrupted. With the end of the violence many were too old to be reintegrated in the regular school system. The creation of special school projects isolated and labelled them as 'social outcasts' and also failed in the aim to bring former SDUs and SPUs together. In cases where a return to school was possible, the attendance of militarised youth created unease for the youth as well as for teachers and other students:

Now all this kind of feelings like you are a man, like a boss, at school now with other kids. I was always quiet and just watching things but I wanted no one to mess up. Nobody messes up with me, that's the way I was - get angry very quickly and I quickly give a smack. But then I think that people could even see that too and that some of the teachers at school were very, very nervous. I could say not really respecting me but scared of me, ja, the way I appeared. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

In 1994 a Community Constable Project had hoped to restore peace to the townships by integrating 800 former members of SDUs and SPUs into the South African Police Services (SAPS). Lacking a long-term integration plan and neglecting the trauma of the ex-combatants, this strategy turned out to be a failure. It resulted in a high rate of suicides amongst the community constables, as well as provocative behaviour and criminal activities. So, finally, neither the educational nor the socio-economic needs and expectations of the youth were met. And as government pensions for people who participated in the liberation struggle were not given to anyone under the age of 35, the youth's disappointment was considerable. They perceived themselves as being let down by their leaders.

Today, there are people who are members of Parliament (of) whom I know their bad stuff, bringing a lot, thousands of guns to our people. Today they are big there, there's a gap now, this big gap. You can't even shake hands with them, we are just nothing ... I used to sit together with one of the members of Parliament ... I was a friend at that time, he used to call me, see my friend, not you my boy, no, my friend because he knew I was a good shooter and that he was good, so we are friends because we knew the same thing. I now know nothing, he's a

member of Parliament, he's driving a Mercedes, having a big house. His children are at universities, he's carrying an R5, that's tough. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 26, 2000)

In a similar way many respondents articulated the feeling of having been 'trapped' by politics. It does not surprise that they talk about their involvement as perpetrators and at the same time also perceive themselves as actual or potential victims both during and after the violence.

We were perpetrators when we were fighting each other ... and I don't know how many people I killed if I did, I shot them. And I told him [his counsellor] about my experience that I was also a victim because I was kidnapped and stabbed there in the back.

[I.]: So you had both experiences of being victim and perpetrator? Ja.

[I.]: And how was it to tell this the first time?

It was very bad because my eyes were full of tears and sometimes I was scared that I will be arrested or something. I was very scared and it was painful to talk about that experience actually. (Interview with participant, July 3, 2000)

When the TRC started its investigations of gross human rights violations in the Katorus region in 1996, the area was still deeply marked by the less violent, but ongoing conflict. The "no-go zones" persisted as much as the negative perception between the opposing groups. Many people were not ready to disclose their recent experiences. Some interviewees told that they were concerned about the legal consequences, but even more afraid of revenge.

## **2.4 Summary**

Against this background, it is not surprising that attempts to work with the militarised youth of the Katorus region proved to be extremely difficult. Diverse phenomena and effects during the violence and others in the aftermath - many of which tie back to this earlier period - need to be taken into consideration in order to address the complex situation of the youth:

- diverse experiences of violence (as observer, victims and perpetrator)
- physical injuries
- different post traumatic stress symptoms (including flashbacks and nightmares)
- addiction to alcohol and drugs (often used to suppress flashbacks)
- disapproval of therapeutic intervention
- involvement in crime after the violence (partly due to unemployment)
- suspicion of authority figures (partly due to the disappointment in their former leaders)
- complex perpetrator-victim-dynamic and fear to reveal their role in killings
- lack of formal education and unemployment
- lack of social acceptance and loss of a sense of belonging

## **3. The Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project**

As the last chapter demonstrates, the re-integration of the militarised and criminalised

youth seemed to be as crucial for the youth's well-being as for the entire community of the Katorus region. The following section will give an overview how the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project was designed in order meet the youth's specific needs.

### 3.1 Short history of the Project

Since 1992 the National Peace Accord Trust has targeted communities marred by violence with ongoing counselling and support programmes. Before the idea of the Wilderness Project was even born, the organisation had already been involved in other programmes in the Katorus area.<sup>13</sup> The National Director of the NPAT emphasises:

The spin-off NPAT project, the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project, reaching the criminalised SDU and SPU members, would never have materialised without the access and credibility built during the NPAT's three-year involvement in Katorus. (Seiler 1997: 114)

The work of the NPAT is grounded on the belief that besides the vital development of socio-economic infrastructure, a parallel effort, focusing on human development, is necessary to address the psycho-social effects of violence. But since in the case of the former militarised youth conventional Western ways of dealing with trauma appeared to be unsuccessful, new approaches needed to be found.

The initial idea for the project was based on wilderness therapy experiences that the Project Manager had undergone in a different context, at a school for youth with behavioural problems:

I realised that I was doing a lot of work and not getting very far. So I thought the thing to do would be to work with them for an intense period of time and to get them out of their normal situation ... and [I] went with them for a few days hiking in the Drakensberg and that seemed to work really well. I was getting a lot more results that way. Huge things were shifting ... I realised that [according to] the type of experience that they had, different things would change. You could actually structure the experience physically to correct different psychological effects and processes. (Interview with Gavin Robertson , July 19, 2000)

Working at the same time for the Ekupholeni Mental Health Clinic (EMHC) at Natalspruit Hospital in Katlehong, Gavin Robertson and his colleagues envisaged an adjustment of this wilderness concept to the needs of former SDUs and SPUs. The project was approved and funded by the NPAT.

A first trail was conducted in 1996 with a former SDU commander, who sought treatment for post-traumatic stress and received counselling from the EMHC. Together with the two psychologists who later managed the project, the ex-combatant went to the Drakensberg Mountains for one week and found this journey to be an experience that helped transform his traumatic experiences. His eagerness to support other militarised youths led to him playing a central role in connecting with other SDU and SPU commanders and co-ordinating the project in Katlehong. Initially, there was much reticence on the part of the

commanders. Continued negotiation between the commanders and the facilitators was necessary until the commanders built up enough trust to send members of their units away with people of the opposing block. In the beginning, a few programmes were cancelled at the last minute or left with a group of former SDUs only.<sup>14</sup>

In 1996, five groups left for a Transformation Trail in the Drakensberg Mountains. In 1997 and 1998, trails were offered about once a month. Between 1996 and the end of 1999, more than 320 militarised youth attended Transformation Trails of the NPAT. Altogether, 28 single trails and four double trails (comprising more than 20 participants) were conducted. In 1998, as the former enemies began to emerge as trained Trail Assistants, the project was extended to work with juvenile offenders or (sexually) abused children and youth.

In order to empower the community to take charge of their healing needs, it had been planned from the beginning that the project should be handed over to the community (Seiler 1997: 114). This happened in early 2000. In close co-operation with the NPAT and other regional organisations working in the field of trauma, the Project Co-ordinator Scotch Madhlophe began running his own association. Together with former Trail Assistants, he conducts a five-day Rites of Passage Programme in nearby wilderness areas. The Transformation Trails are not entirely abandoned, but priority is given to the new target groups.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 Setting<sup>16</sup>

While the main aim of the project concentrated consistently on individual and communal healing, the programme structure, procedure and participants gradually changed over the years. The following description is the outcome of a continuous learning process over years. Each trail brought up new ideas but also questioned some of the previous approaches. Today, the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project consists of one preparation session in Katlehong, a seven-day Transformation Trail in the Drakensberg Mountains and a post-trail support programme in the Katlehong Resource Centre with a range of different follow-up activities for those who are interested. The follow-up activities, as well as the methods and rituals mentioned below, were implemented at different times and sometimes abandoned at a later stage.<sup>17</sup> The cost of approximately ZAR 11 000 for each trail is completely covered by the NPAT. The organisation also puts the necessary equipment (tents, sleeping bags, backpack, etc.) at the disposal of the participants.

#### *Participants*

The initiative is based in Katlehong, which is probably the reason why more participants come from this township. Fewer people from Thokoza, and only a scattering from Vosloorus, participated.

Each Transformation Trail brings together a group of, on average, a dozen members of the opposing factions. At the beginning, the participants were drawn through the co-operation with former commanders, each of whom sent some of their unit members. Later on, several township and hostel dwellers who previously had participated on a trail received an internship contract with the NPAT and helped to recruit a larger group of the former militarised and criminalised youth. Some of the respondents also mentioned that they had



heard of the project and approached the Co-ordinator on their own in order to participate.

In the beginning, only male members of SDU or SPU structures were targeted. But soon the trails opened up to any youth involved in supportive roles during the violence, including women. A significant, but smaller number of women participated. This is to a certain extent due to the way participants were approached. As a former SDU commander, the project Co-ordinator had the opportunity to establish contacts through the formal political and traditional cultural structures. To achieve the community's acceptance and approval of the project, the chosen strategy was advantageous, but it also implied a marginalisation of the role of women during the violence.

A few 'closed' trails addressed specific groups—for example, former commanders (including elder ex-combatants) who led the militarised youth or a group of women who had been involved and abused as sex workers.

In general, the participants attend one Transformation Trail, though as many follow-up activities as they desire. Only a few participants knew each other before going on the trail. Since there were often participants who dropped out at the last minute, the Co-ordinator took the precaution of lining up reserve participants.

### *Facilitators*

At least one psychologist and the Project Co-ordinator, both experienced in wilderness therapy, conduct the Transformation Trail. Often, trained Trail Assistants who previously participated in the Wilderness Project accompany the group as well. During the trail, the assistants mainly carry out tasks necessary for the well being of the group in a natural environment. They assist with managing the physical safety and containing the risk-taking of participants.

Some Trail Assistants held an internship contract with the NPAT for one year. It allowed them to learn more about wilderness therapy and counselling. Their role often went further. It became their task to actively contribute to the empathic group climate. They are also at the disposal of participants for informal counselling during and after the trails.

The Project Co-ordinator and the Trail Assistants are all young men of different cultural background (mainly Venda, Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho). They live in the townships of Katorus and experienced the violence as members of opposing groups. The psychologists are exclusively white South Africans. The two psychologists who mainly managed the project are men. Since 1998, a woman accompanied several trails as an additional psychologist. The language ability of the facilitators, especially of the Project Co-ordinator and the Trail Assistants, allows every participant to speak his or her mother tongue during the trail.

### **3.3 Preparation session**

Normally, a preparation session precedes the Transformation Trail.<sup>18</sup> Scheduled a few days before the departure, it takes place at the Katlehong Resource Centre. This is the first time that the participants meet, and according to the Project Co-ordinator, their self-selected seating often mirrors their division in factions.

Besides informing them about technical details (departure time, clothing recommendations, etc.), the aim of this session is an introduction into wilderness therapy. By means of San paintings that the participants will get to see in sacred San caves on the trail, basic metaphoric explanations around trauma and ways of dealing with trauma are provided. With the help of the "Beast Within", a San painting of a beast chasing a man, the symbolic value of the San rock art is incorporated in the healing process. An analogy is drawn between dealing with post-traumatic stress and confronting the inner beast.

This first meeting does not require that the participants talk to each other or cooperate in any form. The facilitators mention that the preparation meetings have to be handled carefully; they bear a high risk that people pull back from the project at the last minute.

### **3.4 Transformation Trail**

Central to the design of the Wilderness Project is the seven-day Transformation Trail in the Drakensberg Mountains of KwaZulu-Natal.

#### *Departure*

The journey starts in the township, where the participants are picked up by the facilitators. The interviewees describe the travel in the back of a truck as full of tension and anxiety. The opposing groups often refuse to talk to each other. Here, the mediation of the Project Co-ordinator is of great importance. To reduce the feelings of apprehension, the participants are encouraged to sing traditional African songs. In the beginning, "war songs" with divisive and provocative meaning are avoided, but during the course of the trail their reappraisal - by changing the words towards reconciliatory messages - becomes an important task that affirms the (re)construction of a peaceful culture.

#### *Introduction session*

Before leaving for the hike, an introduction session at the foot of the mountains invites the participants to carve and paint their individual walking sticks. In a first exchange, the ex-combatants talk about the personal significance of the colours and/or motifs they have chosen for their stick. Some participants may carve traditional fighting sticks, cross-hatched at the top. Others use different colours to express their fears, expectations and/or hopes with regards to the forthcoming travel. The facilitators explain that the stick stands for the personal story and the individual inner journey they are taking up. Coloured T-shirts with the imprint of the San painting "Beast Within" serve as counter-symbols to the sticks. Everyone is reminded that they will all be going through that inner journey together and need to support each other.<sup>19</sup>

At that point, the facilitators also inform the participants about the principal rules of the hike. Most of these rules raise awareness of the aspects of the natural environment that require disciplined and respectful behaviour: walking in line, no throwing away of rubbish, etc.

The session concludes with a prayer and a cleansing ritual. In receiving a wave of fire smoke, the participants and facilitators clean themselves for the journey and thank the mountain for taking care of them.

The video recordings illustrate that the introductions vary a lot from one trail to another. Over the years, additional rituals were added. A tendency to extend the introduction can be observed. Sometimes participants also spent a first night at the starting point. Under these circumstances, even more rituals and creative activities - like the ones outlined above - were included. The atmosphere remains, in general, defensive and reserved. Careful with their comments and contributions, many participants tend to adopt a policy of 'wait and see'.

### *Hiking experience*

The route of the hike is designed with the understanding that the physical obstacles, challenges, achievements and their parallel psychological equivalents are part of the same process. Generally, the hike will start out by heading up the mountains. At first, everybody needs to get used to carrying the heavy backpacks containing tents, sleeping bags, clothes, cooking utensils and food for seven days. Another major task consists in finding the right speed that allows everybody to follow according to his or her physical condition. The weakest member determines the speed, and the front edge of the group always needs to be considerate of the physical capacity of the group as a whole.

While the leading role is first assumed by one of the facilitators, later on participants are encouraged to take over. Gradually, the hike becomes more difficult, always incorporating new challenges in order to ascend the top of the mountains. Often the challenges appear to be insurmountable or dangerous; however, they are selected and presented in a way that they are high in perceived risk and low in actual risk. The ultimate intent is to give the participants the feeling of personal empowerment and a sense that others can be trusted.

Most trails include a visit to and overnight stays in or near sacred San caves. The site served for the San healing rituals, known as the trance dance. The rock art associated with this healing ritual still remains on the cave walls. The paintings address issues of social harmony, well-being and the healing of individuals by means of the communal trance dance. Thus, the participants learn more about the culture of their "common ancestors".

The arrival on a mountain summit and the visit to the San caves are highlights of the trail and represent a turning point in the journey. The long return and descent then begins. Patience is tested and new group experiences are provided as abseiling and the following of a watercourse through tunnels are added to the hike's activities. Increasingly, participants come to learn that the group's well-being and sense of togetherness depends on the individual's well-being.

### *Break times and overnight stays*

Common effort and exhaustion unites. The change of environment facilitates the transformation process and boosts the creation of new contacts. In particular, the break times allow a gradual reframing of conflictual relationships among the participants. The sharing of cigarettes or food during the breaks is often a first sign of a cautious rapprochement. Common duties such as the preparing meals, fetching drinking water and cleaning the camping area foster communication between the participants. For most participants, it is the first time that they have been in the wilderness. They are not used to sleeping in tents and the rational fear of animals may frighten them. These conditions

increase the possibility of trauma flashbacks, especially at night. Here, the facilitators, together with the group members, pay close attention in order to assume a supportive role in protecting and comforting each other.

### *Reflection and exchange of experiences*

Besides frequent informal exchanges at night -around the fire, for example - official sessions are also held to reflect on the feelings and challenges met by the participants. An important principle during the whole trail is that no one will be urged to talk about present emotions or experiences in the past. The facilitators are always available and ready to listen to participants who want to talk informally during the hike or during breaks about their concerns and nightmares . When participants approach the facilitators privately, they nevertheless try to encourage them to talk to the group in the exchange sessions. Gradually, the group establishes an atmosphere of mutual trust that allows the participants to talk about the past and to bring forward various questions and problems they encounter.

The exchange and reflection of experiences is guided by continual observation of the "inner beast". It may be stimulated or enriched by special exercises. Referring to the spirit of nature, participants are sometimes asked to select their personal "power animal" out of a number of different wild animals (made of wood). Each participant is asked to comment on his or her particular choice. The animals enable the young adults to consciously externalise images of their "inner beast" and to heighten their positive and/or negative projections. Thus, the animals are often selected because of their fighting capacities (lion), strength (elephant, rhino), cleverness and agility (giraffe, impala) or their caring character and peacefulness (elephant).<sup>20</sup> On other occasions, a park of animals and other symbols might be used to express new feelings, emotional barriers or achievements.<sup>21</sup>

Another incentive is the daily distribution of cards with selected proverbs, poems or thoughts that accompany the participants during the hiking day. Evening sessions may be used to refer to the content of the individual cards and their significance for the participant.

### *Return*

The trail concludes with a final session back at the foot of the mountains, where the truck is parked. In a last round, participants share the most important experiences of the inner journey and their significance. The look forward - in terms of challenges waiting in the township - is encouraged, and ongoing support is offered. A prayer, a song and a last cleansing ritual around a candle establish an official end to the trail. Back in the township, each participant receives a copy of the video recording of the wilderness experience. The videotape is supposed to serve as personal souvenir and to enhance the response of the community to the returning young adults.

### *3.5 Post-trail support*

After returning from the Transformation Trail, participants become involved in an ongoing support programme. Follow-up activities are offered that facilitate their re-integration in the community.

In co-operation with other organisations (for example Lifeline), life-skills workshops and

basic business skill programmes are offered in order to foster the self-esteem of the participants, to encourage them to develop future projects and to start a self-made business or other kinds of self-help initiatives. In some cases, participation in vocational training courses or volunteer programmes was arranged.

In order to assume their new role in the community, some participants had the opportunity to function as peace monitors for various township ceremonies and occasions. Others are involved as mentors to children of their community participating in an adventure therapy programme.

Post-trail psychological assessment assists with possible referral to formal counselling. These services are available at all times. Informal counselling opportunities developed over time when some of the former trail members founded a 'Mountain Club', later also called the 'Wilderness Youth Club'. This informal structure first served an ongoing therapeutic function, allowing youth to meet and discuss their experiences, to continue building relationships, and to become involved in cultural and sporting activities. Gradually, the club developed in various directions, always trying to accommodate the needs of the members. Today, none of the previous activities and meetings persist. Only the Arts and Culture section of the club survived. It has been working with secondary-school students in order to extend the peace-building process by bringing youths together in traditional music and dance activities.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. Key concepts**

In the Wilderness Project, a number of psychological, therapeutic, communal and developmental concepts are integrated and determine the work and its progress over the years. Most of the key concepts are outlined in articles by Gavin Robertson (Project Manager) and Marilyn McDowell (Facilitator). Others emerged in interviews with the National Director, the Project Manager, the Project Co-ordinator and Trail Assistants. Many key concepts are closely related or interdependent.

##### **4.1 Transforming trauma through the power of nature**

The project is grounded on the premise that working with people physically brings up or makes conscious the trauma 'locked in the body' and that nature holds a great potential to transform this trauma. For the conceptualisation of the Transformation Trails, the facilitators of the Wilderness Project largely relied upon Carl G. Jung's theory of analytical psychology and his approach of using the archetypal landscape to evoke the archetypal history of human nature. According to Jungian theory, the physical terrain provides the challenges and obstacles required to face danger, confront fear and set limits in an empathic environment. Challenges occur as natural obstacles within the journey and demand of the group to persevere and rely on each other. The process involves both physical and psychological risk-taking. This risk-taking represents a core part of the transition required in therapy.

In addition the project also assumes that a "holding environment"<sup>23</sup> and the experience of undistorted or 'unperverted power' (McDowell 1998: 3), courage and dignity contrast sharply with the youth's past experiences in urban warfare that lacked physical and

psychological safety and created a 'false' sense of strength and courage.

The design of the wilderness trail in the light of the work of Jung is built upon the theory that psychic growth has a teleological drive towards wholeness. Robertson explains:

Jung referred to this drive towards wholeness in psychic growth as *individuation* and to the culmination of this process as *transformation*. He believed that human beings have an instinct for wholeness and that transformation is a natural, albeit hazardous process which involved an on-going dialogue between the ego and the Self or archetypal image of God. For Jung 'all transformation includes experiences of transcendence and mystery and involves symbolic death and rebirth' (Samuels et al. 1986). (quoted in Robertson 1999: 6)

Two types of trail components have been designed in line with the Jungian concepts mentioned above: a 'transcendent' and a 'rebirthing' path. While the transcendent path includes the ascent of mountains and an overnight stay on the summit, the rebirthing path follows a watercourse through tunnels, rock arches, and forests within a continually widening gorge system. The particular structure of a trail is dependent on the assessed therapeutic needs of the group. Frequently, a combination of both trail types is included in a particular route. Despite specific emphasis that might shift from one group to another in order to match with the assessed needs, the trail is generally designed to work with the psychological issues of the hero and his fall from power (the perpetrator-victim dynamic). Referring to a trail experience with former Commanders, McDowell describes the trail design as follows:

The natural landscape mimicked the psychological issues of the trailists in the rapid ascent of the great mountain summit (rise to hero status); the painful and slow descent of the mountains (their fall from power and marginalisation by their communities), with the obstacles and challenges inherent in that process; and the rebirth - this meant swimming through a dark water tunnel in which the Commanders re-experienced danger and fear in an empathic environment. (McDowell 1998: 3)

Hence, the physical terrain of the Drakensberg Mountains and its archetypal symbolism is used to evoke and mirror the equivalent psychological issues of the 'ex-community defenders'. To exemplify the differentiation of the project's trail experience from other wilderness approaches that do not refer to the existence of natural challenges and rational risks, she concludes:

The possibility of healing came from using the physical terrain to re-enact their trauma, however, this time their traumatic situation was witnessed by their 'brothers' and the wilderness therapy team in empathy. This is what makes wilderness therapy different from any other wilderness journey where in both instances the archetypes are naturally present! (McDowell 1998: 3)

#### **4.2 Empowerment and establishment of new connections**

Furthermore the Wilderness Project is based on the idea that the effects of trauma can be reduced through personal empowerment and by fostering new connections at various levels. Following the psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith L. Herman (1992), the project believes

that:

[T]he particular circumstances of each youth are different and the psychological trauma associated with these circumstances manifests in a variety of physical and psychological symptoms. Beneath the various symptoms a pattern can be observed - the core experiences of psychological trauma may be seen in terms of disempowerment and disconnection. The Wilderness Therapy Process addresses the core experiences of psychological trauma through empowering the participants and facilitating the establishment of new connections in the relationship of the participant with the environment, others and self. (Robertson 1999: 3-4)

### *Empowerment*

Many of the defence mechanisms developed by the militarised youth were shaped by an extreme culture of violence. During the time of conflict, these behavioural and psychological patterns made sense, but in relation to the youth's current life circumstances, they might have become inappropriate. The project tries to make use of the wilderness to dismantle defences that are seen as dysfunctional. It starts from the assumption that the natural environment offers enough pressure and intensity to discover the limitations and inadequacies of some of the psychological mechanisms deriving from urban warfare (Robertson 1999: 10; McDowell 1998: 6).

It would be dangerous, though, to leave the participants without psychological strategies that may serve as satisfying and viable substitutes. Thus, the stimulation and heightening of self-awareness plays a key role in this transformation process:

'Self-awareness results in the need for inner growth and ... quest for self-realisation and transformation' (Cumes 1998: 64). In these terms, the increasing self-awareness may be seen as counteracting the effects of trauma and facilitating empowerment. Cumes (1998) lists 'empowerment' as one of the transformations that can occur as a result of the wilderness effect. (Robertson 1999: 10)

In order to support personal empowerment, the trails allow participants to experience themselves in new ways. The engagement with nature and the development of new group and wilderness skills offer opportunities to increase self-esteem and self-sufficiency. It gives the youth the freedom to experiment with new psychological strategies and to acquire a fresh sense of individual identity.

The 'fresh start' permits participants to reconnect with themselves, others and the environment in a more authentic way. The project assumes that the wilderness impacts on each of these relationships:<sup>24</sup>

### *Connection with self*

The connections with self may be seen in terms of the aspects of intra-psychic functioning and psychosomatic (mind-body) functioning. In terms of intra-psychic functioning, the project is built upon the assumption that the natural area and unknown wilderness offer the

ideal hook for the projection of the unconscious. In the same way that the totality of the unconsciousness is viewed as having a compensatory function in relation to consciousness, the wilderness experience fulfils a compensatory function for the urban dweller. In symbolic terms, then, the wilderness is associated with the unconscious:

The symbolic encounter of consciousness and the unconscious evokes the transcendent function in order to facilitate a transition from one psychological state to another. (Robertson 1999: 11)

In terms of psychosomatic functioning, the project is based on recent research that strongly indicates that the entire dissipative structure (the nervous system, the endocrine system and the immune system) functions as a single cognitive network. Therefore, the Wilderness Project engages the whole body in an experience that integrates the physical and psychological. It is assumed that recovery from trauma is more effective when approached through the multiple cognitive processes of the body, rather than through one part of the process - the brain. In short, the project recognises the impact on cognition resulting from interaction between the body and the environment.

#### *Connection with others*

The project tries to foster connections with others at various levels. The encounter of former enemies is facilitated by means of an empathic and nurturing group in which the youth are able to explore healthier and more constructive ways of relating (see Section 4.3). Empathic facilitators provide the necessary psychological climate for healing and transformation. Finally, the post-trail support reinforces the integration of the youth in their community (see Section 4.7).

#### *Connection with the environment*

The project's philosophy rests on Jung's differentiation of a 'personal unconscious' (the superficial, accessible and variable layer in the psyche containing individual experiences of interactions with the environment) and a 'collective unconscious' (the deeper, relatively inaccessible and more stable layer containing the inheritance of ancestral experiences). It sees the wilderness experience as a chance to approach the most basic of all archetypes that compose the collective unconscious: the oneness of nature. Here, the work of Jung matches with the concepts drawn from traditional healing methods (see Section 4.4).

#### **4.3 Encounter the other - reconciliation between former enemies**

As already mentioned, the programme aims to change existing negative perceptions of members of the opposing groups. The establishment of new relationships with others includes the former enemy as well. The project believes that individual and community healing is only possible if the opposing groups have equal opportunities to be integrated in the transformation process. A Trail Assistant, who had been part of the first trail that was leaving with SDUs only, explained it in the following way:

It was no use of having one part of the community and leave the other one being traumatised because that other one with all these negative kinds of things in their minds, they are going to do the very same things back to the ones who



are trying to change ... it's like a waste of time ... I think it was a good idea to get the two sides together ... you can't heal one and leave one in trauma.  
(Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

The project's conception of reconciliation is not only understood as 'fostering community healing'. The idea of 'encountering the other' is interpreted as a key concept of individual healing as well. Robertson elucidates this idea as follows:

That's not just a community healing thing that's happening there; that is individual healing because it's internal splitting off of the shadow side, projecting it outwards onto another group and then trying to destroy them in some way ... . Now in doing that (working with both groups at once), all of those issues have to become integrated because people suddenly realise they have to change their perception. What is that - why were they splitting that off and projecting it outwards? That, what they were putting onto somebody else that is something of their own, it's theirs. So again, you can't slip away from that because it comes back to their internal process or their issues, their shadow issues, so in a sense as internal element, not external. So again the processes are one and the same. (Interview with Gavin Robertson , July 19, 2000)

The project assumes that reconciliation between the participants during the wilderness experience may have a ripple effect in terms of shifting the perceptions of the community regarding formerly opposed groupings (Robertson 1999: 13).

#### **4.4 Back to common roots - traditional healing**

The perception that individual and community healing are interdependent also explains why the project tries to dissociate itself from conventional Western therapeutic frameworks, grounded in individualistic concepts of health and illness. These individualistic notions often struggle to adequately address broader community and environmental healing. They seem to be less appropriate because:

... in this African context it's very difficult to distinguish between the individual growth, it's almost a product of community development, community growth and - particularly working with a group like this - the group healing is part of the individual healing and the individual healing is part of the group healing and, absolutely, they're almost inseparable from my experience in these programmes. (Interview with Gavin Robertson, July 19, 2000)

Thus, the Wilderness Project draws on several traditional healing concepts and practices. This is also seen as a chance to overcome the ethnic and cultural divides that were politicised during violence because these healing concepts underline established common roots of the opposing groups.

#### ***Oneness with nature***

Traditional healing as practised by the San, for example, emphasises human beings' oneness with nature. The project is grounded on this concept of the interconnectedness of humans and nature. It refers to an eco-psychology that starts from the assumption that the psyche is

the size of the earth. Such a holistic conception matches well with the Jungian approach described above (see Section 4.1).

### ***Rock art and healing trance dance of the San***<sup>25</sup>

The project utilises some of the psychological processes and the rituals practised within the shamanistic belief system of the San. The essential function of the shaman is to heal. He carries out his healing task through various rituals such as the trance dance and the spirit journey, which are performed to counteract sickness and to restore harmony and integration between the community and the individual. The San distinguish between ordinary sickness or complaints and complex illnesses that are perceived as predominately social or supernatural and in need of trance healing.

The project assumes that the particular San paintings that the participants see in the cave can be involved in the intra-psychic process of individuation and transformation. They have a transcendent function in that they move the psyche beyond conflict towards wholeness. In order for the trance dance to serve as a healing experience, it requires the symbolism of death and rebirth. Certain paintings combine symbolic death (a dying eland) and rebirth or symbolise the transformation (dying eland with two therianthropes).

### ***Rituals***

During the trail, several rituals are introduced. Examples include the fire cleansing and the use of water as element of rebirth. Their origins may vary. According to the Co-ordinator it is important, though, that they all refer to practices and symbols common in 'African' culture. He highlighted the anxiety that artificial rituals could be imposed on participants:

You have to have good explanations for black people to make them understand the rituals because ... people who do their own rituals don't want to mix with other rituals. So when you do that ritual you must have a good explanation, what kind of ritual is this and where does it come from. (Interview with Scotch Madhlophe, July 7, 2000)

The facilitators discussed the rituals and key concepts of traditional healing applied in the project with traditional healers. This way, the project also acknowledges the strong beliefs in traditional healing that some of the participants have.

### ***Return from the wilderness***

According to Robertson, leaving the community and going into the wilderness is a millennia-old practice. Referring to this tradition, which afforded heroic status to individuals returning to a community from the wilderness, allows the reframing of the community' perception of the ostracised teenage-soldiers. Moving people physically out of the community for a few days can be seen as an opportunity for readjustment on both sides - i.e., for the young adults as well as their community - that is not available in the individualistic Western approach:

... if somebody goes off on it's own to therapy, too quietly, without nobody knowing, they may try to change things in their life and their families and their

community and their friends. We understand that and become uncomfortable with that ... . It's a little bit easier when people are actually physically leaving for a few days, going out on the journey and then coming back ... . So people stand back for a while, almost to allow that persons to adjust into a new phase, a new way of doing things. (Interview with Gavin Robertson, July 19, 2000)

#### **4.5 Facing and integrating the beast within**

'Facing the beast within' is one of the central concepts referred to throughout the programme. The symbolic value of conducting this physical and psychological journey in the Drakensberg (Dragon Mountain) rests in the historically prevalent and geographically widespread concept of confronting the dragon, in this case the 'trauma dragon'.

In psychological terms, the dragon represents various intra - and inter-psyche processes. The dragon has become the symbol of the ultimate enemy of the hero, that is, the conscious ego, which is attacked from the outside and the inside ... . In general terms, the dragon is a composite animal—the confused ingredients of the psyche need to be clearly distinguished and newly related to each other, before the whole can be transformed. (Chetwynd 1982: 125-126)

In the Wilderness Project, the image of confronting and taming the dragon is joined together with the rock art of the San. The paintings that the participants see in the sacred San caves are used to facilitate the process of dealing with the past by facing and integrating the inner beast, the experienced trauma. By means of these San paintings, five psychological stages that determine the healing process are explained to the participants during the pre-trail preparation (McDowell 1998: 6).

##### ***Denial of the beast's existence***

For youth that constructed their 'self' in the context of violence, giving up the distorted qualities of power and strength implies a crisis of identity. The denial of nightmares or any kind of instability may be part of a psychological defence to retain their identity as heroes and community defenders.

##### ***Beast chasing man***

The San painting symbolises the admission by the participants that the past - with its traumatic experiences and memories - haunt them in nightmares as well as during the day.

##### ***Man chasing the beast***

With this 'reversal of opposites', the tenuous persecutor/victim polarity is expressed. It symbolises the perpetrator's fall from power and the ambiguous transformation into a victim.

##### ***Man facing the beast***

Confronting the personal trauma demands a conscious choice to face danger and to reflect on the personal experiences during the violence:

Wilderness trips offer a carefully planned encounter with danger. These chosen experiences offer an opportunity to restructure the survivor's ... physiological and psychological responses to fear. (Herman 1992: 198)<sup>26</sup>

Through the process of 'taming', the inner beast the participants regain self-confidence.

#### *Man integrating the beast*

The inner acceptance of the trauma is the start of psychological, social and emotional healing. It ideally starts during the Transformation Trail and the post-trail care. Over the long run, it releases the participants, so that they can concentrate on new tasks and challenges. They can fully re-assume responsibility for their community in peaceful terms.

These stages are not seen as clear or rigid steps that everybody is going to be able to detect and distinguish in his or her development. Marilyn McDowell shows in her case study of one former SDU commander that the different stages of the healing process can also emerge simultaneously, and not necessarily chronologically (McDowell 1998: 6-7).

The painting of man chasing the beast is the most important symbol onto which the participants project their inner beast. In the beginning, it was used as logo for the project and printed on the T-shirts.

#### **4.6 Journey towards healing - the trail as trigger to start the process**

As already indicated in the concept of the "Beast Within", the Wilderness Project is based on the idea that the healing process needs to be understood as a 'journey' with many stages. Integral to the philosophy of the project is the concept that the Transformation Trail represents a visible departure on this journey towards healing. According to Gavin Robertson it's "the trigger to start the process".

Wilderness therapy is like the washing powder that loosens things up. Many of those people had been totally unapproachable in counselling ... . So it prepares people for counselling but not there [on the trail], you have to let that process happen. (Interview with Maggie Seiler, July 3, 2000)

The aim is to enrol as many militarised youth of the targeted community as possible. Consequently, the Transformation Trails are seen as a once-off intervention. In a way, this principle interferes with the project's conviction that the journey towards healing is an individual-specific enterprise and must respect the different amounts of time that different people need to come to terms with their experiences. The facilitators underline that nobody is urged to talk and that the healing process cannot be imposed:

I've seen situations where someone does not speak about the past for the entire trail and even afterwards. I've spoken to people in that situation and they say, yes, they integrated different things, they go into different expenses but they did not feel comfortable. That's the way it is, there's no guarantee ... . People definitely will go through a process of healing at a speed which they feel comfortable with. We are responsible for that and move people along that journey where they are, and it doesn't work in the same way across the board,

definitely. (Interview with Gavin Robertson, July 19, 2000)

The idea of not pushing or influencing the speed of transformative processes permeates the whole project. It also determines the way in which the post-trail support is offered:

What had always worked in the past was that as people would go through the trail, they come back they kind of hang around, then they ask for a little counselling or they might go into a life-skills programme. As they develop, so does their programme develop in terms of what they choose. Maybe they are feeling great and when people come from local authority looking for people to place in jobs they would be somebody that would come forward. So it's flexible in that it goes as fast as the individual goes. (Interview with Maggie Seiler, July 3, 2000)

Respecting this individual rhythm implied in certain cases that people could attend a trail twice or even thrice. Attendance at three trails, however, was unusual and happened mainly in cases where people stayed in close contact with the project and contributed to the post trail support.

#### **4.7 New sense of belonging and building a culture of peace**

The trail experience is also regarded as a type of rite of passage or initiation process. The project acknowledges that, due to the extreme conflict and disruptions, most of the militarised and criminalised youth had failed to be involved in any community-sanctioned ritual indicating their role within the community. Their return from the wilderness to the community should give them the chance to reappraise their status as heroes within a new discourse, allowing the youth to become more integrated, to dissociate from violence and war and to serve as role models to other youths in the community and to participate in the construction of a 'culture of peace'.

To achieve this goal, a key aim of the NPAT - and hence of the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project - is to boost community resourcefulness. Over the years the organisation learned that the process of building a stable healthy community requires a core group of committed community members that are willing to assume responsibility for this process in the long run. Accordingly, the project places a high trust in the capacities of the young men and women and tries to foster the development of a new sense of belonging in the community throughout the programme:

South Africa is a country of extremes: you have extreme rich, extreme poor, you have the extremes of violence to the extreme of peace and creativity and spiritualism. There are these extremes of energy that are there. There's a good expression in the Bible – I'm not a religious person but I am spiritual. It's the story where Saul becomes Paul, where you have this person who goes running around killing all the Christians and [then] he becomes a powerful Christian. That is how these young people are—as difficult as they are to work with ..., they are these Sauls and that's why they became leaders in their communities. They're the ones with the brightness in their eyes and they have ambition and they just need some vision and some hope, most of them are very bright and intelligent. (Interview with Maggie Seiler, July 3, 2000)

## 4.8 Summary

The underlying chain of assumptions presented above may be summarised as follows. By focusing the individual on the challenge of resolving their internal conflicts, the level of projection of shadow issues onto the enemy is reduced. By reframing the way in which the opposing groups perceive each other, and by making new connections, the peace process grows. In order to consolidate this peace process and to adjust it to the community's long-term needs, members of the community must become actively involved in the work and prepare to assume the burden themselves:

I think that that's where the healing and reconciliation takes place, it's having a vehicle in the programme where we can have volunteers and we can have people who are helping out and we can have people who want to be trained as wilderness therapists. To actually have people involved in communities.  
(Interview with Maggie Seiler, July 3, 2000)

## 5. Sketching some of the impacts and challenges

In this section a range of impacts and challenges of the Wilderness Project will be presented and discussed. The results are based on the interviewees' responses to the process. To fully capture the significance of some of the insights and experiences of participants, it seems useful, at times, to highlight the respondents' factional affiliations during the conflict. In general though, the re-imposition of the 'old' categories is avoided. This methodological decision was encouraged by the example of the participants who deliberately ceased to address their unit members as 'comrades', perceiving this custom - in their particular context - as reinforcing the former divide. It can also be read in light of the whole project, which aims to question former enmities and stereotypes and to reappraise complexity and ambiguity, representing essential steps towards trauma and conflict transformation.

### 5.1 Transformative power

#### **"Your mind changes, you think about something that is positive in life"**

Given the respondents' positive views, it can be concluded at the outset that the opportunity to leave the township and to hike seven days in the wilderness was - without exception - enjoyed as an outstanding and meaningful event. While many respondents had problems in indicating the year when they left school and joined other community projects or the post-trail workshops of the NPAT, most of them knew the exact date of their (first) trail. A few participants even described it as a turning point in their life. Some claimed to have found an end to their nightmares, while others simply emphasised that it helped them to find there is something they have to work on.

I benefited a lot. They teach me how to treat other people and how to struggle in life because whenever you climb the mountain, it's hard ... but in the end of the day you get relieved, your mind changes, you think about something that is positive in life. (Interview with participant, June 30, 2000)

This description reflects the general tone of many responses. On the whole, it can be stated that the interviewees shared a fundamental belief in the positive energy and transformative

power of the process. This confidence often found expression in efforts to convince friends to participate or in the wish to open up the process to a larger segment of the population.

I think that this trail is good for other people; even you must go there ... .  
People from the location, they only stay here at the location, they don't know the parts of South Africa. Just going there, seeing the whole atmosphere, it brings you something new – physically, mentally. You become great, physically and mentally. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

Drawing on their experiences over the years, the Trail Assistants conclude that there has been some kind of transformative effect for almost everybody. They explained this assessment as follows:

During the trail itself, everybody became part of the group because you couldn't survive by yourself - you need somebody ... even the ones who came back and now went back to the very same things that they were doing before, they were no longer negative in the way that they were seeing those people as enemies. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

## 5.2 New connections

### **"You're feeling like a new person"**

When asked about the most significant experience of the project, all responses centred around the establishment of new connections with the environment, other and self. Often, the participants put the emphasis on one or two kinds of relationships that shifted or changed during the trail. This is also the case in the interview fragment quoted below.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the interview, this participant stressed "socialising with people" as major aspect. At the same time, the his response shows how the connection with others (meeting, recognising the other as somebody, as an-other self, sharing) is linked to the experience of nature (listening, speaking to nature, feeling spring water, facing the dangerous tunnel) and how both impacted on the self (you've been qualified, you are somebody, proud of yourself) and vice versa. This speaks for a complex interdependence of the new connections that contribute as a whole to the individual's process of transformation and healing. The participant seems to perceive this interconnection of internal and external events (you can hear that, it's inside, naturally), but these feelings are difficult to express in words. He refers to his experience in terms of an initiation process. Other interviewees talked in a similar way about "a changed life", being a "different person" and having "new friends". The notion of an initiation, which is embedded in the project's design, proves to be quite important.

The most important thing was socialising with people, getting to know people. I was a hermit. I used to lock myself [in]. I did not want to socialise with anyone. I was thinking I was the best. Other people were just like shit. But going there [means] meeting other people, discussing with them, making some new ideas ... . At day four, we start planning: 'now, gentlemen, what are we going to do?' We start saying we are going to do this and this.  
[I.]: So this was very important for you? Also the planning of the future ...

Not only the planning, going there to Drakensberg - it is a good place, no air pollution - speaking to the nature, just sitting there, looking at the mountains, birds, you know?

[I.]: What feeling is it?

You're feeling like a new person, you feel like you've been qualified. Now we are starting a new life. You are a renewed person, like a new somebody.

[I.]: And it has to do with nature and the experience of nature? Ja, ... not meeting people of the location, not meeting all those things, it's just staying there, just the atmosphere, you can hear that ... it's inside, naturally, it heals—even with that water, spring water, the one that they are selling. Just getting into that water, you feel like a new person. There is this place that they call a tunnel. From this side, you cannot see the other side; you have to cross it. When you come that side, you are proud of yourself—you are proud to see 'I have done it' ... . When time goes by, you feel like: this is somebody and I am somebody, this guy is nice, we are just fighting for shit ... we can share a lot of experiences. He used to be my enemy, but now he's not my enemy anymore. We can do many things together, now we are clicking together. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

This statement exemplifies the spirit of the journey that many respondents tried to illuminate. In a similar way, many participants named the third or fourth day as the turning point where the stress diminished and they started to feel comfortable in the group and began to think about their future. Some respondents spoke about the beauty of the mountains in general, but mostly they insisted on the environmental aspects that contrast to the township world, where you cannot see the stars, inhale the fresh air or enjoy silence because of the pall of smog covering the area, constant noise and confinement. Furthermore, the element of water is a physical obstacle and challenge frequently mentioned. Especially the tunnel seems to be a powerful experience. As with the respondent above, many participants voiced the feeling of 'rebirth', which indicates that the people are letting things of the past go, not holding onto them any more.

Many of the quotations that follow show how these new connections complement one another. Nevertheless, the respondents underline some dimensions more than others, and they are often able to give concrete examples of the perceived impacts. The next paragraphs also illustrate that the priorities given by the interviewees have to do with their particular situation or their interests and goals in participating in the project.

### **5.3 The trail as one stage on the individual journey towards healing**

#### **"I came here already knowing that I need a change"**

As introduced in Section 4.6, NPAT understands the Transformation Trail as trigger or starting point of the healing process, and many participants described their experience in that manner. Yet from the responses to questions about events and conditions that prompted the participation in the wilderness trail, it becomes evident that certain respondents had a clear aim in and/or motivation for attending the project even before leaving on the trail: <sup>28</sup>

I came here already knowing that I need a change ... . In fact to tell the truth the journey was nothing to me ... . What can I say? What I was really wanting was



the change and to be involved with different people, to cope with other people's differences and to know exactly how they live because we were misled by our leaders that those guys are like this and like this, (only to) find out that they were talking lies ... . To go up and down was nothing, the real thing was to be with these people alone. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 26, 2000)

Similarly, a number of interviewees reported about their "will to change" even before they joined the project. Some had already made major efforts in order to improve their situation. One respondent explained, for example, how he succeeded in freeing himself from taking pills and returned to school. It looks as if these participants have consciously initiated their journey towards healing before leaving on the trail. Therefore it can be concluded that for some, the trail represented the starting point of the healing process, while for others it became one stage of an ongoing effort towards transformation that started earlier on already. This does not imply that the trail experience was of minor relevance for them. On the contrary, it rather proposes that the higher consciousness around their goals might have allowed these participants to benefit of the trail to a larger extent. In particular they seemed to be better prepared to cope with the often-mentioned post-trail depression. While it is not possible to put forward a general rule, respondents' remarks about participants that were not able to transfer the experience or apply the newly acquired coping strategies in their daily life also attribute this 'failure' to a lack of inner preparation and "will to change".

These findings speak to the urgent need of an extensive trail preparation, perhaps even including some kind of initiation ritual or engagement where the participants affirm their interest and willingness to work on themselves. Also it seems to be important to clarify their expectations in order to prevent possible disappointments.<sup>29</sup> In other words: It suggests that the preparation could or should already be understood as a major stage of the journey.

#### **5.4 Opening up and facing danger**

##### **"I wouldn't lie to you, when I went there, I had stress"**

According to the key concepts presented above, transformation demands the conscious choice to face danger in order to move beyond the habitual way of dealing with their trauma and mutual negative perceptions (see Section 4.5). Listening to the interviewees, it becomes evident that everybody was confronted with fears at some point. The descriptions of the participants' anxieties during as well as after the trail occupy an extensive space in the interviews. It hints at the importance attached to these experiences of opening up, admitting the fear and taking risks. The moments that are perceived as scary, frightening or difficult vary from one person to another. Respondents who participated in the first years often named the encounter with the former enemy as a major threat. It forced the ex-combatants to tackle anxieties before even leaving on the trail:

Everything was scary. When they explained to us that we will be going with these hostel dwellers, I said: "My goodness, are we going to come back?" Especially if we are going to Natal, that's where most of them are from ... I nearly changed my mind while I was there. When they explained that they tried to make this reconciliation, [it came] to my mind, how can we reconcile? We're a group of thirteen, but it's not only thirteen of us who are fighting, the whole

location is fighting ... how can we do this? There were those questions ... and then the tension, nobody was talking to somebody else. (Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

In time, as the community started to trust the process, the dread of being trapped or harmed by the opposing group seemed to diminish. The focus in interviews with people who participated at a later stage shifted towards the dangers faced during the trail. Strong feelings of insecurity or stress were produced by challenges such as unusual physical tasks, the unknown environment, the imagination of wild animals or the simple fact of being far away from family and friends.

The ability of participants to open up and consciously face the perceived danger hinged on the empathic and nurturing group climate encouraging and comforting the respondents:

I was home sick. I was worried about everybody. It's not something that I was used to do, ... I wouldn't lie to you, when I went there, I had stress, it was a lot of stress ... we struggle and we carry, there are heavy things like a tent ... so we had to exchange the tent every now and then, ... I had to see that nothing happens to you, I should watch over you and at the same time you are watching over me. (Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

I had the feeling that it's difficult [to talk about the past], I cannot tell anyone about this. I was always thinking to myself, how am I going to tell somebody about my problems. So the time I was there [on the trail] they [the group] made me feel comfortable: "... If you don't feel like discussing with us, look at us, see if there is anyone you can trust and sit down with him and talk." (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

Altogether, the perception of danger and the way participants faced and integrated their fears seems to depend on the individual's situation during and after the violence. Key variables included family and childhood experiences, educational and cultural background, (religious) faith, and the level of confidence in the project, especially in the Project Coordinator.<sup>30</sup>

This finding raises the difficult question how to "manage" these fears and how to "adjust" them to the participants' particular needs. It is quite likely that too much danger or not enough empathic holding could lead to refusal or a complete blockage. Could the final reaction of one participant - "I won't go back to the project, these guys are crazy, they will take us there again" - be read as an indicator of excessive stress?<sup>31</sup> Or is it merely a sign that the person did not open up and take a risk?

### **5.5 Gaining self-confidence and self-control**

#### **"Now I trust myself that I can do something that is difficult"**

Many participants described the ascent of the mountain summit as a "struggle" (often as their fight with the inner beast) taking a long time. Jointly, they perceived the final arrival on the top as an empowering moment, providing them with a new sense of strength,

courage and self-esteem. These feelings seem to find expression in different kinds of long-term impacts. The responses of the interviewed women reflect the self-confidence they gained.<sup>32</sup> One of them explained how this physical and psychological challenge led to a new self-image that continues to help her till today:

Even when I felt that it's difficult, I told [myself]: 'let me try myself and see if I can cope with something in life.' ... And the time I was there at the top, when I was looking down [seeing], that I came from so far away, it was amazing, as if I'm dreaming. Then I started to see ... I'm not that person I was thinking I was. Now I trust myself that I can do something that is difficult and at the end I can get something because here I am now. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

Another woman told me that the difficulties faced while climbing the mountain stirred a strong will to 'reclaim' her life and to assume responsibility for herself:

I started to say, no, I'm going to do this ..., it's my life now, it's not my mother's life, it's not my sister's life, it's not my brother's life, I started to want my life now and ... I started to be brave now. (Interview with participant, July 5, 2000)

Several men who perceived themselves as extremely short-tempered and liable to flare up before they went on the trail claimed to have found patience and self-control. A few respondents even reported that the improvement of self-control and further support after the trail encouraged them to withdraw from alcohol and drugs.<sup>33</sup>

Both the exchange sessions on the trail and the life skills workshop prompted people to reflect on the meaning of their life and personal goals they want to pursue. Many respondents remarked that this kind of planning supplied a foundation for abandoning their old life style. Being away from the daily stresses experienced in the township allowed the participants to think about themselves, bring out their hopes and wishes and develop a vision of their future.

While most responses concerning the re-discovery of 'self' centred at first on the withstanding and overcoming of physical and social challenges, one respondent stressed from the beginning that the trail primarily encouraged him to reflect about himself and his aims in life:

The most important thing that I found being valuable for me out of the trail was to think more about myself, where do I belong and what do I want to do in life and what am I doing here?

[I.]: And how did they come up these questions? Why do you think they came up in the wilderness?

It was the peaceful environment that I experienced in the mountains: it is nice and quiet up there, nobody is interfering with you, you don't hear any cars driving around or any music noises or anything that happens in the location. So you just concentrate on being there. (Interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

This clear focus needs to be seen in the light of the respondent's biography. Since he had been working as a security and peace monitor alongside ex-combatants of the opposing

group in 1996, the encounter with the former enemy did neither frighten nor excite him particularly. When he went on the trail in 1998, his son had just died, his wife had left him because of his violent outbursts, and he was jobless, abusing dagga, suffered from nightmares and felt "mentally disturbed". After the trail and a workshop offering business skills, he was able to re-establish his family life and to open up a small business. His socio-economic situation is still extremely fragile, but apparently the opportunity to think things over and to earn at least a minimal living with the acquired skills supplied essential support to transform his personal affairs.

These impacts bring up important insights concerning the project's challenges. The courage and strength gained from the trail can easily be distinguished from the urban warfare ideals. "Being brave", often repeated in the interviews, acquired new meaning; it now refers to a mental and natural kind of physical power. Listening to the interviewees, though, this 're-assumed heroism' also triggered unease at times. There is no doubt that the empowerment of the individual is fundamental to any transformation process. Nevertheless, the question must be raised whether an approach that emphasizes individual transformation may fail to take account of the fact that certain fundamental aspects of these individuals' daily life will not change as a result of the project (e.g., the structural violence and injustice - a legacy of apartheid that is still very present in the townships). In other words: An overly ambitious project bears the risk of an individualisation of societal and structural problems. If the confidence coming from individual empowerment is frustrated by a lack of tangible results, unexpected, new disappointments that question the former achievements could be a consequence.

## 5.6 Development of coping strategies

### **"The way you walk is the way you're going to face life"**

Personal projects and strategies to change things in life generally tended to be about the return to school, applying for vocational internships or creating a small business. One participant also indicated that his first task when he returned from the trail was to go back to Natal to ask the family of a person he had shot for forgiveness and to re-establish the contact to his own family, which had been disappointed by his involvement in the violence. In a few cases, the respondents went even further. Besides planning future projects, they translated parts of their trail experience into a personal philosophy of life or a strategy to cope with life.

Often participants mentioned the 'lessons learned' concerning the respect for the natural environment as well as for the group's well being. It left a lasting impression that it is important to walk in line in order to protect nature and that the group has to learn to adapt the rhythm of the hike to the physical and psychological capacities of the 'weakest' member. They realised that this could concern any one of them. One interviewee summarised this insight as follows:

I have to treat the animal as I treat myself and you must not cut trees, those things mean a lot, they bring life to us ... and the way you walk is the way you're going to face life, those are the things that I have realised. (Interview with participant, June 30, 2000)

Several interviewees referred to the 'inner beast' as a helpful metaphor. The beast seems to

fulfil its function as a symbol onto which many respondents projected the confused ingredients of their psyche. In some cases, the participants told me what the beast represented for them (e.g., shyness or impatience). One woman transformed this analogy drawn between dealing with post-traumatic stress and confronting the beast into a personal problem-solving strategy, claiming that it helps her to manage difficult situations in her daily life:

There's a lesson that they used to teach us there, about a beast . . . . They told us that this is about our life: you must not run away from your problems, you must face your problems until you go together with your problems [meaning: integrating the problems] because in life there still are problems, you cannot live without problems . . . . So always when I come across a problem, I sit down and think. I try to tell myself, I must not fear but face these things and fight for it, then I'm going to do it, I'm coping and I'm okay. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

The participant who had defined "socialising" as the most important aspect of the trail (see Section 5.2) subsequently saw the capacity of dealing with difference as an important coping strategy:

It's just like learning and accepting other peoples' views, other peoples' choices of things and respecting other people. Going to the transformation trail teaches you how to obey, how to accept other peoples' views and exchanging views. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

It is very interesting that many remarks of the participants hint in the direction of basic communication, problem-solving and even conflict-resolution skills. When they say that they learned to communicate, this often meant more than accepting diversity. Several participants saw the necessity of empathic listening to each other, to be able to "put yourself into somebody's shoes", to "sit around one table" and to "negotiate" in order to address problems and conflicts.

### **5.7 Building up relationships of mutual trust**

**"There was a fear of talking directly, we had to joke around, it had to come steadily"**

Many interviewees spoke about the cautious but steady process of coming closer and getting in touch with other participants. Even the respondents who left on a trail comprising only SDUs mentioned the challenge of communicating with people they did not know. These anxieties indicate an atmosphere of extreme distrust and suspiciousness characterising the daily life in the Katorus area. Participants felt that a first step towards the other was often triggered spontaneously by sharing cigarettes or lending the other a hand in difficult hiking situations. Some also reported that jokes served as tool to bridge the feelings of insecurity and to get into contact with members of the opposing group. Others mentioned how the confidence in the group increased when they realised that other participants also had to struggle with problems and that they were able to support each other.

The most important thing [is that] there are people who are having nightmares

and ... the trail can help them because you are going to sleep with somebody else and that person can see how you react during the night, then that person can sit down and discuss with the group, the group can donate something in order to help you. (Interview with participant, June 30, 2000)

This statement reflects the significance of the holding environment and the growing empowerment of the group to tackle problems faced by its members. Looking at the interviews, it is striking that the respondents attributed only little attention to the work or presence of the facilitators on the trail. Some mentioned their confidence in the Project Coordinator or their relationship to one of the Trail Assistants, but altogether the facilitators' role stays in the background of the descriptions. It seems as if the facilitators' aim to foster self-help strategies that allow the group to assume responsibility for their members proved to be quite successful. Many participants had the feeling that the group was able to help them to cope with their anxieties, flashbacks and other difficulties.

The concept of "trust" is present in many of their responses to questions concerning the issue of talking about the past. Since initially many interviewees found it difficult, painful or frightening to tell their stories, they seemed to approve of the project's premise to leave it to the individual to decide at what time and to whom he or she would start to talk. Some respondents explained how they first approached only one confidant before talking to the group. A few mentioned that they were wary of revenge or legal consequences and needed a long time or several occasions until they were able to reveal everything that haunted them. Against this background, it does not astound that most participants feel that the disclosure of the past requires confidential relationships. At the same time talking and listening to one another was also the vehicle that prompted their confidence in the group and increased feelings of mutual trust and forgiveness:

When I spoke to him [former enemy and now friend], he was able to tell me everything and that's where I felt bad, ... when he told me what was happening and when I told him what was happening in that time, we agreed with one another, I trust you, thanks very much for telling me, I never knew that you will reveal everything, so I have to reveal everything to you also. I think that was the beginning of our relationship ... he also said, I think we have to forgive each other, we must not actually hate each other. It was good. (Interview with participant, July 3, 2000)

Asked about the sustainability of these new relationships, the answers extended from close friendship to little or no more contact at all. Many interviewees mentioned that the meetings and exchanges right after their return from the trail were often very intense. The trail group sometimes replaced former friendships. A couple of participants reported that they were able to maintain a permanent friendship, even across the former divide. Respondents who lost contact with other participants over the years - often due to a new job situation - nevertheless claimed that they do not perceive 'the other side' as the enemy anymore.

#### **5.8 Common humanity and transcending stereotypes?**

"The same thing we were doing in the location, they were doing in the hostel"

As is already apparent from the statements above, the trust-building process relies on the discovery of common issues that demand a de-construction of the stereotyped image of the 'other'. In most cases, the opening up and sharing of traumatic experiences during the violence facilitated the revelation that the situation and feelings perceived as member of SDUs and SPUs were quite similar. This acquisition of a broader perspective on the conflict seemed to allow them to empathise with the 'other'. In a few cases, the discussion with hostel dwellers even led to the conclusion that the situation of having been locked in the hostels was perceived as more problematic than the circumstances encountered as location dweller.<sup>34</sup> Several respondents also explained how the interaction of group, nature and different physical and mental challenges arose or brought back the feeling of humanity:

There were problems about songs [but] it was resolved because they sing their songs and we sing their songs, we sing our songs but with many, many words changed. We had to chant along the way, everything is heavy, you have your groceries, your sleeping bags, a whole lot of things. It was nice having to sing together. I think that's what kept the spirits up, get to be a human again. I'm experiencing humanity, having to breathe there in the mountains. I start feeling this is life, it is nature, it is alive that day. (Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

Similarly, another participant spoke about the "spirit of togetherness" promoted through the experience of wilderness and the empathic group. Yet the interview with this Zulu-speaking location resident also showed how this really strong belief in common humanity and relationships of mutual trust might in the end still be restricted to the small group of trail members:

Our relationship is great, but you never trust a person and say now this person is right for me because we black people, we believe in these things of herbalists ... . So there are people they rely on these things and come to you and beat you with something. At the end of the day, you become sick because of that thing that they have used for you. So you know there are things that you have to check. Whenever you communicate with them you must be careful even if you can shake his hand, you must be careful because at the end of the day they are going to use that herbalist medicine ... I can say these people don't trust us and there are people, they don't trust the Zulus. You know why they don't trust the Zulus: the Zulus they kill one another, among themselves, they did it in the past, they can catch the taxis and come from Natal to Gauteng to kill that person and then they go back to Natal. (Interview with participant, June 30, 2000)

Statements like this provide insight into the profound disunity of the townships and the inner conflicts they generate. While it seemed to be possible to transcend the stereotypes held about the other militant faction, the discovery of common humanity does not necessarily prove to be transferable to the opposing group as a whole. Prejudices, projections and mistrust among the different groups seem to persist. The thoughts and feelings of this township resident reflect the complex interrelation of different divisions. Zulu speaking himself, he clearly dissociates himself from 'them', meaning Zulu people from rural areas, who would often be more strongly anchored in cultural traditions. This kind of urban-rural divide was also evident in other interviews. Location dwellers were, for

example, convinced that the children growing up in the urban hostels are generally not attending school. This speaks for the distance and lack of knowledge about the daily life of the neighbours. This leads to the conclusion that in the long run, the concentration on one division, in the case of the project the division of the former SDUs and SPUs, might not be sufficient even though a great number of changes were initiated.

### **5.9 From individual to community healing?**

#### **"The other people who haven't been on this thing start wondering"**

The anxieties voiced by the respondent above, and many informal conversations with people of Katilehong, suggest that a peaceful co-existence remains extremely fragile. This is not meant to deny or diminish the changes achieved over the years. Many participants illustrated with their personal stories how the trail experience and the acquired skills and attitudes had a ripple effect on their families and even seemed to influence the life in the surrounding community. Two kinds of impacts can be distinguished that in the participants' judgement contributed to the community's well being:

#### *Sharing the experience with one's community*

The new connections with self often enabled the participants to change their attitudes toward and relationships within the community. The positive energy the participants felt after the trail also had an influence on their family life. Some restored contact again, while others became the breadwinner of the family, started to assume responsibility for their sisters and brothers. At the same time, parts of the community apparently felt relieved when they realised the impact the trail seemed to have:

When I came back, I just spread the message to all the others, the parents and their children that there is this wilderness therapy, going there will help you to be healed as you are stressed or traumatised, it will help you to be connected with yourself. I think I spread the message to the whole community and it made a change because in my section they know that I was involved in these depending things. (Interview with participant, July 3, 2000)

Another ripple effect of this enthusiastic attitude seemed to be an increasing acceptance of trauma and counselling work in the community and among former militarised youth. After all, the same participants who initially refused counselling as being only for mad people, were now talking about their trauma and promoting wilderness therapy and informal counselling.<sup>35</sup> The stories of the participants' experiences often led to the wish of other township residents to go on a trail themselves.

#### *Meeting across physical boundaries*

In 1996, the legacies of the apartheid system and the intra-community violence in Katorus was still visible in the daily street scene. The so-called 'no-go zones' remained abandoned for a long time and the contact between the opposing groups was avoided. Today, seven years after the first free elections, Khumalo Street, one of the main 'no-go areas' seems to be a 'normal' street again. Against this backdrop, it is not astonishing that a great number of participants emphasised how the encounter with the 'other' during the trail in the long run



had a positive impact on the community:

I think it helped a lot getting the two parts [of the conflict] together because ... when they come back, they carry on with their relationship now. The other people who haven't been on this thing start wondering, what's happening with these guys, they are still our enemies but you go there, you hang around with them. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

Without this group context and the opportunity to leave the township in order to practise the new ways of dealing with one another in a safe space, such a change in the behaviour of the participants would probably have been difficult to achieve. But this step represented a process of again consciously facing danger and taking a risk. The reaction of the community could place pressure on the participants:

Now on my return from the mountains, I was like a bad person to the hostel dwellers because I was accommodating people from the location, making friends with people from the locations. Now it was as if now I'm an informer, I'm selling them out. I did my level best to stay calm and tried to show my colleagues in the hostel that we are not with bad thoughts and ideas but what we're trying to do is to rebuild the community and to make that kind of peace environment between the hostel dwellers and the location. (Interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

Interviewees insisted that nowadays they feel free to walk around in the location or to go into a hostel if they want to meet somebody there. Thus, it can be concluded that the daily life and contact of the opposing groups changed over the years. It can be assumed that the project (or more precisely its participants), along with many other programmes and people, contributed to this transformation, which can be interpreted as a form of community healing. This inference should not be taken to overlook the fact that many remarks also indicate persisting tensions. On Khumalo Street, burned buildings remind the participants of the violence, and in the eyes of the location residents the world of the hostel residents is still perceived as less approachable, causing unease among the township population. Some participants of the location believe that sustainable peace and the feeling of security requires the dissolution of the hostels and the integration of the hostel dwellers in the location, at the best together with their families which often still live in Natal. Hostel dwellers, for their part, often prefer to stay where they are or move into new hostels since the living costs are lower and it allows them to move back and forth between Natal and Gauteng.

#### **5.10 Leaving behind and moving on**

##### **"Once you talk about it, it's offloading, you get relieved"**

The formal discussion sessions, as well as the informal exchange about traumatic experiences and present challenges, are perceived as appropriate and essential vehicle of the project. Most respondents affirmed that talking to one another and sharing the memories of the past were important aspects of the trail and follow-up activities. Their ideas about whether and how one should talk about the past can be linked to their trail experience and the 'psychological' knowledge they have achieved. Three closely related notions that were

repeatedly named by respondents can be distinguished:

### *Cathartic relief*

This idea of cathartic relief reminds of the concept of "release through storytelling" fostered by the TRC. None of the interviewees had testified to the TRC or applied for amnesty, but some of the respondents' perceptions of the TRC suggest an influence from this strand of the public discourse. It is interesting that many respondents who warned of the danger in talking about the past in a public sphere at the same time had the feeling that one purpose and positive outcome of the TRC has been the "relief of the perpetrators" from being given the possibility to "speak out" and to "free" themselves.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar way, several participants reported having left behind anger and hatred through the trail experience and insisted on the cathartic effect of releasing emotions and the danger of keeping "bad" feelings and memories locked up: "If I speak out, I've got that healing inside, but if I don't talk, the hatred still grows." (Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

The past is perceived as containing painful elements that hinder people in overcoming the experiences. In order to "get it out" and "to be free", the participants think that one needs to talk about it:

I find it very important for one to talk about the past ... as I said earlier that things that make us feel bad are not made for us, those are things which are looking for accommodation, so if something has once hurt me and now I don't want to cough it out, I think that's sort of a burden for me and it's going to be a burden for the rest of my life if I don't talk about it because the only way to get it out is talking ... at times you might first move on and ... try to ignore the whole thing but now psychologically it's there ... it's like a stumbling block for you, you cannot go far ahead with it because once you start concentrating on something it's always there, it says: 'What about me? You forget about me?' (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

Many participants associate the message of "leaving behind and moving on" with the project. In particular, some of the closing rituals around the fire seem to relate to the idea of "concentrating on forgetting about the past and looking in the future", as one respondent described it. A Trail Assistant confirmed this tendency and equated this form of forgetting with relief:

You want to forget, write it down and then burn it, so the grief that is gone is forgotten ... that's what they always say but I don't think it's really forgotten but just like ... it's relieved. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

### *Personal growth*

One Trail Assistant explained how he outgrew his initial difficulties around talking about the past by realising that every time he tells his story new aspects and perspectives arise. He emphasised that he often learns from the exchange and comparison of the different experiences that the participants share. At the same time, he insisted - as did others - on the necessity of a confidential group context. Many respondents likewise had ambivalent

feelings towards talking about the past, forgetting and moving on. Talking provides a chance to cope or to grow, but in the end it will or should also lead towards some sort of forgetting or at least dissociation from the past experiences:

To my point of view, you can talk about the past because it will help you to grow ... . Talking about the past, it can be part of just reminding people that all in all we have to forget about the past and move forward ... we have to carry on with the developments and you can consider the past, but not that much. (Interview with participant, July 3, 2000)

If you are able to talk about it, laugh about it - that really means you have forgotten about it, you are not forgetting about it because you have the experience. If you are able to talk about it, laugh about it, that's the healing phase. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

### *Education*

When asked whether the participants see an ongoing necessity of talking about the past, some felt that people should know what happened in their area during the time of the struggle:

You must talk about the past for the sake of those who don't know what happened. (Interview with participant, July, 1, 2000)

In most cases, this way of talking about the past implied mainly an educational function and allowed at the same time a positive reframing of the painful and ambiguous experiences. Subsequently, a few respondents even said that they enjoy sharing their experiences with others:

I like explaining to somebody what happened ... I want people to learn and to know that from being a bad person to be a good person, it takes a lot of courage, it takes a lot of energy, pains, admiring somebody, putting yourself into somebody's shoes ... . Showing somebody that this is a good way, this is not a good way, that's what is exciting about this. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

The statement shows how the focus of talking about the past shifts towards the transformation process. It might be that the project's concept of fostering a new sense of belonging and becoming 'role models' for the community has stressed this 'positive' way of talking about the past. Altogether, though, this belief in the educational message mirrors the comprehensible and well known desire of all human beings to give a meaning to former (and ongoing) injustices and suffering. In other words: If one can learn from the past, the painful experiences are were not completely meaningless. Even a respondent who was convinced that it is dangerous to talk about the past, cherished the slight hope that it might be a meaningful experience for countries beyond South Africa:

I think here in South Africa, it's not wise to talk about what one has done ... . It has been done on television showing that such and such people have been killed and things happened in such a way ... it evokes anger and frustration. That

might lead people to look for revenge ... . It can be a good thing to be done in other countries, not here in South Africa, especially in big countries that are still involved in the very same kind of conflicts. In those countries, the history of South Africa might be told so that people can realise that ... - if they look at the present situation in South Africa - there are things that they can learn. (Interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

### 5.11 Forgetting and forgiving

#### **"By saying I must forget, I say I must forgive this person"**

Many responses hint at the complex relationship of talking about the past, remembering and dealing with the past, as well as forgetting and forgiving. Sometimes, the answers of the participants appear inconsistent. A few of these contradictions seem to be due to an implicit differentiation between individual healing and community healing. As already seen above, the respondents tend to favour the idea of "forgetting and moving on", at the same time the also insisted that for the individual forgetting is impossible. One respondent explained for example how a television report on Angola had triggered a flashback. He concluded:

I think it's good to forget, but when the time comes to remember then it comes ... it is difficult to forget but you can forget and live your normal life but when it comes, it comes, you can't run away from it. (Interview with participant, July 3, 2000)

For me, I don't want to forget anything that has happened in the past but only to forgive. (Interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

So, on an individual basis forgetting appears more or less impossible. On the other hand many perceive that community healing demands a certain amount of forgetting in terms of forgiving:

What must happen now, we must forget about all the things that were happening and start a new life ... I mean that if we follow things that happened in the past we are not going to forget what this Zulu person, what he did to my father. By saying I must forget, I say I must forgive this person, forget what this person did to my father. Because if I'm not forgetting that, this thing of peace is not going to work.

[I.]: Would it also mean for you that we shouldn't talk about what happened in the past?

No, we can talk about that and also make sure that we work that there's nothing like that going to happen again ... . We must talk about it and forget, I think the thing that we must forget is that bad things had happened, what this person did to me, we must just talk about it [in the following way]: that time it was a war it happened this and that and now we must do this and that. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

### 5.12 Spirituality and traditional healing rituals

#### **"Wilderness is a place with the power of the Lord and that of the**

## ancestors"

Some participants mentioned that they draw their energy from their religious faith in God, others told that they mainly believe in the spiritual power of traditional healers. As the statement in the heading exemplifies, most participants perceive the wilderness as a spiritual place. The rituals included in the project seem to accommodate the different beliefs among and even co-existent within the participants.

With the exception of the visit to the San caves, the respondents rarely talked about healing rituals or activities of the trail. The little information given makes it difficult to judge the adequacy and the impacts of these stimuli. Some videos left the impression that creative activities risk being perceived as infantile, especially in the beginning of the trail when the participants have not yet faced physical challenges. On the other hand, a participant qualified this observation in a closing session:

Most of us took it [walking stick] as a joke for children, but at the end of the journey this stick was the main negotiator when we were in trouble in the mountains. You can't be a winner alone, you must be supported as leader, you can't just lead, [you] need to sit down and negotiate a strategy. (Video tape April 1999)

It is all the more significant that those rituals respondents recalled were often related to internal events and key issues that occupied them during the trail. For example, one participant's excitement about the San culture and their "beautiful paintings" turned out to be linked to a dream he had in the cave.

I've never seen the bushmen in my life but their paintings show you that there was life, I mean they are the real nation, they were there because they tell their stories in paintings ...

[I.]: Was that the most important ... ?

Yes, the cave I think it was because I never thought I would see it with my own eyes, the caves and I haven't seen my father back then I think it was long ago, maybe I haven't seen my father for about five to six years but when we slept in those caves, I dreamed of my father, ... I dreamed of the guy that day. I think it is utterly peaceful because when we were in tents I couldn't get that dream rest that I needed, ... but when I was there it was peaceful, I mean it was a chance to me, I dreamed of this guy who was my father, I last saw him when he was chasing me away, I remember I was starting to go to secondary school.

(Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

In some responses, a tendency to idealise the life of the 'Bushmen' can be observed. Given their function as 'common ancestors' that were concerned about social harmony and knew how to care for their well-being, this enhancement and instrumentalisation makes sense. In the search for new ideals and heroes, the San culture seems to suit the needs of some participants. Whether or not, and how long, this idealised image can be preserved is open to question.<sup>37</sup>

### 5.13 Post-trail depression

#### **"It gets boring ... it's not easy to accept the life in the community"**

Most of the responses to the question about what should be changed or improved in similar programmes centred on the post-trail support. The responses show that the return is an extremely volatile moment. Re-entry depression or "return bewilderment" as the Project Manager calls it, is common after such an intensive experience of oneness with nature and group. Asked about the difficulties the interviewees encountered when they came back from the trail, they often voiced feelings of being bored, experiencing initial problems in readjusting to the life in the township or wishing to return to the mountains. The obvious desire to go back into the mountains is difficult to interpret. Different kinds of longings and hopes could play a role. At times, it could be seen as an escape from reality. The Project Manager differentiated between those that would like to return and those that want to stay or live in the mountains. It seems problematic if people wish to stay. This might indicate the understandable fear not to be able to cope, but it could also be a sign of avoidance, an attitude not leading ultimately to transformation. The desire to return can also mean that participants discovered the spirituality or the transformative power of wilderness and have the feeling that another trail offers the opportunity to work on different issues. Many responses of those who attended several trails seem to hint in this latter direction. Being asked if this feeling of ongoing personal growth suggests that it might need or make sense to offer several trails, the Project Manager explained:

There's definitely a benefit in that. But at the same time, the value of the processes is in the return, is in the coming back to the community. The value is not in the going out but in the coming back. That's the most important part. The process to get to that is obviously what you're doing in-between. The re-integration of the community is how that gets rolled out in their personal lives. And yes, in some cases, definitely people need to go through that process and dealing with particular things [several times], because healing is not just something that happens at once and you're fine and for the rest of your life you sit back and you're healed. It doesn't happen like that and particularly when your healing is very difficult to control. So in fact everyone has the right to think of it ... . But I think the key to it is assisting people to integrate into that situation definitely. (Interview with Gavin Robertson, July 19, 2000)

If the value of this once-off intervention lies in coming back, wilderness therapy cannot in most cases be of long-term success without addressing the re-entry depression and accommodating participants accordingly. In establishing the post-trail support programme, the project had to go through a learning process. After the first trails, the Project Co-ordinator realised that rather than counselling, it needed a space for the participants to meet:

They used to come always to my place ... . More and more trails were coming to my place. Then I thought of opening up this Mountain Club so that they can come and meet each other ... . So they used to use that hall [in the Katlehong Resource Centre] whereby everybody would meet ... and then it grew on its own, no longer coming to me, coming there and then they feel fine ... because they feel they're bonded now, there is a kind of mutual identity, they have got somewhere a place where they belong so they think it is much better than the

place where they're sitting in the corner smoking dagga, they find that place is not being supportive, they saw that this place is more supportive, it's more doing peaceful stuff. (Interview with Scotch Madhlophe, July 7, 2000)

This opportunity to meet and talk regularly at the Katlehong Resource Centre, and the common activities former participants initiated for themselves, were often named as an important support structure. For some of them, the Centre became a constant 'landing-place'; others benefited from this environment only for a transitional period. Altogether, the participants agreed that the return demanded ongoing personal efforts. One respondent described this process as a sort of constant "self-counselling". Many mentioned that they had to "struggle" afterwards and they also assumed that this was probably one of the main reasons why other participants finally failed to re-integrate in the community:

When you come back in the community, it depends on what person you are. If you say now I'm right and don't put more effort towards what you have done in the mountains, you're going to be demotivated but if you put more effort you change. (Interview with participant, June 6, 2000)

At the same time the question of employment and daily survival was and often still is a central concern of many participant. It is therefore not surprising that respondents' employment situation seem to influence their attitudes towards the project. The interviews proved that the situation of jobless participants is marked by a greater fragility (mentally, physically and economically). Their expectations of the NPAT are correspondingly higher and possible disappointments risk to have a negative impact on the individual's healing process.

Only carefully and in informal conversations, several participants (of both factions) mentioned that they perceived the opportunities provided to location residents and hostel dwellers as being imbalanced. They felt that there was less integration of hostel dwellers into the post-trail programme, as well as into the internships offered by the NPAT. One hostel dweller felt that a certain mistrust remained. Another participant explained the discrepancy in terms of the lack of English hindering hostel dwellers to participate in post-trail offers. Additional support would have been necessary:

Most of them were very scared to come up and volunteer to take part because they thought that they're going to talk English and they felt that because they were not really educated they can't be part of it. So he [translator speaks] thinks that if the NPAT could have organised some black tutors or black facilitators who can facilitate those kinds of programmes with the participants that might have been much better. (Translated interview with participant, July 1, 2000)

It needs to be taken into account, though, that the danger of reinforcing the former divide through imbalanced access or distribution of support reflects a general tendency in the region. Over the years, more programmes for SDUs were offered. Many reasons seem to be involved: higher flux among the hostel dwellers; access to the hostels is more difficult than to the location (especially for people and services that are not based in the community); IFP and ANC control different levels of funding and do not seem to provide the same kind of support to their 'old' factions.

#### 5.14 Social and political involvement

##### **"After the trail I decided to be an example in my community"**

According to one of the key concepts, the participants should be able to reassume their former status as heroes within a new, non-violent discourse. This idea is present in all interviews. Many participants perceive themselves as "role models" and examples for others. This is more than just a positive self-image, it often finds expression in an important investment in the family belongings and needs:

I'm from a family of eight and I'm the fourth. Actually I'm the only boy who did get an education ... . So what I did when I first got a job, was to buy my mom a house, it has two rooms, it is not that big but my vision is in some year to extend it and have all of my family in that one house ... and to feed them and - especially for my little sisters - to educate them better, they should get it better ... . My ambition is to make my family happy, then I'm happy ... because what I like, my little sisters, when they come to school, I'm their role model they only look up to me. (Interview with participant, June 28, 2000)

Beyond this 'private' engagement, participants also mentioned their concerns around the community. Due to their own experiences, 'education' and the 'protection of youth' are stressed as areas where they would like to function as role models.

I would love to see myself getting more involved in the community based stuff, ... because the youngsters out there they are really being channelled to the negative side in the future. So if we see the positive side of it and try to get them attracted to that I think it's going to help a lot and even for the future of the country, so, ja I would like to see myself getting more involved in such stuff. (Interview with Trail Assistant, June 29, 2000)

Some members of the Mountain Club realised this intention. They initiated an arts and culture group in order to draw young people from the street. Between 30 to 40 youth of Katlehong meet at least twice a week for rehearsals in the Resource Centre and they regularly perform at official township events. The two trail participants who are still involved in this work also reported how they slowly shifted responsibility for co-ordination to the hands of younger group members. As some mentioned, these efforts also embody the desire to transform the criminalised image of the Katorus region.

It is significant that the respondents tend to distinguish this kind of community and development work from political involvement. Although, if one defines 'political' broadly as conscious activity in the public sphere (i.e., beyond the private sphere of family and kin group), the participants' engagement could be summarised as social and political involvement. Considering the experiences with politics during the violence, it is understandable that the large majority of the respondents would not agree. Most of them are extremely sceptical about politicians and the different parties.<sup>38</sup> With the exception of two participants who affirmed that they are still involved in the work of their party, most respondents hold the position that you cannot trust politics. Reflections such as 'politics are lies', 'I was used, now I have grown' or 'I am leaving politics, I am starting a new life'



suggest the perception that politics hindered participants' personal development.

I'm not involved in politics anymore because I don't see that we must always involve ourselves in the politics because it is not important for our life. What is important is we must just look for something that is going to make us go forward. (Interview with participant, July 2, 2000)

Consequently, most interviewees perceive politics as something that needs to be avoided in order to create a better life and future. This reaction goes along with a general tendency to polarise in terms of wrong/right, bad/good or negative/positive (often equated with before/after the trail). This form of black-and-white portrayals can be observed in many interviews.<sup>39</sup> Behind this lies the strong wish of being a 'changed person', being on the 'right' track and a 'positive example'. In times of transition and transformation, this kind of search for orientation and landmarks between right and wrong is hardly surprising, but in the long-run it is important to overcome these simplistic views. They don't acknowledge the complexity of people's reality. The question that remains is how one can move beyond these categories and how the project could have fostered this development.

### 5.15 Summary

Comparing the key concepts of the project that have been explored in Section 4 with the experiences of the participants assessed in this Section, it can be summarized that the project's intentions taken by and large seem to be achieved. The participants' responses broadly affirm that the Transformation Trail provides an outstanding occasion to empower the former militarised youth and to establish new connections with the environment, other and self. The project was able to provide many of the participants a new sense of belonging and according to them it also contributed to the building of a 'culture of peace' in their community.

A detailed analysis of the accomplishments of the project illustrates, of course that some concepts are more important than others. While the concept of facing and integrating the beast proved to be of great significance and even applicable in the daily life of participants, other rituals and activities seemed to be less "catchy" - or at least they did not have such a long term impact. It is for instance interesting that many participants perceived the trail as some sort of initiation (see Section 5.2) but they never directly linked it to traditional initiation rites or the named millennia-old practice of affording heroic status to individuals returning to a community from the wilderness.<sup>40</sup> Similarly it is striking that many respondents captured the idea that the ascent of the summit represents the rise to hero status, but none of the interviewees mentioned the descent as 'a fall from power' or a difficult part of the trail - as assumed in the key concepts (see Section 4.1).<sup>41</sup> Some of the impacts illustrate that the trail intervention does not merely represent a trigger to start the healing process. Often a will to change and efforts in this direction preceded the attendance of the trail; therefore it can be seen as one stage on the individual journey towards healing.

The problems and challenges that the respondents faced and mentioned mainly revolve around the trail preparation and the follow-up programme. Looking at the key concepts one realises that they tend to focus on the trail experience. They are less concrete concerning the issues of an adequate selection and preparation of the participants or the handling of

post-trail depression and the long-term integration of the militarised youth. This is probably due to the fact that the recognition of their significance was part of a learning process the project went through. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that future initiatives should have a closer look at these important stages of the wilderness work.

## **6. Potential of the Wilderness Trail and Therapy Project**

Altogether the impacts and challenges discussed above illustrate the project's catalytic potential to enhance an individual healing process corresponding to the specific needs of the former militarised youth in the Katorus region. Part of the project's potential for the transformation of trauma and conflict also appears to evolve around the idea of deconstructing stereotypes and bridging boundaries that the particular conflict in the region has generated. My reading of the process and its impacts suggests that further potential might lie in the following opportunities prompted by the project:

### *Creating an encounter where concerns about the past and the future can meet*

According to John Paul Lederach (1997:35), reconciliation as a concept and a praxis has "to seek innovative ways to create a time and a place ... to address, integrate and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present." The participants' responses suggest that the wilderness trail represents one possible form of providing such a safe space that allows the participants to express and share their memories of pain, loss and trauma, without getting locked into a vicious cycle of mutual exclusiveness. In bringing together former enemies and exposing them to new group experiences and nature challenges, the project enhances the feeling of interdependence. This creates a foundation for realising that people on both sides of the conflict share similar feelings and aspirations concerning the past as well as the future. This point of encounter of common concerns and experiences may represent "the necessary ingredient for reframing the present." (Lederach 1997: 27)

However, looking at the complexity of South African society, it needs to be kept in mind that the encounter initiated through the Wilderness Project concentrates only on one particular conflict constellation, the division of the former SDUs and SPUs. Economic, social and psychological legacies of the apartheid system continue to entrench multiple other modes of segregation between South Africans. One of the lessons to learn from the project is that the discovery of common humanity and the transcendence of stereotypes held about the 'other', do not necessarily prove to be transferable to the opposing group as a whole or even to other factions. In the long run the concentration on one division is therefore not sufficient. More inclusive approaches are needed and the question how the broader context of the conflict could be considered must be addressed.

### *Initiating 'new' citizenship and shaping community life*

Since "the value of the process lies in the return", as the Project Manager emphasised, even more attention should be given to this part of the programme. Coming back from their journey, participants tend to be very enthusiastic about their experience. They want to maintain the 'new' sense of community and wish to share it with others as well. If the community is to benefit from this positive energy, it is essential that the participants do not find themselves left alone with their newly acquired experiences, thoughts and skills.

Hence, it seems to be a great advantage of the project that the participants belong to one township and that over time follow-up activities and an informal meeting place in a public sphere (Katlehong Resource Centre) were provided. The possibility for ongoing exchange and encounter allows the participants to stay in close contact, to support each other and to set an example in the community, showing that former boundaries can be bridged. One can read the whole process as a positive enactment of citizenship and active participation in the (re-) construction of the community.

But as the responses show as well, at the moment the enactment of a 'new' citizenship is not considered as a 'political' activity. The disappointment and in turn the total dissociation of 'political involvement' is understandable but in the long run this separation is not desirable for the creation of a new democracy that needs the active support and steady control by its citizen. It remains the question whether and how the enactment of citizenship can be embedded in the larger context of democracy education.

#### *Providing a holistic approach*

The experience in the Katorus region illustrates that addressing social and emotional scars means more than integrating militarised youth in police and defence structures. Opportunities for healing on an individual, interpersonal and communal level must be provided. At the same time, a lot of my interviewees stressed the urgent need of an income and the desire for acknowledge of their personal investment for the struggle. This speaks to the utility of developing a holistic healing approach that attempts the re-integration of the youth in their community by re-establishing their former status and offering them skills in order to find a job. Over the years, the Wilderness Project tried to create such an approach. Particular challenges and further potential seem to lie in the following areas:

#### *Preparation and Post-trail support*

Individuals' expectations and needs vary considerably and, of course, there are limits to the services that one NGO can supply on its own. Especially the post-trail support seems to require a broad range of types of assistance. In order to respond to the participants' expectations in an appropriate manner it is therefore very important to take the time already at the beginning of the intervention to evaluate the specific needs. First, this helps to avoid disappointments and second, it also gives the project the time to look for possible partners. The work of the NPAT has illustrated that networking with other initiatives is crucial.

However, it also became evident that it will always remain a big challenge to find the right balance between offering sufficient post-trail care and providing enough space and flexibility to encourage and support self-help-initiatives.

#### *Community empowerment*

In order to boost the community's resourcefulness and initiative, the integration of former participants as interns or volunteers has many advantages.

Coming through a situation, understanding a situation very closely and directly, and then being able to facilitate for others in a similar situation is very powerful. (Interview with Gavin Robertson, July 19, 2000)

It empowers former participants, acknowledges their capacities to care for their community and thus enriches the project's work and credibility. On the other hand, these employment and internship offers are limited, and in a situation where almost all participants are in need of a job, feelings of jealousy and rivalry are predictable. The responses proved that one needs to be very careful, lucid and inclusive concerning these decisions, since the fresh and still fragile sense of community is at risk as soon as the impression arises that the distribution between the former opposing groups is not balanced.

*Subtle differentiation in terms of the conflict complexity*

In times of transition and transformation, the search for a clear distinction between right and wrong, positive and negative is not surprising. In a constantly changing society people look for landmarks that help them to reduce the complexity of feelings and unknown experiences. The re-establishment of the former militarised youth as 'new heroes' also enters in this binary world of good and bad. This form of black-and-white portrayals that can be observed in many responses might have been an adequate way to provide a first orientation but the danger it carries should not be overseen. In a way it reproduces the simplistic view that was already dominant during the violence and needed to be overcome in order to openly meet the former enemy. In order to avoid future disappointments it is important to let the youth consciously explore the grey areas between black and white, perpetrator and victim etc. Therefore the question remains how one can move beyond these static categories and embrace the complexity of the conflict without neglecting the fact that the participants need some orientation as well.

Future analysis will explore issues in more detail in an effort to develop lessons that can be taken into account for similar and future initiatives of this kind. An important caveat, however, is that the project does not provide a general 'recipe'. The Project Manager emphasised:

The project looks the way it does and developed the way it did because of the particular community, because of particular conditions found and all the different circumstances – it has changed along the way and all those conditions [are] very different from where it started. (Interview with Gavin Robertson, July 19, 2000)

This statement can be read as recommendation to understand the implementation process of similar programmes as a permanent learning process. Yet it also needs to be underlined that the transfer to other contexts requires more than flexible and sensitive planning. Above all, it seems to demand a dedicated and trustworthy person (or group of persons) that is able to mobilise the envisaged target group. In all interviews, one consistent observation is that the Wilderness Project was only feasible and successful because of the eagerness, persuasiveness and personal investment of the Project Co-ordinator. For his community and all the respondents, he represents the first and most convincing proof that the project can work.

## Appendix

<b>N °/interview</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>First trail/nu mber of trails</b>	<b>Political involvement/A ccomodation</b>	<b>Education/O ccupation</b>	<b>Involvement with NPAT</b>
<b>(1)</b> 2/7/00	21	M	1997/2	SDU/location		participant
<b>(2)</b> 29/6/00	22	M	1996/x	location	standard 8/facilitator	Trail Assistant/empl oyee
<b>(3)</b> 7/7/00	22	M	1996/1	SDU/location	standard 6/unemploye d	participant
<b>(4)</b> 30/6/00	24	M	1997/x	SDU/location	standard 7/ temporal work as facilitator	Trail Assistant Mountain Club
<b>(5)</b> 30/6/00	24	M	1997/3	SDU/location	matric/studen t	participant
<b>(6)</b> 1/7/00	24	M	1997/1	SDU/location	matric/studen t	participant
<b>(7)</b> 2/7/00	24	F	1998/1	ANC youth league/location	standard 10/employed in factory	participant Mountain Club
<b>(8)</b> 28/6/00	25	M	1997/2	SDU/location	matric/occasi onal jobs	participant
<b>(9)</b> 22.6./ 7/7/00	26	M	1996/x	SDU/location	facilitator/Pro ject Manager	participant/trai l assistant/co- ordinator
<b>(10)</b> 3/7/00	28	M	1998/1	SDU/location	matric/admini strator	participant employee
<b>(11)</b> 2/7/00	28	M	1998/1	SDU/location	employed in factory	participant
<b>(12)</b> 28/6/00	28	M	1997/1	SPU/ hostel - KwaZulu - hostel	matric + college/unem ployed	participant volunteer
<b>(13)</b> 1/7/00	29	F	1998/1	KwaZulu - location - hostel	standard 8/ unemployed/ self made	participant

					business	
(14) 29.6./ 5/7/00	29	F	1997/3	ANC youth league/ location	standard 7/unemploye d	participant volunteer Mountain Club
(15) 1/7/00	29	M	1998/2	SPU/ hostel	unemployed/s elf made business	participant/te mporary employment
(16) 26/6/00	32	M	1997/x	SPU/hostel	standard 10/temporal work as facilitator	Trail Assistant Mountain Club
(17) 3/7/00	33	F	1998/2	KwaZulu - location - hostel	unemployed	participant volunteer

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> However, the "struggle" against the Apartheid state and its main agents was not only a militarised one, it included many forms of opposition and non-violent resistance on individual and communal level as well.

<sup>2</sup> A significantly higher number of women and children was implicated; cf. TRC 1998 Vol. 3/ Ch. 6: 670-675

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also IBI/Peace Action 1994

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Marks 1995: 5; Robertson 1999: 1

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dissel 1997: 407-409; [Marks/McKenzie 1995](#): 1

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Seiler 1997: 114

<sup>7</sup> The preparation was based on the results of different project reports written at earlier stages (Kgalema 1997, Seiler 1997, Makhale-Mahlangu 1998, McDowell 1998, Robertson 1999) and on four interviews conducted by a Dutch film Crew 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Despite several attempts it proved impossible to conduct an interview with a participant who by now rejects the project.

<sup>9</sup> The quotations below are not representative for a comprehensive conflict analysis. Detailed information about the different layers of the conflict in Katorus are given in TRC 1998 Vol. 3/ Ch. 6; Visser et al. 1995; and IBI reports. The complex situation of militarised youth during the 1990s is described in Dissel 1997, Marks 1995, [Marks/McKenzie 1995](#).

<sup>10</sup> Township residents generally speak of their "location".

<sup>11</sup> An account and analysis of displacements in Thokoza and Katlehong is provided in IBI/Peace Action 1994.

<sup>12</sup> The importance attributed to the so-called 'witch doctors' and their medicine ranges from disapproval to adherence. But the fact that many respondents referred to it -without being asked-indicates that it plays/played some role in their lives.

<sup>13</sup> In 1994, NPAT had started a community-based pilot project in Katorus seeking to respond to the desperate need for social services. A training programme with skills that the community had requested (e.g., trauma management, basic counselling, parenting) was implemented and in February 1996, 22 Community Care Workers started full-time work in the region. The project was a first step in reducing the stigma of counselling in the community Seiler 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Among the respondents, three experienced trails that left with a group of SDUs only.

<sup>15</sup> The National Director explained that the NPAT still organises a Transformation Trail when a group of about ten former SDUs and SPUs comes together, but logistically and financially the demands from other areas are too great to continue the programme on a regular basis.

<sup>16</sup> The following project description is grounded in an analysis of videos taken on each trail, NPAT articles, case studies (MacDowell 1998, Kgalema 1997) and additional explanations provided by facilitators and participants.

<sup>17</sup> As a result, the experience of the interviewees and their memories around certain rituals vary significantly.

<sup>18</sup> In the beginning content of the preparation was part of the sessions during the trail (Kgalema 1997: 20).

<sup>19</sup> Over the years, the T-shirt was introduced in various ways: Sometimes it was distributed in a final graduation ceremony after the trail as a souvenir (Kgalema 1997: 24). It has also served as a contract between facilitators and participants. Whoever agreed on the principal rules could confirm consent by taking a T-shirt (video 5/1998).

<sup>20</sup> The elephant unites many images. On the one hand, it is a fairly aggressive and dangerous animal. On the other hand, the elephant is also known as a caring animal that looks after the elder members of the herd.

<sup>21</sup> The selection of the power animal is sometimes introduced before leaving on the trail and the symbolic park may be used several times and in final sessions as well (video, April 1999).

<sup>22</sup> None of the interviewees spoke about the family's reaction, but the fact that several respondents mentioned the video indicates a certain significance that they attached to this personal souvenir.

<sup>23</sup> This term is often used by Robertson and McDowell. It refers to an empathic group climate that allows the participants to open up and gives them the feeling of being supported by the facilitators, the trail assistants and the other group members.

<sup>24</sup> The following information is elaborated in Robertson (1999: 10-13).

<sup>25</sup> This information is taken from an unpublished paper "Symbolism in Bushmen Rock Art", written for the project and mainly referring to the work of Yates, et al. (1990), Lewis-Williams (1994) and Chetwynd (1982).

<sup>26</sup> Survivors in this context were both persecutor and victim.

<sup>27</sup> The selected extract comes from an interview with a participant who was extremely enthusiastic about the whole project. His positive view should also be interpreted against his comparatively stable psychological and socio-economic situation. After the follow-up workshops, he found a job that brings him not only a salary, but also satisfaction and recognition.

<sup>28</sup> At the same time this statement reveals the different emphases that participants placed on the project. Here, the physical challenge appears to be of minor relevance; the main focus - at least retrospectively- lies on the connection with the other.

<sup>29</sup> According to two respondents, some of their friends were disappointed because they had still expected to get money or jobs afterwards. They claimed that these expectations prevented the friends from opening up and getting involved in a transformation process. Another respondent learned only on the trail that they are not sleeping in a hotel.

<sup>30</sup> One participant from Natal said that he was less impressed by the mountains and the hiking part, his fears revolved more around the encounter of the enemy. Others explained how their religion helped them to trust the process as a whole.

<sup>31</sup> This reaction was reported by a Trail Assistant referring to a friend who returned to his former life style.

<sup>32</sup> One is tempted to interpret the women's responses against the cultural and social context influencing the life of women in townships, but considering the lack of representivity of this study, it is a risk to jump to such conclusions.

<sup>33</sup> This establishment of new connections with self is not limited only to the trail experience. Also, the post-trail support, especially the life skills workshop, was named as significant and empowering. One woman mentioned that it gave her the opportunity to realise that "not only people with matric are good." Others discovered new capacities (e.g.,



counselling).

<sup>34</sup> The significance of such statements can only be sufficiently appreciated by recalling the fact that hostel dwellers forced into line with the IFP were often seen as initiators of the fight fuelled by the apartheid regime and the SAPS.

<sup>35</sup> Before returning in the township, the facilitators generally tried to raise awareness about this 'new' language they were using in order to protect against feelings of alienation from the community.

<sup>36</sup> The perceptions of the TRC were marked by suspiciousness and a visible lack of information around the exact aims. Only few had consciously decided not to apply for amnesty because they felt that their revelation of the past in the public would have been counterproductive for the community and the project's future. The (dis)approval also seems to be grounded in the specific perpetrator-victim- dynamic they saw themselves caught in.

<sup>37</sup> The fact that many participants admired the Project Co-ordinator and saw him as a model shows that in the long run it is probably necessary to find or provide examples that tackle with the whole complexity of the daily life in the township.

<sup>38</sup> This implies in a few cases the refusal to vote or the decision to vote for both opposing parties.

<sup>39</sup> This impression might in some cases be reinforced by the difficulty to express complex feelings in English.

<sup>40</sup> This might also be due to the fact that this practice - as most traditional initiation rites - requires a community celebration on the return of the youth. Such an official celebration (for instance with families and friends) never happened.

<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, the interviews allow no further insight into how this could be explained.

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