

# Anna Merz — protector of African rhinos

By TEOH CHENG HAI

"IT WAS pure fluke! They were there and I was there and they needed help." That was the simple and direct response to my question why she, Ms Anna Merz chose to protect the African rhino.

I had the opportunity of meeting Merz at the Global 500 Forum workshop in Nairobi in December 1992.

Against numerous odds and ridicule, Merz started the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary in north-eastern Kenya with her personal savings in 1983. The aims are 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 progress of its kind in Africa", enthused Merz. In recognition of her outstanding contribution to the protection of wild animals, Merz was awarded the prestigious Global 500 Award by the United Nations Environment Programme in 1990.

Prior to Ngare Sergoi, Merz 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 was rather powerless to do anything.

When she and her husband went to Kenya to retire in 1976, they found paradise in their new home as wild life was abundant. But that proved to be shortlived as the animals began to disappear in the same way as in Ghana.

"I soon realised that the

Merz attributes the success of Ngare Sergoi to the very good security and a dedicated and competent cadre of workers. "We have bred 15 rhinos so far; although we have 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 also 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 had not attempted to break in so far.

Although she was too modest to mention it, it was really her initiative and motivation to save the rhinos that made Ngare Sergoi.

I found Merz to be an unassuming, soft spoken and pleasant person but behind the frial facade is a woman of guts, determination and commitment. Merz's life is under constant threat from poachers and guerillas and this has worsened with the civil war in neighbouring Somalia. However, she is undaunted and accepts the danger rather philosophically. "You can also die from falling off a bus".

When she went to Kenya in 1976, Merz knew nothing of rhinos but today, she is an authority in her own right. She has recorded her experiences and thoughts in the



□ HIGH security fencing of the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary.



□ MERZ with Samia — the rhino she raised from birth.

Pictures by Gerry Ellis

## WWF Malaysia: Conserve existing water resources

By JENNIFER JACOBS

THE Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF Malaysia) urged Malaysians to rethink the usage of water in their daily lives, in conjunction with the World Water Day, yesterday.

In a statement released by WWF, its Malaysia Scientific Officer Daria Matthews said Malaysians have a tendency to undervalue water, despite the growing supply problems, both in terms of quantity and quality, which has increased tremendously, especially in highly populated areas.

She said although Malaysia enjoys heavy rainfall of about 990 cubic metres, a great proportion is lost through evaporation and transpiration.

She said recent reports also state that the current loss of water revenue in Malaysia is about 43 per cent annually, the highest in the Pacific region.

Emphasis, she further elaborated, has been directed towards investing in the development of new water resources.

So far, insufficient attention has been given to pipe network maintenance and leakage control.

Matthews said a cost effective analysis of the problem by WWF Malaysia reveals that apart from the costs incurred for repairing damage, including treatment, rehabilitation, control and monitoring, potential benefits for economic, subsistence and recreational activities are being lost.

Conservation strategies developed by WWF Malaysia highlighted the need for more holistic planning and integrated management of water resources.

Matthews said poor land-use planning and practices contribute significantly to water resources which should essentially include catchment area management.

She said land-use within catchment areas must be governed by stricter conditions.

Water availability should be a key factor for consideration in determining the viability of the proposed land-use activities.

Matthews said the focus of water management should be shifted from exploring and developing new resources, to conserving existing ones.

She further stressed that conservation methods such as recycling should be practised more extensively.

## Pahang boat operators warned

FOREIGNERS are employed on about 100 traditional fishing boats operating in Pahang waters, Fisheries Department Marine Branch head Abdul Hamid Shukur said yesterday. He said the boats, most of which are under 40 tonnes,

should only employ locals.

Abdul Hamid told a news conference that action would be taken against the operators of these boats as the rules are relaxed to allow only deepsea fishing boats to engage foreigners. — Bernama



trouble as I saw increasing numbers of their enormous corpses minus their horns rotting away in the plains.

The sad part is rhinos are not killed because they compete with men and other animals for food or space. It was their horns that became their undoing.

Their horns are much sought after in the Far East where they are used as med-

**“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.”**

icines and supposedly aphrodisiac and in the West Asia they are made a dagger handles which are status symbols. At US\$50,000 (US\$1 = RM2.60) a kg, rhino horns are about the most valuable commodity in the world”.

Determined to save the rhinos from extinction, Merz set on the idea of establishing a sanctuary. After numerous frustrating attempts to get sufficient land for the project, Merz's break came with a chance meeting with David and Delia Craig who owned Lewa Downs, a 18,212ha (45,000 acre) cattle ranch in the foothills of Mt Kenya.

Despite her lack of knowledge of rhinos nor any experience in the running of a sanctuary, Merz's perseverance convinced the Craigs to lease her 2,024ha for the project on condition that she finance the establishment and running of the sanctuary. Thus, the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary was created; named after the river that flows through it.

The construction of the sanctuary commenced in early 1983 with the erection of a 20km perimeter fence that is charged with 5000 volts to deter potential poachers.

The sanctuary was completed in early 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 Merz and her team. Both rhinos were released into the sanctuary 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 rhinos in the wild.

Pleased with her early success, the Craigs agreed to lease another 2,024ha to Merz in 1988 and last year the sanctuary was enlarged to 24,687ha which covers the whole of Lewa Downs and some government land to the south of the ranch.

Extinction (Harper Collins Publishers). Her book described the establishment of Ngare Sergoi, capture of rhinos, the feeding, breeding and social behaviour of rhinos as well as an account of her life in the sanctuary.

While rhinos are commonly regarded as temperamental and ferocious, Merz sees them as beautiful and intelligent and above all they are individuals. “They are ex-

tremely 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, Merz was able to study the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of individual rhinos. All her rhinos are named. While Godot, the first rhino at the sanctuary, was much feared by other rhinos and people as he would not hightail in the face of danger, Morani was in total contrast, at ease with people.

Merz's most interesting account was the detailed diary of Samia, the rhino calf who was abandoned at birth by the mother, Solia. Merz 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 60 years when other women look for a quiet retirement, Merz continues relentlessly on her mission to save the rhinos. With the enlarged area of the sanctuary which costs about US\$200,000 to maintain, Merz's present concern is to seek international financial support for Ngare Sergoi.

While the future of the African rhino appears optimistic, the same cannot be said for the Asian rhinos. “As I understand it, the position of the Asian rhinos 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. 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.”

**Teoh Cheng Hai is the Director, Research and Development of Golden Hope Plantations.**



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