The love of Africa

Tammie Matson’s love affair is one that literally crosses borders. Sarah Morgan meets the Coast woman who is committed to her cause.

FORGET Romeo and Juliet. This is the love story to end all love stories.

It began as a minor crush when she was in her early teens and has grown into a mature relationship which has lasted more than 13 years, despite continual protests from her concerned parents and friends who don’t all approve of her love. A love which is, after all, a bit on the wild and dangerous side.
They are on opposite sides of the social ladder. But they don’t care.

And like most relationships, they have had their ups and downs, including financial strains, their fair share of break-ups and reunions, long distances and, most of all, political differences.

But despite all of this adversity, it’s a solid relationship. This is the true story of Tammie Matson and her beloved Africa.

“It all began when I was 15,” the 29-year-old said.

“Dad took me – because I was the eldest and mum didn’t want to go – to Africa for a hunting safari. We stayed in Zimbabwe for two weeks.

“We stayed at this remote safari ranch, Humani Ranch, which dad had heard about through his friends. It’s run by the second generation of white settlers in the south-east of Zimbabwe.

“Dad always wanted to go there – he’s always been adventurous and wanted to go on a safari because of all the Wilbur Smith novels he’d read.”

Those two weeks, as the cliche goes, changed Tammie’s life.

She transformed from a young, naive Townsville girl, who dreamed of becoming a hot shot city lawyer, to a woman of the world who only knew one thing: she had fallen in love.

“As soon as I got there, I knew I had to return,” she said. “It got under my skin.

“I had been infected with Africa-itis. Africa is so addictive ... I’ve decided it is a medical condition which should be officially recognised.

“As soon as I got home, I began working as a check-out chick so I could save to go back in the gap year between high school and university.”

“Then at 17, I returned for six months to the Humani Ranch, I worked as a safari slave in exchange for board and food.

“I used to drive the supplies out to the safari camps. In my spare time, while the rest of the safari staff were snoozing, I volunteered as an English teacher at the local school, which was for children of the Shona tribe.

“There were three classrooms and three teachers for about 300 kids – actually they weren’t exactly kids, most of them were older than me at 17. One of my students, Clever, was 23.

“They had no uniforms, no shoes and were only living on one meal a day. There were goats running throughout the place.

“But when I walked in, their whole faces lit up, like they had swallowed light bulbs.”

After her six-month stint, Tammie returned to Australia to study a Bachelor of Environmental Science at UQ with one primary motive: to return again to her love.

“I was obsessed with Africa. I had to get back and this course was the way I could get back there and live there,” Tammie said.

“After four years of studying and madly saving through so many different odd jobs like picking apples and asparagus, working at a Chinese convenience store and packing supermarket shelves, I went back to do two weeks’ practical volunteer work for my degree, assisting researchers working on hippos and African wild dogs.

“I was only 20 but by now it had become my other home.”

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Tammie returned two years later to complete her fourth year Honours project, which looked at the impact hunting and photography had on the behaviour of impalas (medium-sized antelopes).

Then, in 2000, Tammie was awarded a government-funded scholarship to complete her PhD on common impala in Zimbabwe. But fate had a different path chosen for Tammie.

“Just as I was about to go back to do my PhD, the Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, declared all white people enemies of the state,” she said.

“He wanted them out.

“Just as I was beginning to start to pack, there were all these media reports about how horrible it was over there. Mum and dad, and friends, were really worried and didn’t want me to go.

“But I was determined. I rang a friend over there and asked what it was like. I asked if the media had blown it out of proportion. She said it was OK and then the line went dead. It was clear that someone was listening and tapping the phone conversation and had cut the line.

“It turned out emails I wrote were never received.”

But just like the Wilbur Smith heroes, she didn’t let fear stop her.

“The ranch (Humani) was a wildlife mecca up ‘til then. But after the war veterans invaded, they built huts and settlements all over the place and poaching just got out of control. Roger (the owner/manager) was just absolutely powerless,” Tammie said.

“We were picking up snares all over the place. Many animals were senselessly killed, including the beautiful black rhinos and the animal that was to be my study species, the impala.

“I remember one day I was told there was an elephant carcass nearby, which had been poached. We spent ages working with an old metal detector to find a bullet so we could take it to the police as evidence of poaching. I later realised how pointless that would have been. The police were working for the president...

“However, I had heard that there was an endangered subspecies of impala in Namibia ... the idea of any impala being endangered made many laugh from where I was (in Zimbabwe). They were as common as cattle to Australians.

“But in Namibia, they had the black-faced impalas ... they have bigger, bushier tails and of course black faces. Hardly anything was known about them.”

Tammie and one of her friends decided to pack up their bags and head for the ultimate girls’ road trip — through Botswana’s Kalahari Desert.

“Graham said to me ‘Lock your door’.

“Luckily, Graham got into a conversation with the guys who chatted away and it was OK. Turned out they wanted Roger out of the area, not us.”

A frightened Tammie began looking at other options for her studies. The option of returning home never entered her mind.

“It was a bad time. I also found out that my university’s insurance wasn’t going to cover me there. I thought to myself: ‘What am I going to do now?’

“Everything was falling apart,” she said.

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“I went out of disaster to the desert,” Tammie said.

“It was quite a mission … two chicks driving through the desert by ourselves – but we made it.”

Tammie, after working at the Etosha National Park, wrote a management plan to reintroduce the endangered subspecies to other parts of the country.

When she started, only 3000 were left, but when she finished her PhD in 2003, that number had risen to about 4000.

“It was a big cultural change moving to Namibia which had only 1.8 million people,” she said.

“It was completely different. Different tribes and even a different language … where I was in Zimbabwe most people spoke Shona or English, whereas in rural Namibia they spoke mostly Afrikaans and only a little English. “I had to learn Afrikaans as I was basically deaf and dumb.

“Plus, where I was working was a real boys’ club. When I walked into the tea room in Etosha, they were all men around their 40s or older; very hard-core and serious. They had no idea what to make of me – a young woman from Australia there to study the black-faced impala.

“I had to gain their respect and I knew I would have to do it the hard way.

“Since then, I’ve been involved in the management of black-faced impala in other ways and I’m helping to reintroduce them to their former range later this year.”

Tammie has been dividing her time between living in Currimundi and Namibia’s capital Windhoek where she works as an environmental consultant for organisations including Wilderness Safaris, Save the Rhino Trust and the Namibian Professional Hunters Association, as well as running a research project on human-elephant conflicts at the request of the Chief of the Bushmen.

Earlier this year, Tammie released her first published novel, Dry Water: Diving Headfirst into Africa – an autobiographical look at life as a wildlife conservationist. The book is expected to be the first of many.

“I’ve always come back to Australia for a rest. Africa is where I feel I am really living,” she said. Dry Water: Diving Headfirst into Africa, published by Hodder Australia, ($35) is available at most Australian book stores.