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For Immediate Release

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**PANTHERA'S TRISTAN DICKERSON PROFILED AS ONE OF THIS YEAR'S
'TOP 200 YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS'**

Mail & Guardian selects Dickerson for his innovative approach to leopard conservation in South Africa



[Tristan Dickerson](#), Panthera's Leopard Program Coordinator and lead field scientist on Panthera's South Africa-based [Munyawana Leopard Project](#), has been chosen as one of the Mail & Guardian's '[Top 200 Young South Africans](#)'. Each year, Mail & Guardian profiles 200 innovative leaders under the age of 35 who are leading a new generation of South Africans and who are making a tremendous impact on the

country. Dickerson was chosen as a Top Young South African for his groundbreaking approach to saving South Africa's rapidly dwindling wild leopard population.

"I'm truly honored to have been selected as one of Mail & Guardian's 'Top 200 Young South Africans,'" said Dickerson. "It is motivating that conservation efforts gain such prestigious recognition not only for the people involved but also for their causes. Wild leopards of South Africa are under increasing threat from the illegal leopard skin trade and I'm hoping this award will help shine a light on this issue and bring about a solution which will make all parties happy".

Leopard skins are in increasing demand among members of South Africa's Shembe Baptist Church, which has adopted the Zulu practice of wearing spotted cat fur (mainly leopard) during religious celebrations. Although trade in leopard skins is illegal in South Africa, the practice is widespread and expanding among the Shembe's estimated 5 million members. In order to reduce demand for real leopard skins, Dickerson has spent the past year working with digital designers and clothing companies to create a high-quality and affordable faux leopard skin which he will present at the next annual Shembe gathering in July. His work is also the focus of an hour-long documentary, [To Skin A Cat](#), currently in production.

"This is conservation at its most innovative," said Dr. Luke Hunter, Panthera's Executive Vice President, who hired Dickerson in 2005. "Tristan is an incredible field scientist with an intimate understanding of leopards from years of direct observation but more importantly, he isn't content simply collecting data. He has turned his deep knowledge of leopards towards finding solutions to the issues that most threaten them. This recognition is well deserved; he is one of Panthera's young stars producing real solution's for the conservation challenges facing big cats".

Today, only an estimated 400 leopards live in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province where the Shembe church is strongest. Between 2004-2008, just one supplier of Shembe religious

attire in KZN was arrested for possessing skins of at least 150 leopards. Panthera's Munyawana Leopard Project, now in its ninth year running, has introduced conservation interventions to reduce human-leopard conflict over livestock depredation and improve the sustainability of trophy hunting of leopards, which has helped double the leopard population in this region since 2005. Tristan hopes his solution to the skin trade will secure the future of the species once and for all.

[Watch videos and read articles](#) on the state of South Africa's leopards and Panthera's efforts to curb the decline of this species.

About Panthera

Panthera, founded in 2006, is the world's leading organization devoted exclusively to the conservation of wild cats and their ecosystems. Utilizing the expertise of the world's premier cat biologists, Panthera develops and implements global conservation strategies for the largest, most imperiled cats – tigers, lions, jaguars and snow leopards. Representing the most comprehensive effort of its kind, Panthera works in partnership with local and international NGOs, scientific institutions, local communicates and governments. Visit <http://www.panthera.org/>

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