to survive on the bottom rim of Africa, although not in great numbers.”

Atwood has spent her life thinking deeply about environmentalism and feminism, which she sees as crucially connected. “One of the big keys to [environmental action] is the education of women, because as soon as you have educated women, number one: they’re aware of the problem; and, number two: they have fewer children. One of the things people are terrified of talking about at the moment is overpopulation. We are industrialising at the same time we are reproducing. And of course everyone can now see stuff on their phones they once wouldn’t have known about, and they think, ‘I want a car too. I want air-conditioning too.’ But there are not enough resources to have everyone living in a Beverly Hills mansion. Then what will happen? With disaffected populations all of whom want the cars and the air-conditioners.” And the elaborate bridal attire.

“Whoa.” Atwood stops before the almost seamless ivory silk-satin dress of the 1934 bride Baba Beaton, sister of society photographer Cecil. “Now to get this silhouette with basically no bum, you needed the invention of the two-way stretch girdle.” Does she know about this invention from writing or life? “I know everything,” Atwood clarifies, moving briskly on.

Outside, Australian team adviser Dean Lague waits in the shade of a mango tree, nursing a cigarette. As a civilian, he’s not permitted to participate in searches.

“There’s a growing class of people here that is concerned about wildlife,” says Lague. “But the average person sees it more as a resource that’s there to be taken.”

In the house, cupboards and cluttered corners are inspected; clothes and linen are thrown to the ground. A gendarme pulls the bed apart, revealing several bulky sacks. He rips one open to find polished elephant tusks. Unfazed, the owner watches from the doorway.

“They’re fake,” he says. Asked to prove it, he grabs a tusk, raises it over his head and smashes it on the floor. A mixture of cement and sand spills out. “They’re fibreglass. If people don’t know better, I say they’re real.”

The military police file back into their trucks. Lague stubs out his cigarette. “Generally, the same people continue to trade wildlife, even after being caught and prosecuted,” he says. “So we just keep checking and checking.”

Lague joined the rescue team in January 2012. Although it is overseen and bankrolled by Wildlife Alliance, an American non-profit organisation, it operates under the auspices of the Cambodian government’s forestry administration. Military policemen are on loan from the Royal Gendarmerie of Cambodia.

The team has a nationwide mandate to combat Cambodia’s illegal wildlife trade – a trade fuelled by the culinary fetishes of the country’s elite and traditional beliefs in the medicinal properties of products such as bear bile, pangolin scales and cobra blood. Wildlife that is not consumed domestically often finds its way to lucrative markets in Vietnam and China. Through inspections, searches and raids, the team has rescued more than 50,000 live animals since its formation in 2001.

Back at the team’s cramped Phnom Penh office, forestry officials labour over reports while gendarmes in black berets and starched green fatigues play online games, their AK-47s chained to a nearby rack. The walls are decorated with maps and wildlife posters. A large stone Buddha sits on a shelf. Before every sortie, the team offers it incense. Out the back, the washroom is stuffed with writhing sacks – 126 tortoises await release after being rescued from a passenger bus earlier in the week.

Lague, 50, sits at his desk in jeans and a light cotton shirt. The Perth native wears his grey hair cropped close and speaks with a casual self-assurance. “This isn’t something I planned on doing, that’s for sure.” He laughs. “I’ve never been a member of Greenpeace or anything like that.”

As the team’s technical adviser, Lague shares his investigative experience, improves information networks and
provides on-the-job training. But with gendarmes known to occasionally leak information to wealthy wildlife traders, Lague says that his presence essentially serves as “a corruption prevention effort”.

Lague spent nearly 25 years with the Western Australia Police, including 21 as a detective, before moving to Cambodia in 2008 to help local police fight human trafficking. He sees his current work as a continuation of what he loves best – law enforcement with tangible results, defending the defenceless.

“The conditions that you see some of the animals in are fairly appalling.” He describes cobras with mouths stitched shut and birds plucked alive. The worst, Lague recalls, involved a bear cub in a remote village. “They wanted to capture the mother, so they tied a wire noose around its neck and left it in the forest to cry.” Lague grimaces. “The wire caused a massive cut all around this poor cub’s neck.”

The team’s trucks rattle along National Highway 4, past rice fields, thatch-roof homes, sugar palms, small forested hills, and thin white cattle with garlands of silver bells. It’s the height of the dry season and a layer of red-brown dust lends the trees what could be an autumnal hue, were it not for the unblinking violence of the sun.

Lieutenant Colonel Kuoch Haksrorn, 57, the gendarmes’ commander, rides shotgun. An old gym bag containing a battered AK-47 sits between him and the driver. Lague and the rest of the team follow in separate vehicles.

Haksrorn speaks of fighting alongside the Vietnamese army after it deposed the Khmer Rouge in 1979. He’d lost his mother, sister, brother-in-law and nieces to the genocidal regime. The Vietnamese gave him food and clothes, then let him choose a weapon. Haksrorn took an American-made M16.

“I wanted to kill Khmer Rouge,” he says coolly.

His unit subsisted on wildlife. Living in the forest, they had no choice. “We couldn’t go to the market because of Khmer Rouge ambushes and landmines along the roads.” Only five of his 100-man training group survived the country’s protracted civil war.

The rice fields give way to guarded garment factories. A dense cluster of shop-houses announces the town of Kampong Speu.

The truck turns into a laneway and we wind past shacks, then farms again before stopping at a walled compound containing a towering stuccoed mansion. A sign out the front reads “Red House Restaurant”.

The restaurant’s grounds are filled with folding tables and chairs arranged under a low iron verandah. A luxury 4WD with military plates is parked out the front. As soon as we enter the compound, a waiter rushes into the house,
carrying bulging sacks. The doors of the house are bolted, windows are shut. The owner – heavy-set, well dressed, wearing a gold watch – emerges. He demands to know what evidence the team has.

Forestry official Heng Kimchhay takes him aside. Kimchhay assures him this is just a routine check-up. The owner becomes more congenial. He agrees to let the team inspect the kitchen and grounds.

The gendarmes poke around. Lague, impassive, smokes at a table at the far end of the compound. “The forestry administration’s policy is always to try and enter by consent,” he says. “If we get a warrant in advance, nine times out of ten the information gets back to that person before we get there.”

The gendarmes search iceboxes, cupboards, fridges. Half of the kitchen is in a fly-swarmed shed, the other half is outside. Waiters and cooks stand around nervously. The owner’s wife taunts the team.

“I have all kinds of meat,” she says, arms folded across her apron. “Even human flesh.”

Kimchhay examines two translucent shopping bags stuffed with meat – “This is red muntjac,” he says, identifying the venison by its colour and texture. “This one is rabbit.” Another bag contains the plucked carcasses of small birds. “These are spotted doves. They’re common species, but they’re still illegal.”

Using an iPad, the owner begins photographing the team. The gendarmes become uneasy. They know full well that some wildlife traders wield more power than they do.

Kimchhay counts 17 birds. A colleague quickly weighs the meat: 1 kg of muntjac, 1.5 kg of rabbit. The owner is given a $150 fine – three times the meat’s market value. He says he’s only trying to support his family. He promises he’ll stop selling wildlife.

In town, the meat is doused with gasoline and burnt atop a pile of plastic and timber. Lague watches the blaze. Asked why no attempts were made to search the house’s interior, Lague seems mildly annoyed.

“If we’d gone into the house without a warrant, we’d be breaking the law. That would do more damage than good.”

He hints that the team would never win this particular case in the province’s court – pushing too hard, Lague says, could endanger his men.

“That was the deputy governor’s house,” he says. “If we’re too critical of the authorities, they’ll just stop working with us.” With a shrug, he adds, “It’s frustrating, but if you get too worried about it, you’d go mad … To get the message through, we have to just keep hitting them again and again and again.”