

Of predators and prey . . .

Our guide wasn't about to brook any nonsense.

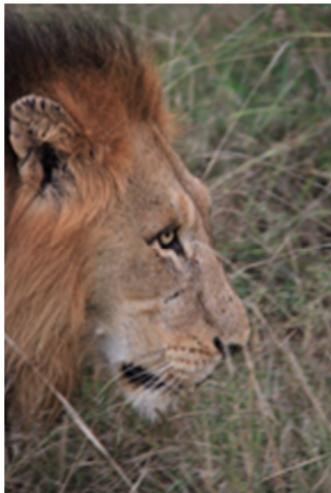
We were ready to depart from Thornhill Safari Lodge for a late afternoon/early evening plunge into South Africa's Kruger National Park two months ago. Nine of us were perched in a three-tiered Land Rover without a roof.

"Do NOT get out of the Land Rover at *any* time," he thundered. "And do NOT stand up."

The wild animals we were about to stalk with our cameras had long ago become comfortable sharing their turf with Land Rovers and their seated passengers. But Reckson wanted to be sure we understood the stakes. "If you get out of the vehicle or stand up," he grinned, "the animals will make a wonderful new discovery: FOOD!"

We obeyed (um, why wouldn't we?) and stayed seated, even when the bull elephant tried to run us down an hour later and our guide gunned the engine, hurling us all backwards. He was the only one who'd seen the elephant coming. Good guide. Liked him a lot.

Which brings us to the subject of predators and prey.



We photographed the Daddy lion as he walked within a foot of our Land Rover, the Mama lion and her three cubs who strolled up the road ahead of us, the leopard and the cheetah who stalked us from afar, the crocodile who stared at us through lidded eyes. But we also mingled with herds of impalas, African buffaloes and zebras, befriended dozens of giraffes, admired the stately kudus, laughed at the vervet monkeys . . .

And wondered how they survived with so many predators prowling among them.

We learned part of the answer a few days later when we went on a walking tour our final morning at the lodge. Within a few hundred yards we had entered a world teeming with prey. It was shortly after dawn and the predators had slunk away to sleep. The remaining animals watched us without alarm and our guide, Valley Masinga, began giving us information about each species. He also introduced us to the delicate art of capturing and eating termites, but we won't get into that here . . .



“Look how they stay close to each other,” he said, pointing out the giraffes, the zebras, the wildebeests, the kudus and the impalas. “They take care of each other. They watch out for each other. They each have a different skill that helps *all* of them survive.”



The giraffes can see for long distances, so they issue early warning cries if they spot a predator approaching. When impalas become frightened or startled, the entire herd begins leaping around to confuse their foes (they can jump as far as 33 feet and as high as nine). Zebras have superior vision and hearing and use sounds and body posture to



signal others that something is wrong. Adult female kudus bark at the first sign of peril. And wildebeests use their sense of smell to suss out danger, then stamp the earth to warn the others.

Masinga's words sent me back nearly 35 years to one of my more spectacular entrepreneurial failures. Two friends and I sold our homes and moved from Minnesota to California to launch a publishing business. We made enough mistakes to fill a textbook, but here was the most damaging: We all had the same set of skills . . . and we innocently thought if we did more and more of what we knew how to do it would somehow make up for all the things we *didn't* know how to do.

Wrong!

I crept back to Minneapolis seven months later, my friends married each other and moved to northern California, and we all smiled bravely for a few months when people asked what happened.

The marketplace is harsh. Four of five small businesses in the United States fail within the first three to five years -- unless they have a sound business concept, a massive amount of market pull, and a great management team.

You can see where this is going. The most important word in that last paragraph is “team.” Six of seven businesses started by graduates of the Harvard Business School succeed, but it’s not because they’re smarter than the rest of us -- entrepreneurial success depends on street smarts, not school smarts. *It’s because they know how dumb they are.*

So they surround themselves with people who have complementary skills. They recruit giraffes, zebras, impalas, kudus and wildebeests who work seamlessly as teams, vastly increasing the ability of their companies to survive and thrive.

And, trust me, it’s all about survival, whether for prey in South Africa or for social enterprises in a cold-blooded marketplace. The National Federation of Independent Business in the United States estimates only one in 10 new businesses will survive, one in four won’t make it past the first year, and half will fail before the end of five. Of those that do hang on, only 39% will be profitable, 31% will hover around break-even and 30% will lose money.

Dozens of things must go right for a social enterprise to succeed. Competitors, customers and regulators need to behave, products and services have to be priced properly and constantly re-engineered, suppliers and distributors need to perform – the list is endless.

So, with the odds stacked against you, why start with a flawed management team?

In real estate, the mantra has always been “location, location, location” (or at least until it recently became “default, foreclose and run for the hills”). In business startups, it’s “management team, management team, management team.” Social investors rarely bet on a Grade A social enterprise concept if it’s being managed by a Grade B team – but will sometimes take a chance on a Grade B concept if it’s led by a Grade A management team.

Or, as Valley Masinga would put it, if the team has the proper mix of giraffes, zebras, impalas, kudus and wildebeests.

(Information about Thornhill Safari Lodge can be found at www.thornhillsafarilodge.com or by calling +27-11-471-7400)