

THEY were there and I was there and they needed help! That was Anna Merz's response to my question: 'Why rhinos?'

I had the privilege of meeting Anna at the Global 500 Forum Workshop in Nairobi last December. Anna is one of a rare breed of people who have devoted themselves to the cause of endangered wild animals. Against all odds and plenty of ridicule, she started the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary in North Eastern Kenya with her personal savings in 1983. The objective is to protect rhinos from poachers and to bring together single isolated rhinos who would otherwise have little or no opportunity to breed. Today, the sanctuary is a success story. 'It is one of the most exciting projects of its kind in Africa' enthused Anna.

Prior to Ngare Sergoi, Anna had no knowledge of rhinos, but her work as an Honorary Warden for the Ghanaian Games Department and National Park made her sensitive to the plight of endangered animals. In Ghana, she saw the populations of wild game diminish but she was powerless to do anything about it. When she and her husband retired to Kenya in 1976, they found paradise in their new home, as wildlife was abundant. But that proved to be shortlived as the animals began to disappear in the same way as they had in Ghana. 'I soon realised that the black rhinos were in serious trouble as I saw increasing numbers of their enormous corpses minus their horns rotting away in the plains.

'The sad part is that rhinos are not killed because they compete with humans or other animals for food or space. It is their horns that are their undoing. Their horns are sought after in the Far East where they are used as medicines and supposedly as aphrodisiacs. In the Middle East they are used for dagger handles, which are status symbols. At US\$50,000 per kilo, rhino horns are about the most valuable commodity in the world.'

Determined to save the rhinos from extinction, Anna set on the idea of establishing a sanctuary. After numerous frustrating attempts to get sufficient land for the project, Anna's break came with a chance meeting with David and Delia Craig who owned Lewa Downs, a 45,000 acre cattle ranch in the foothills of Mt Kenya. Despite her lack of knowledge of rhinos and no experience in the running of a sanctuary, Anna's perseverance convinced the Craigs to lease her 5,000 acres for the project on the condition that she financed the establishment and running of the sanctuary. Thus, the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary was created; it was named after the river that flows through it.



Photo: Gerry Ellis

Anna Merz with Samia at the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary

'They were there and I was there and they needed help'

A profile on Anna Merz

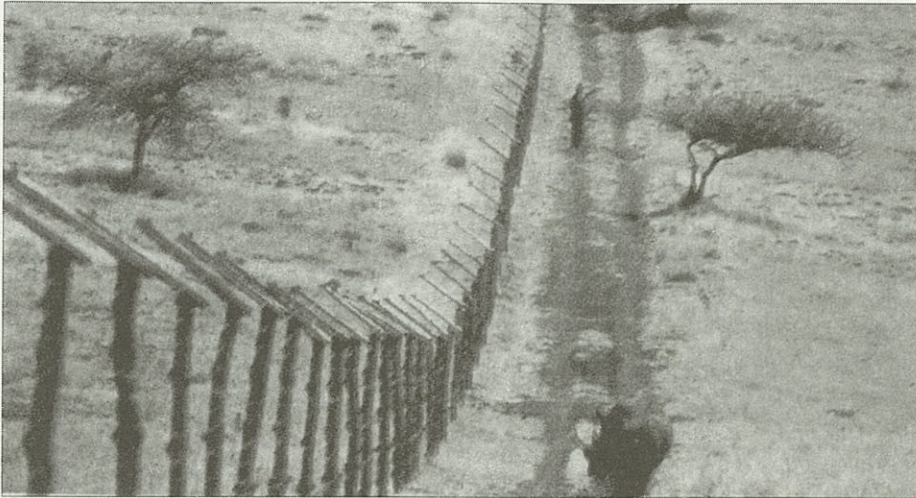
By TEOH CHENG HAI

The construction of the sanctuary commenced in 1978 with the erection of a 20km perimeter fence that is charged with 5,000 volts to deter potential poachers. While the sanctuary was being built, Anna had to consider how to introduce rhinos into the sanctuary. Before she could do so, she had to acquire some basic knowledge of this pachyderm. This took her to India and to the Royal Citawan National reserve to observe the Indian rhino, then to Nepal for hands-on experience on the capture and relocation of rhinos and finally to the Pilanesberg National Park in Bophuthatswana for an insight into the management of game parks. The sanctuary was completed early in 1984 and it received its first rhino, Godot, from the Wildlife Department. This was soon followed by the capture of a female rhino from the nearby Shaba Reserve by Anna and her team. Both rhinos were released into the park in April 1984.

From then on, the rhino population at Ngare Sergoi increased steadily with animals relocated by the Wildlife Department and the capture of animals in the wild. Pleased with her early success, the Craigs agreed to lease another 5,000 acres to Anna in 1988 and last year the sanctuary was enlarged to 61,000 acres, which covers the whole of Lewa Downs and some government land to the south of the ranch.

Anna Merz attributed the success of Ngare Sergoi to very good security and a dedicated and competent cadre of workers. 'We have bred fifteen rhinos so far; although we lost a few animals through natural causes, we have not lost a single animal to poachers. This is because we maintain a high level of alert. We have 102 well-trained people who are equipped with firearms and radios and they patrol inside and outside the sanctuary day and night. Workers are also assigned to watch over individual rhinos. Electronic devices are fitted along the 2.5m high perimeter fence. Through this monitoring system, we are able to pinpoint the actual location of any intrusion.' The high level of surveillance has proven effective as poachers and armed bandits have not attempted to break in so far - 'They know that they would not have it easy if they do!'

Although Anna was too modest to mention it, it was really her initiative and motivation to save the rhino that made Ngare Sergoi. Anna is a soft-spoken, unassuming person, but behind that frail facade is a woman of guts, determination and commitment. Her life is under constant threat from poachers and guerillas and this has worsened recently with the civil war in neighbouring Somalia. However, she remains undaunted and accepts the danger philosophically: 'You can die from falling off a bus'.



Security fence with white rhino and guard at the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary

Photo: Gerry Ellis

The following statements provided by Lily Venizelos are excerpts from a submission by MEDASSET to the Council of Europe Standing Committee for the Convention and Conservation of Wildlife and Natural Habitats. The submission concluded with the statement: 'Zakynthos is the epitome of this Convention. If you allow this matter to fall, so does the reputation of the Conventions...' As a result of the MEDASSET declaration and associated lobbying, the file on the Laganas Bay marine turtles remains open. The struggle continues...

M E D A S S E T

MEDITERRANEAN ACTION TO SAVE THE SEA TURTLES

In the summer of 1992, nesting became increasingly difficult for turtles in Zakynthos. At least 1,000 metres of designated 'protected' nesting beaches were lined with several rows of umbrellas and beach beds. Responsibility for this unacceptable situation lies entirely with the local prefect, who, according to the 1990 Presidential decree for the protection of this habitat, is responsible for defining and designating zones for use of umbrellas and beach beds.

There are now dozens of new illegal roads and buildings next to the important nesting beaches of Daphni and Kalamaki, including tavernas, restaurants and cafeterias, operating without permits and without paying taxes. No efforts have been made to screen the interference from lights; sewage pollution from hotels has been increasing and is now evident in the sea and on land. Hundreds of speeding boats routinely trespass in the 'protected' zones in the bay, and some harass the turtles as they approach the shore looking for suitable nesting spots.

In a report to MEDASSET last summer, archaeologists diving in the bay reported finding thousands of aborted turtle eggs dumped on the seabeds, confirming the increased difficulties encountered by turtles attempting to nest at Laganas.

Now, the hotel owners are beginning to recognise the adverse effect that unplanned tourism is having on their trade, and in an effort to counteract and prevent the negative impact of tourism on the island, from January 1992, 90% of the hotel owners of Zakynthos have formed a tourism development group that supports turtle conservation, works closely with MEDASSET and supports the action of WWF, Greenpeace and STPS in their efforts to help the creation of a Marine Park.

We urge the Committee not to close the file on the Zakynthos turtles before the Permanent Committee has been fully informed of the implementation of the Convention, especially with regard to the protection of the marine turtles in Zakynthos.'

When she went to Kenya in 1976, she knew nothing about rhinos, but today she is an authority in her own right. She has recorded her experiences and thoughts in the book 'Rhino at the edge of extinction' (Harper Collins). The book describes the establishment of Ngare Sergoi, the capture, the feeding, breeding and social behaviour of the rhinos, as well as an account of her life in the sanctuary.

While rhinos are regarded as temperamental and ferocious, Anna sees them as beautiful, intelligent and above all, as individuals. 'They are extremely clever and they have an incredibly interesting social system and method of communication. As they are highly strung and nervous animals, they are often mistaken as temperamental.' Through daily observations, Anna was able to study the characteristics and idiosyncracies of individual rhinos. All rhinos have names; while Godot, the first rhino at the sanctuary, was much feared by other rhinos and people as he would not hightail it in the face of danger, Morani was in total contrast, at ease with people.

Anna's most interesting account was the story of Samia, the rhino calf who was abandoned at birth by the mother, Solia. Anna recounted how she nursed Samia for three years from a weakling that almost did not survive, to a full-grown rhino.

At the age of sixty years when other women are looking for quiet retirement, Anna Merz continues relentlessly on her mission to save the rhino. With the enlarged area of the sanctuary, which costs about US\$200,000 to maintain, Anna's present concern is to seek international financial support for Ngare Sergoi.

While the future of the African rhino gives rise for optimism, the same cannot be said for the Asian rhino. In Anna's words 'As I understand it, the position of the Asian rhino is terrible! The Sumatran rhino population is down to 500 or 600 animals and they are widely scattered. The number of Java rhinos is even smaller, as they are located in small areas with little room to expand.'

And if all that leaves you breathless, as it did me one night in Nairobi as we all shared stories about our work and passions, a final quote from this extraordinary person should suffice: 'After I have raised sufficient money to ensure the future of our sanctuary, I would like to help the Asian rhinos; that is my next ambition'.

Anna Merz is a 1990 Global 500. Teoh Cheng Hai is the Research and Development Director of Golden Hope Plantations Berhad, Malaysia, and a member of the Global 500 Forum Council.