



LINDY RODWELL – SOUTH AFRICA

PROJECT PRESERVE CRANES, THEIR WETLAND HABITATS
AND THE LIFESTYLES OF THE PEOPLE WHO DEPEND ON THEM

PROJECT LOCATION CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

BIRTH 13 FEBRUARY 1962, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

PROFESSION – CURRENT JOB ZOOLOGIST; AFRICA PROGRAMME
COORDINATOR FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN CRANE WORKING GROUP
OF THE ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST

DEFINING MOMENT AFTER A FIVE-MONTH INTERNSHIP
AT THE INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION IN THE UNITED STATES,
LINDY RODWELL TOOK HER FIRST JOB IN A BIRD PARK IN SOUTH AFRICA.
SHE SOON REALISED THAT TO MAKE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION
TO WILDLIFE, SHE NEEDED TO GET OUT OF CAPTIVE BREEDING AND
INTO HARDCORE, HANDS-ON CONSERVATION.

LINDY RODWELL HAS DEVOTED THE PAST 11 YEARS TO PRESERVING THE CRANES OF AFRICA, WHOSE MAGICAL PRESENCE IS WOVEN INTO HER CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND THE CULTURAL FABRIC OF HER NATIVE SOUTH AFRICA. WITH ITS WETLAND HABITATS DISAPPEARING, THE WATTLED CRANE, AFRICA’S BIGGEST CRANE, IS CRITICALLY ENDANGERED IN SOUTH AFRICA. FOLLOWING THE BIRD’S DISTRIBUTION ACROSS AFRICA, RODWELL IS EXPANDING HER CONSERVATION NETWORK, AIMING TO COMBINE THE EFFORTS OF VOLUNTEERS AND EXPERTS IN THE 11 “WATTLED CRANE STATES” OF CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA, WHILE PROTECTING THE WETLANDS ON WHICH CRANES AND MANY PEOPLE DEPEND.

“All over the world cranes are enmeshed and embedded in culture,” says Lindy Rodwell, whose family instilled a love of wildlife in her from an early age. “They are symbols of longevity, they are symbols of lifelong fidelity, they are symbols of royalty and power.” It is not hard to see why. At up to 1.7 metres tall, these regal and elegant birds mate for life, with both parents sharing the incubation of eggs and the rearing of the young. All 15 species worldwide practise an intricate courtship dance, bowing and leaping into the air as they whirl around one another. The male presents the female with gifts – pieces of vegetation. The ceremony ends with a clamorous “unison” call, announcing their partnership.

For Rodwell, who recalls as a child hearing the blue cranes’ haunting call as they flew high above her, cranes embody something uniquely South African. In fact, the blue crane (*Anthropoides paradiseus*) is her country’s national bird. Both the blue crane and the wattled crane (*Bugeranus carunculatus*) are critically endangered within South Africa. For Rodwell, the idea that either should one day disappear is almost inconceivable.

Thanks to her past efforts, the future for both these species is beginning to look more secure within South Africa. But beyond South Africa’s borders, wattled cranes range across ten countries: Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Angola, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rodwell, in partnership with the International Crane Foundation, is building an ambitious network of conservationists to ensure that these birds are protected not only in her native country, but across Africa. For this Lindy Rodwell has been selected as a Rolex Laureate.

Projects and people are already in place in Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Over the next four years, Rodwell hopes to strengthen that network, identifying, training and providing resources for individuals in 11 countries whose combined efforts will help protect the little-studied wattled cranes, and the wetlands these birds frequent. Rodwell insists that the entire wetland systems utilised by the cranes be protected.

Biggest and rarest of Africa’s cranes, the wattled crane is critically endangered in South Africa, home to zoologist Lindy Rodwell who is determined to preserve the bird and its habitat. This species is highly dependent on wetlands, preferring a diet of aquatic vegetation. The reproductive rate for wattled cranes is quite low. They mate for life and lay one or two eggs each mating season in their wetlands nest, but only raise one chick. The incubation period of 33–36 days and the fledging period of 90–130 days are the longest of any crane. The young are very vulnerable to predatory people and animals.





Distressed to see cranes disappearing in her country, Lindy Rodwell is convinced that local farmers and farm workers have to be part of her conservation plan. Visiting the homestead of Andries Nkosi, the Rolex Laureate accompanies South African Crane Working Group field officer Sampson Phakathi who brings a large, stuffed blue crane and a telescope for an educational programme. Rodwell helps a child observe a pair of cranes and their chick. A wattled crane, raised in captivity, raises its wings as Rodwell imitates its flight. Farmers and their staff report crane sightings, nesting activity and threats to the birds. Those who manage their property in a “crane-friendly” way are awarded Crane Custodian signs. To avoid captive-bred cranes imprinting on people, one of Rodwell’s colleagues puts a puppet crane-head on her arm as part of her disguise.

For example, the Zambezi River system and its associated floodplains extend across four countries. The cranes move between these wetland areas, sometimes hundreds of kilometres apart. If one part of the river system or floodplain is damaged or degraded, it will impact on another part of the system downstream, with the result that the chain is threatened, and cranes may disappear. For her, the wattled crane is important not only in itself, but also as an emblem of the initiative to preserve ecosystems that thousands of people and hundreds of species depend on.

Wattled cranes are important scientifically – as a litmus test of the state of wetlands under threat from agriculture, the construction of dams and drainage schemes. “Cranes are the flagship species for an ecosystem on which we are entirely dependent,” says Rodwell. “South Africa is a semi-arid country, and where we’ve destroyed wetlands, we’ve got a major problem with water supply. So you’ve got a direct link between the health of the birds, the survival and sustainability of these wetlands and the health of the people.”

Rodwell became involved with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), South Africa’s most prominent non-government conservation body, in 1991. Three years later, she helped found the South African Crane Working Group (SACWG) under the auspices of the EWT. Over the past decade she has been involved in every aspect of crane conservation in South Africa, from captive breeding to satellite tracking.

Within her own country, Rodwell has started projects aimed at creating awareness among farm workers and landowners whose conservation efforts are recognised with a “Crane Custodian” board placed on farm gates. Many landowners now report sightings of the birds, thus assisting the monitoring of cranes.

“In ten years, Lindy Rodwell achieved what the formal South African government conservation agencies, with larger budgets and greater resources, were unable to do: make crane conservation a people’s issue and motivate local communities to be responsible for their cranes,” says the Endangered Wildlife Trust’s president, Dr John Ledger.

At the end of 2000, she handed over the coordination of the South African Crane Working Group to two colleagues in order to devote her time to her new brainchild within the same network – the cross-border African project. While pushing back the geographical boundaries of that project, she has narrowed the focus of her efforts to the wattled crane. The species is on the Red Data List of the IUCN (World Conservation Union) as critically endangered in South Africa and endangered in Africa. The biggest and most wetland-dependent of Africa’s cranes, it is sensitive to the least alteration of its habitat. It is highly territorial, easily disturbed and raises only one chick per breeding attempt.



Expanding her efforts throughout central and southern Africa, Rodwell is setting up conservation initiatives in 11 countries. Associates in Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia are already on the job. With David Nkosi and Sampson Phakathi, she plans a workshop in Zambia where the wattled crane population has plummeted. Brent Coverdale, a field officer with the KwaZulu Natal Crane Foundation, and Rodwell scan wetlands for a pair of breeding wattled cranes. Most of South Africa's wattled cranes live on private farmland. Rodwell argues against planting commercial forests too close to wetlands as they have an adverse effect on the hydrology and impinge on the grasslands where cranes forage.

In October 2001, in partnership with the International Crane Foundation (ICF) and with the help of local associations of amateur and professional pilots who donated their flying time, Rodwell and her colleagues oversaw the first-ever coordinated aerial surveys of wattled crane populations in southern Africa. The news was bad – whereas historical guesstimates had put numbers at between 13,000 and 15,000, her team's estimate was closer to half that number. To check the figures and gain more knowledge of the species, further surveys will be undertaken.

In South Africa itself, Rodwell's approach and the network of skills she has brought together have proved successful. Here wetlands are small and scattered, and people live on the edges, using them for winter grazing, water, fishing and the collection of reeds for thatching or basket-making. Rodwell's field workers are promoting these wetland crafts, in which people use sedges and bulrushes to weave baskets, mats – even conference bags – for sale. In other countries, however, the wetlands take the form of vast floodplains such as the Zambezi Delta in Mozambique, which has been dramatically altered over the past 28 years due to reduced flooding caused by the Cahora Basa dam built on the Zambezi River. Researcher and team member Carlos Bento regularly travels 60 kilometres on foot into the delta where, living off lizards, fish and the occasional leftovers of a lion kill, he studies the relationship between its flooding patterns and the wattled crane's breeding habits.

According to Rodwell, Bento is just one of the many extraordinary people in central and southern Africa who, through sheer determination, have risen above civil war, poverty, lack of resources and formal education to champion the cause of crane and wetland conservation. She is ensuring that these people meet and share their experiences. "It is so important to build relationships, to let people sit around the fire at night and talk and develop the feeling that this is an African team," she stresses.

"Working in Africa has not been an easy walk for Lindy or the programme," says Kerry Morrison, SACWG's National Operations Manager. "Every step has had its stumbling blocks, from political instability to a lack of adequate communication channels, to hours and days spent trying to get through the logistical nightmares of working in developing countries. However, Rodwell faces each stumbling block with careful thought and determination, and manages each time to overcome it."

Ultimately, Rodwell's aim is to "create a creature that will move forward on its own without me... if possible", she says. The Rolex Laureate seems certain to reach her goal. Dr George Archibald, founder of the International Crane Federation and a long-standing source of inspiration for Rodwell, is confident she will succeed: "Every project Lindy touches becomes a

golden project," he says. She has many achievements behind her to prove this. In 1989, for instance, she set up her own ceramics business – Lindy Ceramics and Fabrics – which she sold eight years later for a profit. Even while running a successful company, Rodwell managed to devote much of her time to her beloved cranes. As well as bringing her an income, the business also satisfied another of her passions – sculpture and pottery. Each summer she spends a couple of weeks in Nature's Valley, a "haven" on the Tsitsikamma coast, where she works on pieces in clay or bronze inspired by nature, and dreams of owning her own studio.

Rodwell is unlikely, however, to abandon crane conservation. For now she has her hands full capitalising on the possibilities that the Rolex Award has opened up for her. Her philosophy is to strengthen the existing, in-country programmes with better resources and training, rather than try to start up new programmes and spread the money too thinly. But, Rodwell says, "apart from the funding, the kind of profile and awareness that an award like this creates is invaluable. Funding begets funding."

The time is ripe, she says, to tap into international interest in Africa, and to foster an image of South Africa that is positive and outward-looking. Lindy Rodwell believes the Rolex Award will make a big difference for her project. "It just takes the programme into an entirely different league, almost overnight," she says.

Marvellous birds with two-metre wingspans, wattled cranes prepare to land at one of the small, scattered wetlands in South Africa. Nearby agricultural lands must not be allowed to encroach, says Rodwell.

In semi-arid regions, ample wetlands ensure an adequate water supply and the survival of the cranes.

An aerial survey by volunteer pilots has put the number of wattled cranes in southern Africa at about half the previous estimate of 13,000-15,000. In South Africa only about 235 wattled cranes survive.



“I was particularly impressed by Lindy Rodwell’s ability to coordinate a network that crosses political boundaries. Her success promises a brighter future for the peoples of Africa beyond preservation of cranes and wetlands. Her work will be a useful model for those working on cranes in Asia and elsewhere.”

PROFESSOR CHIE NAKANE

“It is impossible for us to recreate what nature has conceived, so we must now protect what is left of nature. That is what Lindy Rodwell is doing.”

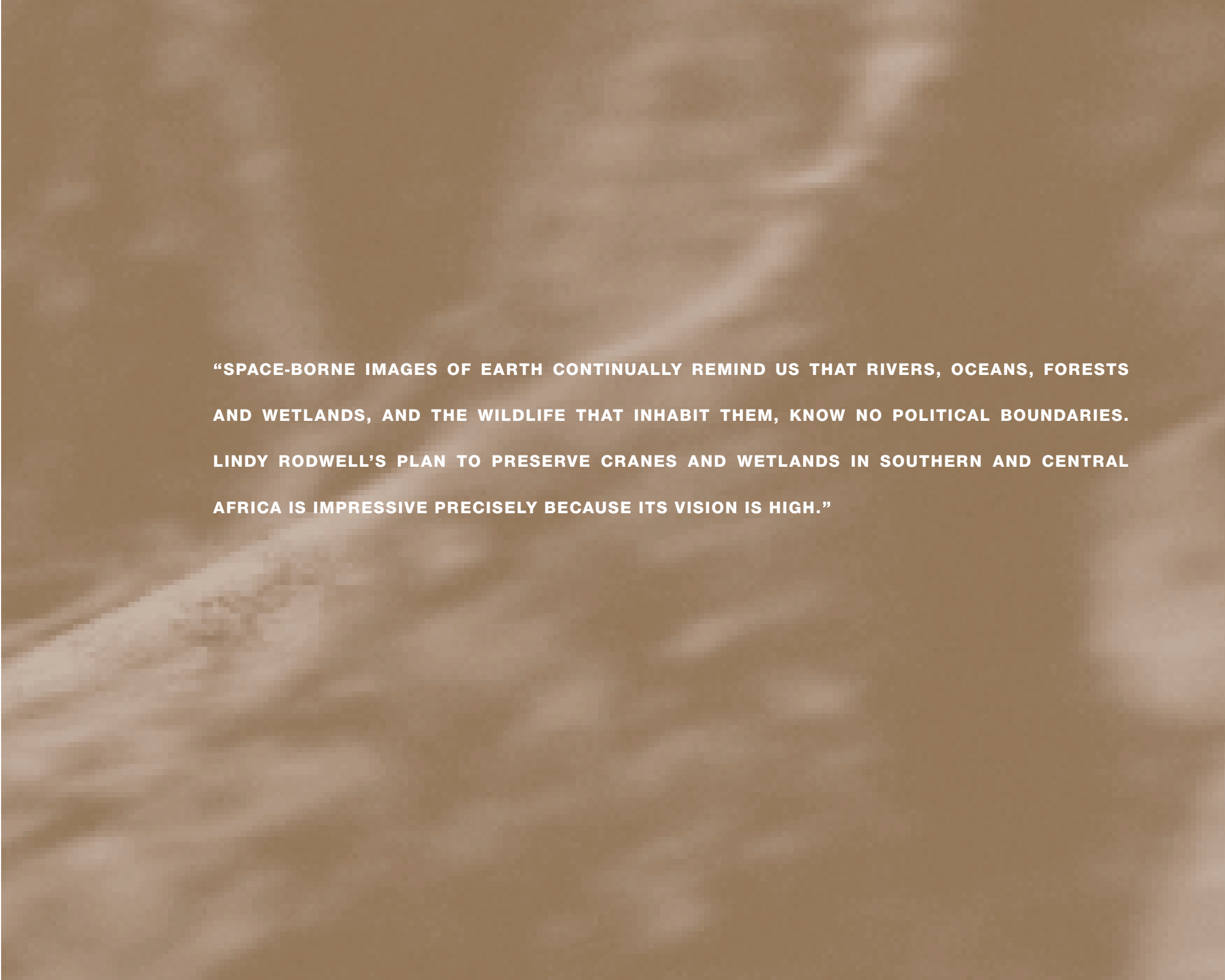
DR OSCAR RODRIGUEZ

“In Russia we have many songs about cranes. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t love these birds. Congratulations to Lindy Rodwell for having the vision to connect saving the cranes with preservation of the wetland environment and bettering the life of the local people.”

DR ANATOLY SAGALEVITCH

“Space-borne images of Earth continually remind us that rivers, oceans, forests and wetlands, and the wildlife that inhabit them, know no political boundaries. Lindy Rodwell’s plan to preserve cranes and wetlands in southern and central Africa is impressive precisely because its vision is high.”

DR NEIL DE GRASSE TYSON

An aerial photograph of a river delta, showing a complex network of water channels and wetlands. The river winds through the landscape, creating a series of loops and curves. The surrounding areas are a mix of light and dark brown tones, indicating different types of vegetation and water levels. The overall scene is a vast, open landscape with a high degree of natural complexity.

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