

SIX BLACK RHINO BABIES AND NINETEEN LIONS

If the last rhino in southern Africa is not to become a drying carcass in the bush and a couple of horns hidden in the hold of a freighter bound for Asia, conservation agencies in the new South Africa need national and international support

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Beside the big spoor stood that of a very small one. We have been tracking their owners for four hours, when George, with his keen rhino sense, claims that we are getting close.

Soon we spot a flicking ear among the bushes. Unperturbed, the rhino stand under a tree about 100 m away.

The one-month-old calf is half-hidden behind its mother: a magnificent horn makes her unmistakable as Dengezi. They start moving slowly towards us. The wind is good, and only some ten metres away does she catch our scent. Then she

turns around quickly and runs away with her calf stumbling along close at heel. We call it Olehile: it is one of six calves born in the Pilanesberg during 1993.

EXTERMINATION AND INCREASE

In the first half of 1993 about 40 Black Rhino, approximately the size of the Pilanesberg population, were slaughtered for their horns by poachers in Zimbabwe. South Africa's northern neighbour has sent rhino overseas to Australia and the United States of America, and a couple of hundred have been translocated to sanctuaries in the core of the country, but hundreds have also been killed. Very few are now left in the wild, and the risk of ruthless rhino killers moving south of the Limpopo River is becoming greater every day.

If the last rhino in southern Africa is not to become a drying carcass in the bush and a couple of horns hidden in the hold of a freighter bound for Asia, conservation agencies in the new South Africa need national and international support. They also need to cooperate and coordinate their efforts. Rhino need more attention: they must be an attraction to everyone who visits a national park. The more awareness, the better the protection; they cannot be hidden from poachers.

Everyone who has encountered a Black Rhino in the bush, and experienced the thrill when this short-sighted animal stands quietly and tries to find out what is going on around it, must try to convey that enthusiasm to others.



NOTE: Ear notches are important for identification. Unfortunately, holes punched in 1992 had often regrown



How can we say we will succeed in protecting the environment if we cannot save a few pockets of land for the rhino? Except for Kenya, where the population is slowly recovering in sanctuaries after a disastrous crash due to poaching, Namibia and South Africa are the only countries on the continent where Black Rhino numbers have increased. The Pilanesberg population demonstrated its potential in 1993; during the first six months six Black Rhino calves were born, an increase of almost 20 per cent.

Six charming Black Rhino provided quite a sensation, but this faded somewhat in the fuss created around 19 Lion that were introduced to the Pilanesberg from Namibia; it was a new experience to find Lion spoor in the park. In the beginning we were quite excited when we came across them, but it was rare and soon we almost forgot and concentrated on the rhino and their calves, which naturally are more of an attraction to us.

NAMES AND NUMBERS

When we first started the Black Rhino identification project in the Pilanesberg, we intended, as true scientists, to give each individual a number only: no need to become emotional! But we soon found it was easier to remember a name, and, anyway, when you work with such fascinating animals as Black Rhino, you cannot help becoming emotional about them (which anyone who read through the first page must have realised).

Each Black Rhino has its own character. Buglehorn got her name because that was what her front horn looked like in 1989; later, the tip broke off and she now has a normal-looking horn. She is a fairly reliable rhino, often to be found in the same area. In 1992 her one-year-old calf disappeared, but in 1993 she gave birth to a new calf.

Zita, the first calf we saw with Buglehorn at the age of six, now has a calf of her own: probably the first third-generation offspring to be born in the

ABOVE: *Dengezi and her one-month-old calf walk up to us*



ABOVE: *Some White Rhino are easily recognisable by horn shape*

Pilanesberg. Some confusion reigned when we spotted Zita and her calf from the helicopter. She stood in a small patch of bush and would not move, but finally she trotted away. We got our pictures and flew on down a valley almost in the same direction as she had headed.

Soon we saw her again — or rather, so we thought. Following our principle of not disturbing rhino more than necessary, we almost turned away when, soon after seeing Zita, we again spotted a female with her calf; but a small difference in the size of the calf made us realise that this was not Zita.

As female rhino often do when they have small calves, Gijima had moved a bit outside her normal home range. Her ear notches look very similar to Zita's, and although she is at least ten years older, similar horn shape and size can make it difficult to recognise one from the other. However, the pictures clearly showed the different ear notches; also one calf was male and the other female. The importance of ear notches for individual recognition was again demonstrated: it was therefore unfortunate that some of the notches we had made in 1992 had closed.

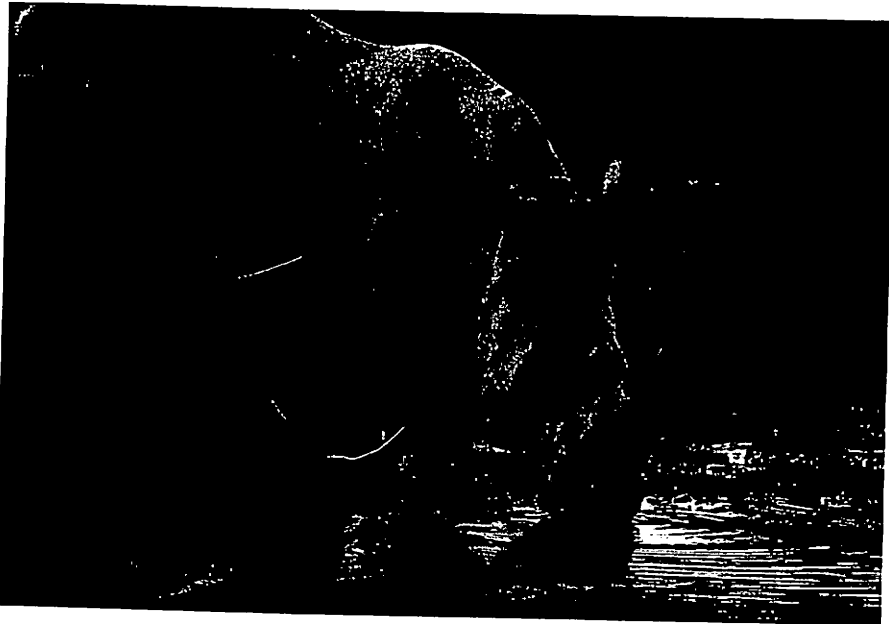
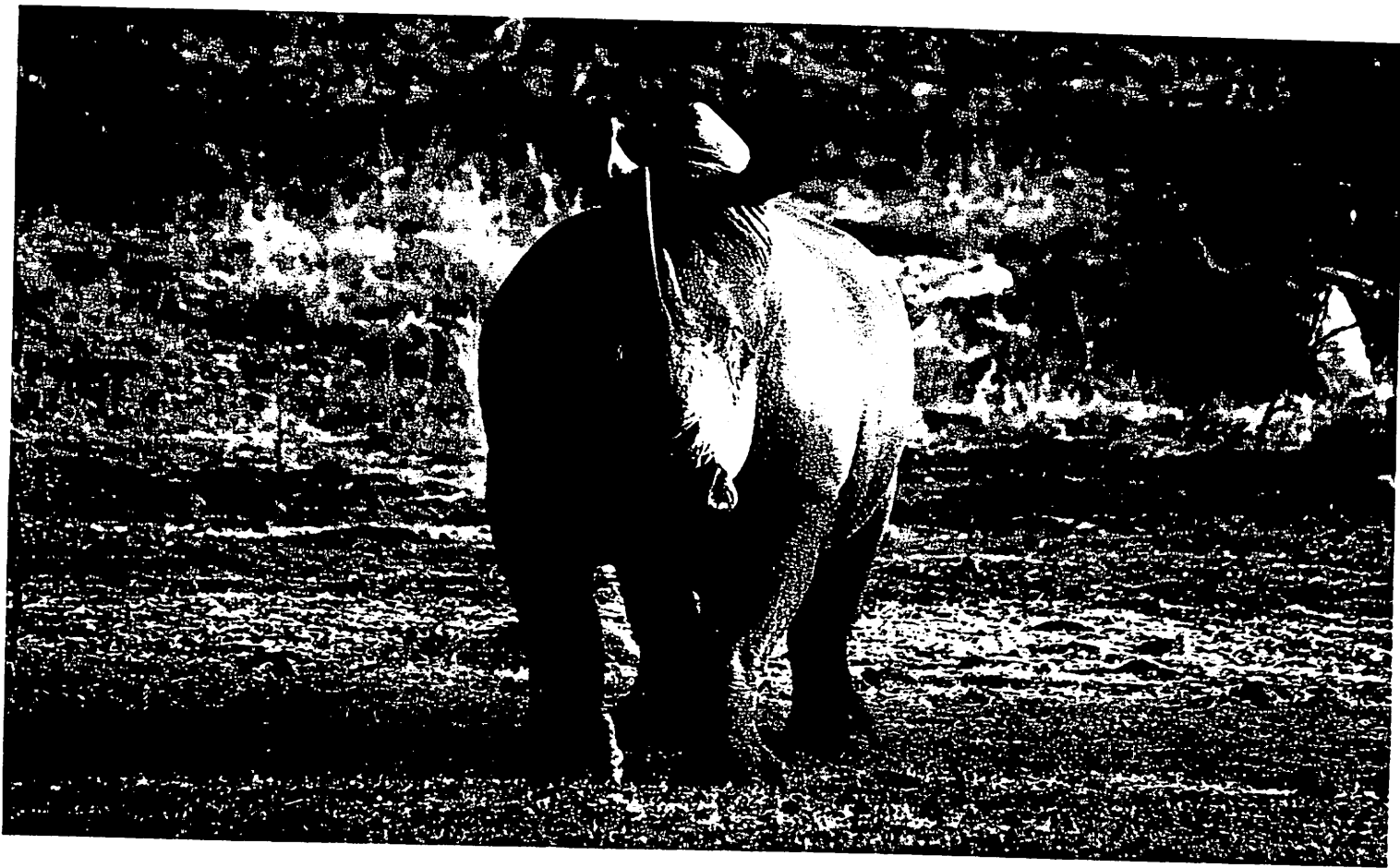
BOB, THE TROUBLEMAKER

The ear-notching numbering system designed according to the management plan for Black Rhino in South Africa gave us a choice between combina-

tions of notches at the fringe of the ear or holes in the middle. In an attempt to make it easier for observers to identify an individual, it was decided in 1992 to use numbers with punched holes in the ears.

A year later many of the holes had disappeared because the tissue had closed. We had confirmation of this when we found Bob, or, to be more correct, when we spotted an adult male with no notches. This was a surprising observation as, except for calves, there was not supposed to be a 'clean' male in the population. We soon realised that it could only be Bob, who last year gave us all a lot of trouble and Hans a scar on the chin when this uncooperative rhino decided to get up and walk away before Bob Keffen, the vet, had given the antidote.

Bob did not have more than a hole in the ear, but that still made him individually recognisable. Now, it seemed, the hole had closed. We decided to finish last year's job, dart him and give him the appropriate notch number. The dart goes in, but this rhino reacts differently to M99 from all others. He ran four km before he finally stood still and very, very slowly lay down with his head squeezed into a forked tree trunk. Weighing around a ton, it was a major exercise to get him out before he strangled himself. The ear notches were made quickly, the antidote administered, and everyone scrambled for a tree. Bob stayed put. Bob the vet



TOP: Most of the White Rhino had no ear notches
ABOVE: To establish how many White Rhino were identifiable, as many as possible of these more docile animals were photographed

gets down and prods him gently: no reaction. Another push and he is on his feet in a second, which has Bob running. Recovering fast, Bob the rhino picks up the spoor like a bloodhound, but Bob the vet finds a tree just in time!

Everyone got away unscarred and Bob received his notches. We found him a few days later 10 km away.

FULL OF TRICKS

Sergeant George Phiri, our trusted friend and invaluable companion on the rhino project, maintains that Black Rhino are full of tricks. He is right. When you expect them to do one thing, they often do another, and vice versa. They also have a way of vanishing into thin air.

Hughey is Gijima's previous calf and at the age of two and a half he had just left his mother and was still inexperienced. We had seen him a few days previously but then the vet was not available; now we would give it another try.

It was a wonderful morning: crisp air with a promise of spring. Shortly after take-off we spotted a Black Rhino standing in dense bush watching us as we passed. We turned back and it was Hughey, just the one we were looking for and a good way to begin the day. He started trotting leisurely across an open hillside and we returned to base for the dartgun. Five minutes later we were back at the spot where we left him and he had gone, gone to ground, disappeared from the face of the earth. To this day we do not understand where he went. Only a week later did we find him again, twenty minutes before we had used up our annual quota of helicopter

hours. He received his notches and all Black Rhino in the Pilanesberg are still individually identifiable.

WHITE AND BLACK RHINO
More than 200 White Rhino were released in the Pilanesberg during Operation Genesis when the park was re-stocked with wildlife. Today, approximately the same number grace the beautiful broad valleys; they have done well and are doing very well. Many have been moved to other North West Province parks such as Botsalano and Borakalalo. When the rhino were introduced they were all ear-notched for identification; however, because some have died and many have been moved, the majority today are 'clean'.

In an attempt to estimate the proportion of marked White Rhino, this species was included in the photographic project in 1993. If a sufficient number in the population is identifiable, and many sightings are collected, a computer programme developed by Richard H Emslie makes it possible to calculate the population size. At the same time many sightings increase security. Black Rhino have so far been in the front line of the rhino war because they were more numerous north of the Limpopo River, but poachers do not discriminate between Black and White Rhino.

It was a different experience to work with White Rhino for a change. One walks quietly up to them, takes a picture and walks silently away again, hidden by some bushes. No need to disturb them. All right, the odd bull might pretend to chase a bit and the average tourist should not try the exercise. But, generally, White Rhino are peacable and, unlike their Black relatives, there is seldom any huffing, puffing and snorting; and no need for tree climbing.

The White Rhino is not, however, as charming as the Black Rhino; it is difficult to explain why, and maybe we are being unfair. The White Rhino is indeed a fantastic creature, and it is exciting to walk up to an animal weighing two tons — and they do charge now and again. But if they are the salt of the savanna, the Black Rhino is the pepper — spicy and full of spirit.



We still do not know enough about rhinos, but we learn a little more each year. Because each individual is identifiable, the population in the Pilanesberg provides a unique opportunity for collecting information that is vital to the conservation of these highly endangered species.

ABOVE: The people who won the Pilanesberg Black Rhino Adventure Competition of 1993. The prize included tracking rhinos with us

AN UPHILL BATTLE

Our friend Anthony Leadbeadle once said, "What is the point? All right, a couple of Asians might get withdrawal symptoms if they don't get the stuff. Otherwise, I reckon their disappearance won't make much difference. I don't even think that rhinos play an important ecological role. But, now, take the Elephant..."

When you are both fascinated by and very fond of Black Rhino, statements like that make you mad, even if they are made after a beautiful braai on a peaceful Sunday afternoon in spring.

Sometimes one feels as if an uphill battle is being fought when working with Black Rhino. They are not cuddly like seals, magnificent like whales, nor majestic like Lions: they are simply Black Rhino. But they are definitely not the aggressive, bad-tempered animals that they are mostly made out to be. One sometimes has the impression that Black Rhino have been persecuted by man for so long that the mere scent of him makes them run away snorting and puffing heavily in order to rid their sensitive noses of his terrible smell. It can of



course happen that they choose the alternative option and try to chase the intruder, but that is mainly if one bumps right into them.

We might be prejudiced, but to us Black Rhino are charming, fascinating, shy, fearless, secretive and mysterious animals that prefer to go their own way sustained by a diet of dry twigs, sticks and forbs. They look prehistoric; some claim that they have reached the end of their line and that they are not fit for a life in modern times. It is true that rhino have very old ancestors who lived about 50 million years ago, but so has the horse. Despite the fact that many horses have been replaced by tractors, very few people would claim that horses have outlived their usefulness. No, the rhino has run to the brink of extinction in a very short time — in an evolutionary sense, in a millisecond — because of human superstition, greed, corruption and poverty.

South Africa and Namibia are now the last strongholds of both Black and White Rhino. Maybe these two species should be made part of South Africa's new national symbol: they live peacefully together.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We feel privileged that North West Province Parks asked us to participate in the annual Black Rhino monitoring project for the fifth time, and wish to thank all the staff in Pilanesberg for their friendly assistance. We are particularly grateful to Park Warden Johnson Maoka and Ecologist Keryn Adcock, who share our concern for Black Rhino. Our gratitude also goes to Section Ranger Sergeant George Phiri who has a sixth sense for Black Rhino and a love for the bush.

We would also like to thank the Mazda Wildlife Fund for the generous use of their 4 x 4 vehicle, and the Endangered Wildlife Trust for their financial support. We are grateful to Gert Brumme, Graham Shipway and their staff at Bakubung and Kwa Maritane Lodges, who never hesitated to share their hospitality and enthusiasm for Black Rhino.

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ABOVE: At present less than 20 per cent of the White Rhino can be identified by ear notches