

Getting the message

A new programme has been launched using text messaging to contact the most remote parts of Africa

IMAGINE being able to send a text message to an entire country from the middle of an African national park using just a laptop and a sim card.

That is exactly what Ken Banks imagined as he was sitting in watching Saturday night television one night. A few months later his computer programme, FrontlineSmS, has gone on trial in four African countries and is set to revolutionise the way that charities communicate with people in the developing world.

Conservation

Through the programme, Mr Banks wanted to marry his passionate belief in conservation work with his wide knowledge of Information Technology.

Influenced by the British inventor Trevor Bayliss, whose clockwork radio allowed thousands of people throughout the developing world to receive information about the threat of AIDS, Mr Banks wanted to make it possible for charities and other organisations in Africa to contact, and send informa-

By Orlando Crowcroft

tion, to those living in the remotest areas of the continent.

Twenty years ago the most effective medium for doing this was radio, now it is mobile phones that have the largest captive audience in Africa. Mr Banks estimates that 94% of people in South Africa have mobile phones, even those living miles from the cities in national parks have them, so the ability to 'blanket text' every phone in a wide area would be an invaluable source for any group.

'A lot of people in the remote areas of Africa can't get a landline phone but almost everyone now has a mobile. Without text messaging there is no other way of contacting them,' he said.

'Now that it is working, it is very exciting,' he added. 'Charities are doing amazing things that they couldn't have done without it.'

The crucial selling point for FrontlineSmS is its mobility. With this technology, a ranger in a national



Ken Banks has developed FrontlineSmS in the hope of getting information to people who are isolated by distance Picture: JON GUEGAN (00275022)

park who may see an escaped lion while driving his jeep along a remote road would not need to rush to the nearest internet station to get in touch with those living nearby. He simply pulls to the side of the road, switches on his computer, and sends a message of warning to ev-

eryone in a 100 mile radius.

Similarly, a charity that is trying to contact its donors can do so from anywhere in the country, at any time, about breaking news or to appeal for help.

But as well as transmitting information for charitable causes, Mr Banks

would be the first to concede that there is commercial potential for such software. He hopes to start commercial trials of the programme in February and March.

'The possibilities are endless,' he said. 'Schools could use the programme to contact pupils about

snow warnings, companies to keep their clients informed about special offers. It doesn't sound unique but there isn't anything like it around at the moment.'

But Mr Banks was keen to emphasise that FrontlineSmS was never developed to make him rich. He

hopes that the commercial sales of the product will subsidise its sale to charities, who naturally cannot afford to pay full price.

'I didn't write the programme to make money. Charity really is the main crux of it, what I do my work for,' he said.