

Dale Parker was a man of the land, a farmer, businessman, passionate conservationist and true South African. He would always describe himself as a farmer, but his real love was for the wild places and the plants and animals which they sheltered. As a farmer, he knew the vital importance of water and this was what first drew him to Lapalala, with its strongly-flowing rivers and deep pools where crocodiles hid among the reeds or basked on the sandy banks.

As a young child Dale had spent a great deal of time on the family farm Elandsberg near Wellington, where leopards roamed the mountains and the fynbos was alive with birds and small buck. In the 60s, when he took over the farming, he began to introduce antelope such as eland and springbok and in 1971 took the first steps to having the wild parts of the farm declared a nature reserve, a pioneering step at the time.

When in 1978 the reserve was threatened with expropriation for an Armscor factory, Dale mounted a determined and in the end the factory was built on adjoining, less sensitive land. However, he later brought a ground-breaking court case which established that natural veld was as valuable, if not more valuable, than developed farmland, a concept which was later the basis for the objections to the Armscor developments at the De Hoop nature reserve. His efforts also resulted in environmental impact assessments being made mandatory in such cases in the future.

Today Elandsberg Farms, under the direction of Dale's long-time associate Mike Gregor, is one of the major producers of wheat, wool, meat and game in the Swartland, while disease-free buffalo are bred on the farm in a trailblazing South African project. The original Victorian farmhouse has become a luxury hospitality operation known as [Bartholomeus Klip](#), popular with discriminating local and overseas guests and providing significant job opportunities to the community.

The 4 000 hectare Elandsberg Nature Reserve is a gazetted provincial nature reserve, and is well known in conservation circles for its botanical importance and for the Geometric Tortoise and Quagga Breeding projects run in the reserve.

In 1964 Dale purchased the first of the Mpumalanga farms which would become the enterprise Mokobulaan Plantations, and together with Les Engelbrecht developed a forestry farm where conservation, as well as the efficient production of timber, was a priority. In 1973 the first mountain catchment area in South Africa was proclaimed at Mokobulaan, and under the able management of Les's son Neil (voted Tree Farmer of the Year in 2004) it was one of the first timber operations to be certified by the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council), from which it regularly receives top ratings. The farm has also been declared as part of the Sterkspruit Nature Reserve due to its well-preserved wetland systems and montane grassland habitat.

In 1981 Dale met the renowned artist and conservationist Clive Walker and they soon became firm friends, united by their interests in nature. Clive introduced him to Eric Rundgren, a former game warden and professional hunter from Kenya, who was trying to sell the 5 000 hectare game farm he owned in the Waterberg. Dale and his family had been looking for a bushveld farm for some time, so it did not take him long to decide to purchase the property. This farm became the nucleus of Lapalala Wilderness, later enlarged by the 16 more farms which Dale bought with Clive's encouragement and assistance. By 2001 Lapalala Wilderness, at 36 000 hectares in extent, was one of the largest privately-owned reserves in South Africa.

Among the achievements of the first 20 years at Lapalala were the purchase in 1990 of the first black rhino to be sold to a private reserve, which made news around the world, and the establishment of the very successful Lapalala Wilderness School by Clive Walker on a prime site in the reserve.

Lapalala Wilderness today is a flourishing nature reserve with a great future, renowned in particular for the breeding of rhino, both white and black, and roan antelope as well as for the habitat it provides to these and other rare species. It owes its establishment to the vision, drive and energy of Dale Parker, who has left an enduring legacy of inestimable value for South Africa.