

Portraits in Conservation

Eastern and Southern Africa

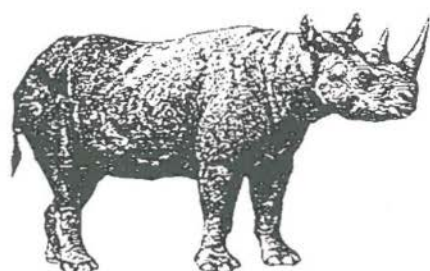
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SECTION TWO

One Does Not Compromise
with Extinction



Chapter Three

AFRICA'S BLACK RHINOCEROS

Photo: courtesy of Elisabeth Braun



We have little say in the eventual extinction of the species, for in evolutionary time this is inevitable. ... Rhino are primitive representatives of a line that is approaching the end of its evolutionary cycle. Man can, however, reduce the destructive pressure from his own kind so that the five remaining species of rhino can become extinct in the natural cause of evolution many years from now, rather than in the "geological second" represented by our own brief appearance on earth.¹

Like elephants, black rhinoceroses once roamed the entire sub-Saharan continent. Their numbers were vast, somewhere between 750,000 and 1 million.

Although the ruthless killing of rhino by non-Western traders and the export of rhino horn and rhino products to the Middle and Far East had been going on for centuries, the first great rhino slaughter began in the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of Western adventurers and explorers on the continent. Vociferous international public relations campaigns have had considerable success in debunking the myth of the rhino horn, but the deeply ingrained belief in Asia in the horn's curative and mythical powers is hard to eradicate. The Chinese, for example, believe rhino-horn powder has aphrodisiacal power, a view leading conservationists disavow. To satisfy the Asian demand, the Asian rhinos became the poachers' first target. Once decimated, the African species, particularly the black rhino, followed.

Five rhino species remain alive in the world today: the white and black rhino in Africa; and the Indian, Sumatran, and Javanese rhino in Asia. Black rhino statistics in sub-Saharan Africa over the past quarter century tell a compelling story of this ancient animal's demise.² In 1970, there were 65,000 black rhinos in Africa and in 1980 their numbers had been reduced by 77 percent to 14,795. By 1984, a further reduction of 41 percent had taken place, leaving about 8,800 animals alive. From 1984 to 1990, rhino numbers again dwindled by 60 percent, with a total population of 3,500 remaining.

In 1980, the African countries with the largest black rhino populations were Tanzania (3,795), the Central African Republic (3,000), Zambia (2,750), Kenya (1,500), South Africa (630), Zimbabwe (400), and Namibia (300). By 1990, a devastating picture had emerged. Tanzania had lost 98 percent of its rhino population, leaving less than 50; the Central African Republic and Zambia each also lost 98 percent, reducing formerly healthy herds to insignificance. A similar situation occurred in Kenya and Zimbabwe, which, over one decade, lost 86 percent and 71 percent, respectively.

The only black rhino populations that increased from 1980 to 1990 were in South Africa (63 to 640) and Namibia (300 to 450).

The sharpest declines occurred from 1980 to 1984 in the Central African Republic (94 percent) and Kenya (63 percent), and from 1984 to 1986 in Kenya's neighbors Tanzania (87 percent) and Zambia (88 percent), and in Cameroon (45 percent), the Central African Republic's neighbor.

Rhino poaching began where it was easiest to export rhino horn and rhino products, i.e., in the coastal regions of East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) and in Central Africa (Central African Republic leading to Cameroon). Known routes to Middle and Far Eastern destinations passed through the

ports of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Mombasa in Kenya. As the poaching trade moved south, new smuggling routes opened up, with Zambia and Johannesburg as major transit points.

Following is a brief survey of the political and economic background in countries that became focal points of rhino-horn poaching.

Tanzania, which had the largest black rhino population, became independent in 1964 as a single-party republic and, over the following decade, imbued the state with massive powers in an effort to establish African socialism. However, together with severe drought and economic mismanagement, this centralization of power encouraged excessive corruption, smuggling, and a flourishing black rhino-products market. Tanzania, under its president Julius Nyerere, was spared the political upheavals that beset its African neighbors, but suffered immense economic hardship. Such disarray encouraged rhino poaching since no controls were in place to provide protection for rhinos.

Zambia was plagued by similar problems. Troubled by transgressions of its neighbors Mozambique (1975), Angola (1975), and Zimbabwe (1980), Zambia suffered economic misfortunes, and austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund brought the country close to collapse. The inevitable corruption and misappropriation of funds left no resources for the protection of valuable wildlife populations, including rhino. The disarray encouraged poaching.

The *Central African Republic* under the corrupt and dictatorial regime of Lieutenant Jean-Bédél Bokassa became a political and economic ruin in the 1970s, and its neighbor to the west, *Cameroon*, has stumbled from one political crisis to another due to the lack of genuine democratic government. Rather than being protected, the rhino has been exploited in these countries.

Tanzania, Zambia, the Central African Republic, and Cameroon are single-party presidential republics and, more often than not, staging areas for the single-minded pursuit of power and wealth by the few at the top at the expense of the country at large. Although parks and nature reserves were proclaimed and declarations to preserve fauna and flora made (Arusha Declaration, 1958), the effective protection of the species lagged behind pitifully.

Kenya has enjoyed a closer association with the West, which has had a positive impact on wildlife conservation. However, until the formation of the parastatal Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), Kenya had done little to curtail the corruption and mismanagement that have plagued other African countries.

After independence in 1963, Kenya's economy expanded rapidly. However, the collapse of the East African Community in 1977, which was an important trading partner for Kenya, severely impacted Kenya's economy. Failure to diversify, the inevitable mismanagement and corruption at all levels of government, and the need for massive infusion of international funds to correct past ills and set the economy on a road to recovery prompted a closer alliance with the West. Wildlife tourism became the most important foreign-exchange earner for Kenya and eventually jump-started elephant and rhino conservation efforts. Their reverberations are still being heard around the world. In the case of the elephant it led to the CITES ivory ban in 1989 and the burning of Kenya's multimillion-dollar ivory stockpile, with President Arap Moi setting the torch.

In contrast, *South Africa* and *Namibia* have been in the fortunate position of having strong parks and wildlife-management departments that have so far been able to thwart wildlife disasters of the magnitude experienced farther north.

In fact, the success of the Natal Parks Board's Operation Rhino project in the Umfolozi Game Reserve in South Africa in the 1960s saved the white rhino by translocating it to game reserves, parks, and zoos around the world. This led in 1965 to the reclassification of the white rhino from the Category A protection list of the IUCN "threatened with extinction" to the status of "no longer endangered." Today's world population of 4,600 white rhinos is descended from that original Umfolozi population.

It is commonplace to ascribe blame for the dramatic killing of thousands and thousands of rhinos over the past twenty-five years to human greed and callousness. Ultimately, however, the protection of an endangered species is not only a matter of conviction, ethics, public outcries, and international appeals but also of political commitment, the allocation of funds and manpower, and appropriate management. None of these "but also" conditions existed in African environments until very recently.

All roads to understanding the intricacies of the international rhino-horn trade lead to Dr. Esmond Bradley Martin in Nairobi. "A superb investigative geographer," in the words of his wife and collaborator, Chrissee Perry Martin, he has used his international connections and appointments to continuously gather information on and intercept the devious ways of the rhino-horn trade in the Middle and Far East. Dr. Martin appreciates public pressure and grass-roots campaigns, but "commitment at the top of government," he believes, is essential. "One person can turn the system around, but one can also wreck it." As examples of the former, he cites Indian and Nepalese top-level interventions that in fact stopped illegal rhino-horn trade, and of

the latter, the miserable excesses of the Bokassa government in the Central African Republic in the 1960s and 1970s.

Asked if he believes that the rhino-horn trade will ever disappear totally, Dr. Martin suggests that "the issue is not whether the trade will disappear but whether the rhino populations will recover."

Ultimately, the black rhino's survival has fallen prey to the powerfully persuasive forces of economic reckoning: In one decade, the price for African rhino horn increased twenty times from US \$30 per kilo to US \$600 per kilo. The price of the even more valued Asian rhino horn rose from US \$2,000 per kilo in 1972 to US \$20,000 per kilo in 1980. Although the African hired hands receive a minute percentage of the immense profits derived from poaching, it is more than they would ever earn with regular work. Ethics and aesthetics or international agreements have little power of persuasion if there is hardly any money for food and necessities.

Although trade in rhino-horn products has been banned by CITES, the continued illegal use by many Asian countries poses an enormous threat to the world's few remaining rhinos. But Dr. Martin is quick to point out that not all attempts at curbing the traditional use of rhino horn have failed. "True enough, in the black spots such as Yemen, Taiwan, China, and South Korea, but we must not forget the domestic markets that have been closed: Japan, Hong Kong, peninsular Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Brunei, and the Philippines."

The knowledge, information, and skill to manage the comeback of the black rhino on the African subcontinent is resident mostly in Kenya and southern Africa. In order to stop the decimation of the remaining rhino populations, Kenya began creating rhino sanctuaries in 1984 to both protect rhinos through fencing, alarms, antipoaching surveillance, and monitoring and to build up their numbers as quickly as possible through breeding. Sanctuaries are considered interim solutions, however, with complete success coming when sanctuary-bred rhinos have been restocked in former rhino territories such as Tsavo National Park.

About 500 black rhinos remain in Kenya (1991). Most of them are located in eleven well-protected areas on private and public lands, such as Nairobi National Park (57 rhinos), outside Kenya's capital, and the Solio Game Reserve in northern Kenya (58 rhinos). An ecological carrying capacity (ECC) formula helps determine optimal environmental conditions for rhino breeding and management. Although drought and other man-made phenomena may play havoc with ECC for any one year, it has been estimated that given normal environmental conditions, Kenya's total ECC for rhinos in sanctuaries is about 680 animals. With a nucleus of 295 breeding rhinos, this capacity could be reached in Kenya within a decade.³

The cost for the black rhino's rescue, however, is immense, and it has been difficult to assign a realistic economic value to this critically endangered species. The Natal Parks Board in South Africa attempted to do so in 1990 when it auctioned a founder population of five black rhinos to the 24,400-hectare Lapalala Wilderness owned by renowned conservationist Clive Walker. Endorsing recent views that controlled breeding in small reserves represents a viable means for the survival of the species, the sale price for the two bulls and three cows was R 2.2 million.

Zimbabwe's commercial approach to conservation also focuses on the need to stabilize the country's dwindling rhino population of about 400, which are scattered in the vast region of the Zambezi Valley bordering Zambia.

Vilified by the international conservation community, Zimbabwe feels that the legal sale of its rhino-horn stockpile could go a long way toward financing patrols, equipment, and monitoring. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWLM), which is responsible for rhino projects, is a poorly funded government institution, and, unlike the parastatal KWS, in no position to accept international donor funding for rhino projects.

Not that Zimbabwe would want to do so anyway. Assuming eventual donor fatigue, Zimbabwe takes a cautious view of sanctuaries and a long-term view of a conservation ethic where the rhino will assume its place in the larger conservation framework. "It is a risky thing to break away from the conventional mold," Raoul du Toit of the DNPWLM suggests, "but we think that by looking long term and toward private and communal conservancies, we will serve wildlife and endangered species better than through sanctuaries."

To provide an immediate stop to rhino poaching, Zimbabwe followed Namibia's example and began dehorning all black rhinos in 1992. So far the operation has been successful. But the cost of dehorning one rhino is US \$3,000. And the rhino horn will grow back at nine centimeters per year, possibly necessitating further dehorning.

Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), under the dedicated leadership of Blythe Loutit and her team in Namibia; Anna Merz at the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary in Lewa Downs in Kenya; and Michael Werikhe, the "Rhino Man" from Kenya, are but three of the many individuals and groups who have made it their objective to help save the black rhino from extinction.

Chapter Four

BLYTHE LOUTIT

Save the Rhino Trust

Namibia

To the children of Khorixas

The logo of Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) was taken from a rhino rock engraving at Twyfelfontein, etched on a great slab of sandstone in the northwestern part of Namibia. Directly below the rhino engraving is that of a human footprint, alluding to the precarious relationship humankind and the rhino have had with each other over time.

This is harsh desert country, and the black rhinos of Namibia (*diceros bicornis bicornis*) are well adapted to desertlike conditions. Their population in this vast and empty space is small—perhaps 115—and scattered, and Namibia's wildlife officials, the nongovernmental advocacy group SRT, and

other concerned individuals and organizations have done their utmost for over a decade to secure the continued existence of these ancient animals. While both public and private sources would attribute the success of their work to the often-backbreaking teamwork among rhino advocates and Damara people from many walks of life, it is generally agreed that Blythe Loutit, the director of fieldwork of SRT, has made the uncompromising protection of the desert rhinos her special cause.

The Allure of the Desert

Blythe Loutit came to conservation and rhino advocacy through the circuitous route of avocation and marriage. Born in South Africa in 1940, she spent her early years on her parents' farm in Natal. The farm still had wildlife, and she loved to be with her horses, which she rode expertly and with abandon. The youngest of four children, she also spent much time with her mother, a landscape designer who, after three children, had tired

of finding baby-sitters for her fourth child and therefore took Blythe with her on her many travels. It is through her mother that Blythe learned to appreciate and paint the rich flora of southern Africa. "It was a lovely, lovely childhood," Blythe muses.

Not particularly enamored with regular schoolwork and burdened with the youthful indecision of choosing an occupation, Blythe eventually began to study botanical art at the Botanical Institute in South Africa. Thus she developed a skill which gave her professional direction later when she—and her husband Rudi—decided to settle in South-West Africa. Blythe and Rudi had met at the Wilderness Leadership School in

Photo: Anthony Bannister



Blythe Loutit

Natal and, searching for a place to settle, had gone off on an exploratory trip to Angola in 1973. Two things happened on the way back: they got married, and their dream of settling in Angola was shattered by that nation's civil war, which made it a most unsuitable place to put down roots. South-West Africa, which had been on their way, was the next most inviting place. It had the allure of wide-open spaces and it had a desert, something Blythe had fancied living in since childhood. "I don't really know why," she recalls, "but I always had pictures of deserts on the walls of my room on the farm."

Reflecting on whether there was a particular incident that gave her latent interest in conservation a push at an early age, she recalls her parents' desire to establish their farm as a wildlife sanctuary in the late 1940s and early 1950s. And some years later, during a visit to a game park, her artistic imagination was fired by the mysterious glowing eyes of wild creatures caught in the glare of the car's headlights. "Then and there I decided that I wanted to get a job in conservation," she recalls, and in 1967 she joined the Natal Parks Board as an illustrator.

In 1974 the Loutits settled in Windhoek, then the administrative capital of South-West Africa. While Rudi pursued his professional career as a qualified accountant, Blythe worked as a freelance illustrator for the Windhoek State Herbarium. Becoming increasingly disenchanted with his profession, Rudi switched careers in 1976 and joined the Directorate of Nature Conservation, moving with Blythe to Etosha National Park. Two years later, in 1978, they transferred to the Skeleton Coast, and the first inklings of Blythe's later all-consuming involvement with black rhino conservation were aroused.

Problems on the Skeleton Coast

The Kaokoveld, comprised of Kaokoland and Damaraland and wedged between the Skeleton Coast and Etosha National Park, was deproclaimed as a game reserve in 1970 as a result of the Odendaal Report, which aimed at creating South Africa-style homelands in that area. But in addition to making room for homelands, the deproclamation also opened up the area for hunting and poaching and thus to massive devastation of native wildlife, including elephant and rhino.

Government sources put the current number of black rhinos in Namibia at 490 (1993). This represents 97 percent of *diceros bicornis bicornis* in the southern African region. Of these, 346 are in Etosha National Park; 114 are on communal state land in Damaraland and Kaokoland (now called the Kunene Province); and the rest are distributed throughout other Namibian game reserves, parks, and private ranches. In 1970, before the

deproclamation, Damaraland alone was home to 250 rhinos. However, "there is always margin for error in a rhino count," Blythe suggests. "When there have been rains we find many footprints; but in times of drought, the footprints become less and less prominent and the rhinos move into the hills and we don't find them that easily. Then we worry even more that something could have happened to them. That's why we have tried not to publicize their numbers."

When the Loutits came to the Skeleton Coast, there was general awareness of the slaughter of rhinos and elephants in the area, and conservation tempers were rising. But it appears to have taken Blythe Loutit and a few kindred spirits "to do something about it" and to bring the flexible energy of the private advocate to the endangered rhino's cause. "At every water hole there were carcasses riddled with bullets from automatic weapons," Blythe recalls. Initially her most enraged kindred spirits were her husband Rudi, the government's nature conservator in the area, and the late Ina Britz, wife of geologist Colin Britz, who worked for the Consolidated Diamond Mines which is still a powerful economic presence in Namibia today.

Together they enlisted the help and goodwill of others and founded the Namibia Wildlife Trust in order to help stop the wanton poaching. It was very much a collaborative effort among governmental and nongovernmental sources, the media, people like SRT's Sharon Montgomery, and geological personnel. It also was very much an ad hoc effort. Ina lobbied the local government authorities, and Blythe went to Cape Town and with the help of newspaper editor Tony Heard and journalist Margaret Jacobsohn presented a formal complaint to the South African Parliament regarding the slaughter of elephants and rhino. With her husband's total support, Blythe also began extensive fieldwork and research into the feeding habits of the desert-dwelling black rhinos and later copublished the results in a professional journal.

"Lots of times the Skeleton Coast staff got into trouble for helping," Blythe recalls,

because there was no specific brief for rhino conservation or spending funds on such an activity. We also could have never done it without the tremendous support of the authorities of the Damara representative government at the time, such as Chief Justice Garoeb and the late Simon Gobs. There was no wildlife section in the Damara representative government per se; all was organized under the Department of Agriculture, even tourism. There was no clear structure. We were all part of a team. Our group's specific aim was to patrol and monitor

the area; Garth Owen-Smith's work was to involve local people as auxiliary game guards; and the Department of Nature Conservation had law-enforcement powers. We all worked together. We still do, although we have our differences, but we have all come to realize that in this vast, empty space we all need each other.

Although SRT has enjoyed the support of the highest government echelons, the question offers itself as to why nongovernmental organizations such as the SRT have taken the public lead in rhino conservation when the Ministry of Wildlife has the ultimate authority over the country's wildlife?

Blythe thinks one reason is because the Ministry is mired down by a bureaucratic structure that does not promote flexible decision making and by a budget so small that most of their vehicles cannot be repaired. "The protection of the rhino is dependent on trackers, and the Ministry of Wildlife does not have positions for trackers. A minimum requirement for joining the ministry staff is a high-school (standard eight) education and knowledge of English and Afrikaans." Most people who have those qualifications don't want to be trackers. "NGOs are much more flexible. We can respond to a situation immediately and make decisions on the spot. But there is no easy solution to this problem."

In 1984 SRT, under the auspices of the Wildlife Society, began the awesome job of raising funds and soliciting support. "Support came slowly but from every conceivable area. In the beginning our biggest fund-raisers were the schoolchildren. We distributed thousands of 'rhino friend' patches to schools, and the children then sold them for R 2 apiece. I traveled all over southern Africa, and it was interesting to see that the most dedicated support came from poor schoolchildren. It was almost as if they could identify with the rhino. We raised R 160,000, and the money for our first sturdy vehicles was raised by schoolchildren in Natal." Since Namibia's independence, fundraising has expanded beyond Africa, and nearly all major international conservation organizations have become involved in one form or another. And, almost like angels from heaven, anonymous donors have on occasion appeared with sizable donations to keep SRT going."

The Unsung Heroes of Rhino Conservation

The great unsung heroes of rhino conservation, Blythe feels, are the local trackers. Intensely dedicated and familiar with the area and terrain, and with an inborn ability to spot hardly visible human footprints and animal

tracks, these men of the veld render an invaluable service to rhino conservation. They must be infinitely patient in the pursuit of their task—Blythe cringes at the thought of patrol teams rushing and not taking time to search an area thoroughly—and they must be prepared to stay out for weeks at a time, far from family and friends, self-sufficient and alert. “Most of them,” Blythe suggests, “are quite happy with their work and don’t mind being out for a long time. Many of them come from the small town of Khorixas, which is located at the eastern edge of the rhino territory, where the unemployment rate is 86 percent. They really don’t want to get into drugs and drinking, which is common there. They are happy to be employed.” How do they get paid? “They can choose to receive their wages in rations or in cash,” Blythe explains. “Most choose rations with a small cash allowance; it’s easier to feed their families this way.” The World Food Programme (WFP) assists with basic rations.

The life of a tracker, like that of a cowboy in America’s Wild West, engenders a certain feeling of romanticism and daredevilry. “That’s our interpretation,” Blythe suggests. “The trackers are deeply into their work. They sit around the fire in the evening and talk about their day. Their lives center around their being trackers and working as a team.”

Often many man-days and endless miles away from SRT headquarters in Khorixas, their work has been immensely facilitated recently by the donation of a two-way communication system that enables direct contact among the men in the field and with SRT in Khorixas. “It’s almost too wonderful to be true,” Blythe says thankfully. “Our trackers are no longer out on a limb, and we needn’t worry any longer about their well-being in the bush. The days of walking two hundred kilometers to report a poacher or an incident are finally over.”

Questions to Be Answered

In 1989, when five rhino and eleven elephants were poached and not enough manpower and funds were available to stem the crisis, a consensus was reached to dehorn rhino in defense. This was a first in the annals of rhino conservation and has engendered much debate and controversy. “The first rhino dehorned was a female named Tammy,” Blythe remembers. “She was tranquilized, her horn sawed off with a wood saw, and since they did not wish to injure the rhino, they used horseshoe clippers to chip away the last pieces of horn. I can still remember the smell of the hot horn falling off.” Dehorning seems to have stopped the poaching in that area, but the controversy over its long-term effects, which appear minimal at this time, will not

be known for years to come. "You have to be around for ten years or so to determine whether it really and truly has an effect on the rhino's life, and so much depends on climatic changes in the desert."

International efforts to eliminate the rhino-horn trade are well documented, but ever more innovative smuggling methods and routes are devised. Namibia continues to be a passageway for rhino-horn exports to the Far East, particularly the port of Walfish Bay on the Atlantic Coast. "They found rhino horn packed in frozen fish," Blythe says. Khorixas is a smuggling depot for rhino horn as well. "It's an easy way from Khorixas to the coast and Swakopmund and Walfish Bay if you don't want to stay on the main roads." Other than poaching, smuggling of rhino horn in general and through Khorixas in particular is SRT's greatest worry, since it takes place in SRT's own backyard.

SRT shares the view that local communities must benefit in some form from wildlife if it is to be conserved. Supporting the principle of sustainable utilization as contained in the Namibian Constitution, Blythe chooses to emphasize its nonconsumptive application in the form of tourism-generated revenue shared with local communities. Blythe thinks that at some future time it might even be possible to consider farming rhinos. Although rhino farming is not to her conservation tastes, she is pragmatic enough to suggest that "if it saves the rhinos, one might look at it." And she says so, fully aware of the vehement opposition of her Asian colleagues who have the most difficult time keeping the dwindling numbers of the Asian rhino species alive. "I am convinced," she continues, "that if we sat down one more time and really talked this through from all perspectives, we could find a solution." It does not appear likely soon.

Blythe Loutit, the activist, has been in the forefront of rhino advocacy for over a decade. She has received two awards for SRT's unrelenting work on behalf of black rhinos: the Peter Scott Merit Award (IUCN) in 1988, which was given jointly to Blythe and Rudi; and the Operation Survival Award (1991), which was particularly meaningful to Blythe Loutit, the artist, since it combined art and conservation.

It has been a long road for Blythe Loutit, Save the Rhino Trust, and their many collaborators. Would she do it again? "Yes, definitely. There were days, particularly early on, when I asked myself: Are you mad? But I have enjoyed the full support of my husband, and the fact that we totally respect each other and each other's work is very important to me. I don't believe in destiny, but I have always had the feeling that there is some kind of a line that tows one along to some destination."

Chapter Five

ANNA MERZ

The Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary

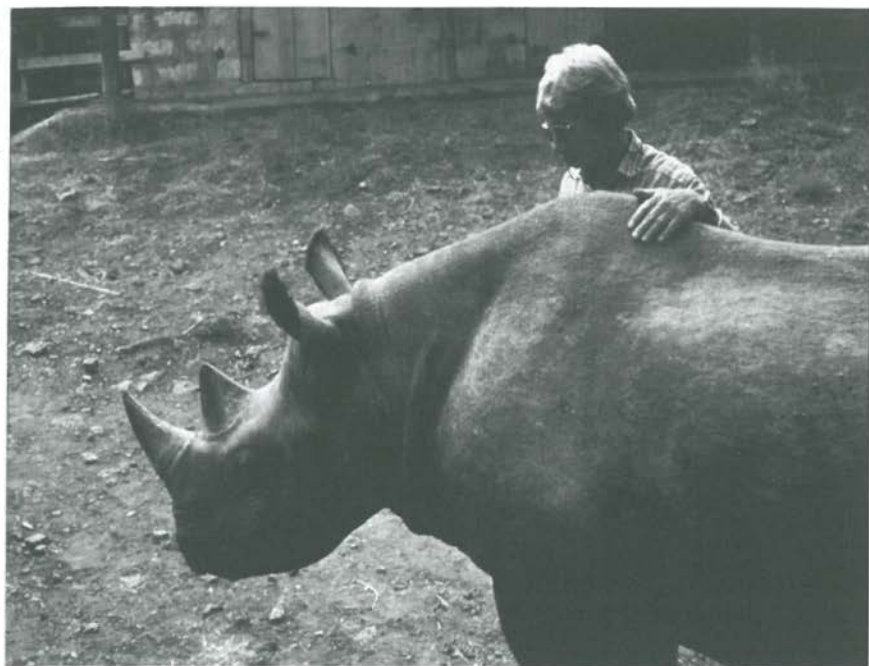
Kenya

To Hanz Dyer

"I have always been a dreamer of dreams but am not a very practical person," Anna Merz says of herself. Like Ann van Dyk in South Africa or Laurie Marker-Kraus in Namibia, Anna is convinced that one cannot become a true advocate for saving an endangered species unless one has shared time, joy, and sorrow with it. None of the three women is a sentimentalist or picture-book romantic.

Anna Merz is an English lady in her early sixties who was raised during the devastating years of World War II. As an only child of rather elderly parents, she sought the companionship of animals, the solace of the coun-

Photo: courtesy of Anna Merz



Anna Merz touches a gentle rhino.

tryside, and the devotion of her nanny, Ricky, to whom she would later dedicate her first book about rhinos. "School," Anna says, "was a misery and disaster for me, as no doubt I was for my teachers."¹ Promised a year of freedom by her father before studying and reading for the bar, Anna chose to go to India but, in light of her parents' horror at such an idea, compromised and chose Ceylon instead. Thus began an adventurous life that, after driving a Land-Rover to Pakistan for an archeological expedition and suffering immense regrets that she could not drive solo around the world in an Austin Gypsy, would bring her eventually to Africa, first to Ghana and eighteen years later to Kenya.

She was a young bride in Ghana when she wakened to the wanton destruction of forests and animals: "All this just to make veneer plywood without which people can live perfectly well," and to acquire "bushmeat." Anna is not one to mince her words. "What goes by the name of hunting would better be described as unbridled rape in total disregard for the future welfare of succeeding generations ... and to gain cash which is mainly invested in drink and brings little benefit to the hunters' family or to the communities as a whole."²

Soon her African household would become home to a menagerie of wounded and abandoned animals. She acquired the knowledge necessary

for raising baby wild animals from people at the local Kumasi Zoo. "I felt that my degrees and qualifications were somewhat irrelevant under the circumstances."³ Her dedication to animals and her anger at their vicious maltreatment deepened palpably. "I could cope with death and even suffering in the natural order of things, but the suffering I saw inflicted on animals by human beings distressed me deeply."⁴ Her volunteer work on behalf of wild animals led to her appointment as honorary warden for the Ghana Game Department, in which post she served for over a decade until she and her second husband left Ghana to retire in Kenya in 1976.

Fortress Rhino

Anna credits Dr. Esmond Bradley Martin for Anna's involvement with rhinos. After learning about the rhino-horn trade from Dr. Martin, Anna resolved that "surely somehow, somewhere I could do something to help the black rhinos of Kenya."⁵ With the active support of her husband, she decided to create a black rhino sanctuary and in 1982 met David and Delia Craig, owners of Lewa Downs Ranch, who would be receptive to her sanctuary idea. "Slowly I began to realize that Lewa Downs could both become my home and the place where I might at last realize my dream of helping a species that was in danger of extinction."⁶

Initially the Craigs reserved 5,000 acres of Lewa Downs land—which by 1993 had been extended to a full 61,000 acres including the Ngare Sergoi Forest Reserve to the south—around which was built 68 kilometers of 2.5-meters-high near-poacher-proof fencing that carried 5,000 volts of electricity. Fortress Rhino. It was a massive project which all involved survived because "we had no preconceived notions about rhinos and rhino management and were thus able to adapt to whatever was required quickly."⁷

The first rhino, Godot, aptly named because they had waited so long for him to arrive, came to Lewa Downs in 1984, to be followed by a host of others with such resonating names as Shaba, Morani, Womba, Solia, Zaria, Rongai, and Amboni. However, Anna's favorite became Samia, daughter of Solia, who was born on February 15, 1985, and was deserted by her mother because she had no milk. Anna hand-raised Samia over three and a half long years with endless bottles of various rhino formulas. It was a labor of love, and to watch Anna's interaction with Samia, who is now eight years old, on an evening walk together with the dogs is to realize that, anthropomorphic or not, there can exist a singular relationship of trust and comfort between, in this case, woman and beast. On Samia's first birthday, Anna made the following entry into Samia's diary: "Now I know that when she breathes

heavily she is not out of breath but is telling me something, although I cannot understand."⁸ Although various animals have held a special place in Anna's life—Heavenly Horace, the Akun eagle owl; Berta, the chimpanzee; and Sambo, her dog for eighteen years—Samia would remain her favorite.

As Samia became weaned and Anna could delight in having hand-raised a rejected baby black rhino from birth, she also needed to take her husband of many years to a nursing home in Europe for special care after a debilitating stroke. He died there in 1992.

Ngare Sergoi sanctuary was established not for scientific purposes, but to provide a safe environment where endangered wildlife species could reproduce undisturbed by poachers and, eventually, help restock Kenya's parks and reserves.

The financial support of a sanctuary is an awesome obligation. When Anna received the United Nations Environment Program's Global 500 Award in 1990 for her personal efforts to save the rhino, her citation noted that "she had invested her entire savings, time, and energy into the project." And she continues to do so. However, with an annual carrying cost of US \$200,000, Ngare Sergoi has stretched her personal resources to their limit. A trust in the United States and in the United Kingdom helps defray the cost of the sanctuary. She thinks that the debt-ridden countries of Africa cannot possibly finance sanctuaries for endangered species. "When people are dying of starvation, you cannot expect governments to earmark funds for wildlife." Help, she believes, must come from the private sector and first-world countries. "It takes just one big corporation and it is so little money compared to what money is spent on today. The price of one jet fighter could save all five rhino species."

A Wholly Deplorable Crime

Anna is enraged that the black rhino should disappear because of human greed. The special target of her rage is Taiwan. "With Asian horn fetching up to US \$52,000 per kilo, Taiwan uses it as bullion to back its national currency, and they are banking on the animal to become extinct. No third-world country, whether in Asia or in Africa, can keep an animal safe with a price tag like that at the end of its nose. Only America can put consumer pressure on Taiwan. In 1990 Taiwan exported goods worth US \$23.3 billion to the United States as against US \$12.2 billion to the whole of Europe. If American consumers exert enough pressure on their government to raise the issue with Taiwan, there is a chance. It is only consumer pressure that will work." And, as Dr. Bradley Martin suggests, "commitment at the top."

Although Anna has made the Kenyan black rhino her cause, she is keenly aware that she is not part of the Kenyan conservation establishment. "I am a stranger in a strange country. I don't belong here. I came here when I was already old and my husband and I wanted to retire. I have difficulty speaking Swahili, the local language, and I am an iconoclast. I have to force myself to be outgoing." She is also a fighter and unlikely to abandon her cause. "The more difficult the situation gets, the more determined I am." Anna, it seems, has not mellowed since her adventurous escapades of earlier years.

Anna takes issue with Daryl Balfour's sentiments, that "the rhino are primitive representatives of a line that is approaching the end of its evolutionary cycle." Totally passionate about creating conditions for the survival of the black rhino, Anna feels that such a theory "is one of the main reasons that the rhino has such a bad image. Of course," she continues, "extinction is inevitable in the long run, but some species have incredible time spans. The shark is pre-Devonian, the turtle is nearly as old. Rhinos and elephants evolved about fifty to sixty million years ago and are superbly adapted to exist in a wide variety of habitats and a wide range of altitudes and climates. We, the human species, are the only reason why they are in trouble. Our unlimited skill in killing is the one thing they cannot adapt to. How many millions of years will homo sapiens survive?" she asks, and her response is quick: "I wouldn't mind betting that we have one of the shortest life spans." And human beings, she feels emphatically, do not have the right to arbitrarily and deliberately shorten another species' life span.

I believe that all species of life that have evolved on earth have a right to continue to evolve. I believe that we humans, in the position of power that we have attained over all other species, have the absolute duty to see that they survive. I also believe that we should think a very great deal less about our much-vaunted rights, and a very great deal more about our hardly-ever-mentioned duties. Social and moral progress must be seen as more important than the accumulation of material possessions. Why do we measure ourselves by what we possess rather than by what we are? Our survival depends on the survival of the natural world. And already the divorce in our thinking has gone so far that we think of "us" and "it." We have to think of life as one interacting chain. Was it not Donne who said that all humanity is diminished by the death of a single person? How much more is it diminished by the loss of a whole species?

Anna's hopes for the immediate future are simple. "At the moment we must develop, temporarily I hope, an 'ark concept' of conservation. These scattered arks—national parks, reserves, and private sanctuaries—will safeguard species from being pushed into the abyss of extinction. The rhino's passing would not upset the balance of life on earth, but it would deprive the world of a magnificent and intelligent animal. Its passing would be for no good reason, for it is not dangerous to man nor does it compete with him. It is being exterminated simply out of greed, and this is a wholly deplorable crime.

And Anna Merz will not stand for it.

Chapter Six

MICHAEL WERIKHE

Walking for Rhinos

Kenya

To my daughters, Acacia and Kora

The name of Michael Werikhe brings smiles to people's faces. He is the man who by walking thousands and thousands of miles across Africa, Europe, and America has raised public awareness as well as US \$1.5 million for conservation and the survival of the black rhino. He has become known as the "Rhino Man" throughout the world and is proof that one individual can make an immense difference in the whirl of conservation causes clamoring for public support.

Although only in his late thirties, Michael conveys the impression of a man much more ancient than his actual years. He seems to carry the wisdom

Photo: Duncan Willetts, Camera Pix, Nairobi, Kenya



Michael Werikhe walks with a young rhinoceros.

of unknown generations of ancestors, a wisdom rooted in nature rather than in acquired knowledge. Michael Werikhe, the inner, private man, determines the actions of Michael Werikhe, the outer, public man. The one is shy and introverted, the other amiable and friendly; the two of them know each other very well.

He is a child of the seashore, born in Mombasa on the Indian Ocean. The mangrove swamps around Mombasa with their richness of animal life were his first playground. He was one of twelve children in a matriarchal household. He was raised by his grandmother, and his parents were his friends who supported their child's love of nature.

Although now dispersed—two brothers and a sister live in England—the whole family has remained close and follows Michael's public forays with pride. Werikhe is a name he carries with distinction. "When a woman has lost several children, the one that survives is given that name," Michael explains. "My grandfather was the person who survived. I am very proud of this name."

Michael's upbringing was simple but emotionally whole, and his education rudimentary. Life's experiences, respect for his elders and nature, and an inner discipline that has remained with him to this day were his real teachers. "I am a very disciplined man," Michael suggests. "I have always been a great lover of nature, and I have always wanted to make others understand how important nature is."

Michael's first job was in the ivory room of his country's wildlife and conservation department in Mombasa in the 1970s, weighing elephant tusks and rhino horn. It planted the seed for his later involvement with rhino conservation and his resolve to make whatever small contribution he could to their survival. "If you hold a rhino horn, you know very well how the rhino died," Michael says. "You visualize it. It must have been very painful. And there is really no proper reason why we should have this horn." In 1977 the Kenyan government outlawed the auction of ivory and rhino horn, but the trade continued illegally.

His next employer in Mombasa, Associated Vehicle Assemblers (AVA), whom he joined in 1978 as an assembler and where he is now the estate superintendent, fostered Michael's burgeoning concern for conservation. Michael tells the story:

Behind the factory, toward the water, where people lived, the soil was eroding very badly and the villagers were cutting down the trees for wood. When I talked to my employer about this he gave me the task to see whether I could find a way to stop the erosion. I talked with the villagers. I built a very close relationship with them and together we worked toward reclaiming the land. We planted trees and natural vegetation. Today the whole area is under cover. But the villagers still can have the wood they need.

Michael credits this practical experience for launching his advocacy for conservation. "AVA gave me a task, I lived up to the solution, they supported me." And they have ever since.

This early experience also highlighted what Michael considers one of his strongest personality traits: "I never leave a job unfinished, even if it takes longer than a lifetime." After a long pause he adds thoughtfully: "I believe in finishing what I have set my mind to."

He set his mind to his first walk in 1981 and with a handmade poster tried to enlist the support of the East African Wildlife Society, which was eventually extended. Today Michael is honorary vice-chairman of the society.

But the credit for the first funds raised for the black rhino goes to an unlikely source. When the New Zealand HMS *Waikato* was at anchor in Mombasa, Captain David Wood invited Michael and the Friends of Fort Jesus to attend a traditional Maori dance to be staged at the fort by members of his crew. The event must have been a success because the sum of Ksh 3,000 was raised.

The actual walking did not come until 1983. His first walk was from Mombasa to Nairobi, mostly alone but for the company of one of his favorite snakes. Michael is an accomplished amateur herpetologist. "I always loved unusual animals, and I took my snake with me because people would ask about her and then I would have an opportunity to talk about rhinos as well. Sometimes I would also walk for days without meeting another human being." It took Michael twenty-one days to cover the 500-kilometer distance.

In 1985 Michael walked 2,090 kilometers from Kampala, Uganda, to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and on to his hometown of Mombasa. Word about Michael's walks spread, and African and international conservation organizations began to provide sponsorship and walking companions. Each successive walk received more media attention, and eventually the Rhino Walk Committee, under the auspices of Wildlife Conservation International (WCI) and with the organizational skill of Helen Gichohi, was formed in Nairobi.

In 1988 Michael took his campaign to Europe, setting out from Assisi, Italy, in honor of Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals. In 135 days he crossed the Alps and the borders of Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. He walked nearly 3,000 kilometers. In 1991 Michael brought his cause to the United States, walking through thirty cities for rhino conservancy.

Each walk has special memories. At one point on the long walk through East Africa in 1985, his future wife, Helen, whose acquaintance he had made five years earlier, joined up with him. He proposed on the spot although he still had 1,500 kilometers to go. His plans "to be alone, to take care of myself, and do my own thing" were put to rest. Today Michael values his family, which now includes two young daughters, above all else. Vivacious kids, the five-year old Acacia is named after one of Africa's most famous trees—"they give food and shelter to so many animals"—and three-year old Kora is named after the reserve in northern Kenya where George Adamson and his lions lived.

Helen is the anchor of the family's daily life, and Acacia has some understanding of her father's involvement with conservation. When Michael's much-revered father died during Michael's thirty-city U.S. tour, his family decided that Michael should continue with his walk instead of returning for the funeral. Acacia offered to be with him by "walking to America." Geographical realities, among other things, prevented the granting of her wish.

Uganda holds another pivotal memory for Michael. It again concerns his snake and his conviction that ultimately people at the grass-roots level

will make the difference in conservation. Walking across Uganda at a time of war and unrest, past roadblocks and in full sight of AK-47 rifles, this solitary man with a backpack did not always elicit a positive response from the soldiers. But the country people were wonderful, sharing their food with Michael and his snake. "That really touched my heart." Eventually though, Michael would lose his much-loved snake by accident. She went exploring away from the backpack and Michael and into the hands of a frightened villager. Severely hurt, the snake held on under Michael's care as best she could, but her death at the end of Michael's walk touched him deeply. The snake and Michael shared that special relationship of trust and understanding that is possible between human being and animal. "I did not want to lose her," he says softly.

Exposed to the elements with only a backpack, meeting people who did not know or understand his reasons for walking, often endangered by the vicissitudes of being alone on the road, Michael does not allow his mind to lie idle while on a walk. "I think about the world around me and of myself as a very tiny part of the world. I think about ways and means to solve problems. If my mind is occupied I don't get bored and don't suffer so much from stress." Or from the pain in his knees, which frequently rebel from the constant pounding. "When my knees ache I always talk to them and assure them that all will be fine. When you are tired and talk to what pains you, I believe it tends to reduce some of the pain."

Although his black rhino advocacy and other conservation concerns have made him a highly visible person, Michael is aware that he may have enemies. "There must be someone in the Far East who would like to see me dead because I am against poaching and using rhino horn. I am not afraid for myself, but I must make sure that my family is safe." Not coincidentally, one passes through a set of locked gates before entering the Werikhe apartment in Mombasa.

Michael has received numerous awards, but the recognition and media exposure have not turned his head. "To my family I am still the same Michael." He feels honored but thinks that "if you make yourself believe you are a personality, once the show is over, you can fall deeply." Indeed, he considers his greatest achievement to be of a personal kind. "Part of my personality is extremely shy. I am basically a solitary man, like the rhino. But I have managed to overcome my shyness as a result of talking to people about conservation."

For the record, it should be mentioned that in 1989 he received the United Nations Environmental Program's Global 500 Award. In 1990 he was awarded a Goldman Environmental Prize for his walks in aid of the

black rhino. Further recognitions in Kenya, America, and Europe followed his 1991 U.S. walk. Throughout his campaigns, Michael's message has remained the same. It echoes that of fellow Kenyan conservationist and Global 500 honoree Perez Olindo. The former director of Kenya's Wildlife Conservation and Management Department, Olindo feels that "the average citizen is the key to the country's ecological future." In Michael's own words: "Grass-roots support is the most effective solution to environmental problems. You get positive results when you involve people early, when you work with them instead of against them."

The earlier the better, in fact. Michael feels the particular need to increase the conservation awareness of children. "Children," he says, "are closer to nature than adults, their minds have not been polluted. Children relay messages without agendas. I always involve kids in my campaigns." The human mind, Michael thinks, is a wonderful machine, but it has one weakness. "If it forgets something, it is very difficult to reactivate it." Michael is pleased that one of his fellow Global 500 awardees is the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya [WCK], where over one hundred thousand Kenyan schoolchildren learn about their country's environment and wildlife.

Michael is part of a younger generation of African conservationists who acknowledge indebtedness to their mentors but go their own way in the belief that however species-specific or issue-oriented conservation causes may become, they must start at the grass-roots level, with children and local communities involved. "One does not need a doctorate to be committed," he says calmly.

Michael is best known for his black rhino advocacy. However, he is involved in many other causes such as marine ecology, the preservation of indigenous forests, and pollution control. He has had many offers to become a spokesperson for conservation organizations. But he does not feel that he wants to leave Mombasa. "I can do a lot of service to the environment by staying here in Mombasa," he says. "I would be betraying my principles if I left now. I believe in finishing what I have set my mind to."

What are his future plans? To continue what he has been doing for years now, to make sure that his family remains safe, and to perhaps put his thoughts on paper. They might also include a walk in Australia. "I am seriously thinking about it," Michael reflects. "I want to experience Australia's unique creatures and aboriginal peoples for myself."

"The rhino has long been a symbol of conservation in Africa," Michael suggested at the award of the Goldman Environmental Prize. "If we cannot take care of our symbol, what hope is there for the rest of our natural habitat and ultimately for man himself?"¹