

If you want to know what's on the mind of a black rhino, just ask Anna Merz. No other human has spent more time in the company of this endangered species.

During the late 1970s, Merz, now 60, noticed an almost weekly decline in wildlife populations in Kenya—particularly in Tsavo, her favorite park. With

ZOOLIFE: What are the most important things you would like people to know about rhinos?

MERZ: That they are sensitive, intelligent animals. Humans have always thought of rhinos as stupid creatures. But they have been on this earth for 60 million years, and have adapted themselves to living quite comfortably among

KENYA'S "RHINO WOMAN"

rhinos dangerously close to disappearing over the whole of Africa, her alarm turned to action. Armed with a family inheritance and a fierce commitment to saving these animals, Merz decided to start a sanctuary. She consulted with experts and visited other reserves. In 1983 she persuaded the Craig family to let her enclose 5,000 acres on their cattle ranch, Lewa Downs. With the blessing of the Kenya Wildlife Service, black rhinos were captured and released on the reserve now called Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary. At the present time it is home to nearly two dozen white and black rhinos. In just a decade, the rhinos translocated there have produced 15 young.

With substantial financial help from the American Association of Zoo Keepers' "Bowling for Rhinos" program, Merz and the Craigs have expanded the reserve to include the entire 45,000-acre Lewa Downs as well as the adjoining 16,000-acre Ngare Ndare Forest Reserve, owned by the Kenyan government. Nearly every species of East African animal, except hippos, live on the reserve. Two well-guarded openings in the fence allow for animal migration.

One of Merz's most challenging tasks was raising an orphaned baby black rhino, whom she calls Samia. When mother Solia was unable to nurse the baby, she did "the only thing she could do, which was walk away," says Merz. But Merz could not walk away, so she gathered up the frail baby and set about raising her to become a "proper rhino."

Merz describes the sometimes difficult, often comical and always heartwarming path she and Samia have traveled these past seven years in her book, *Rhino at the Brink of Extinction*. She also describes what she has learned about rhinos, from debunking myths about their temperament and intelligence to learning about "contact breathing"—their unusual but understandable way of communicating. If Michael Werikhe of Mombasa has been nicknamed the "Rhino Man" because of his fund-raising walks on behalf of the species (see "Walk a Mile in His Shoes," Spring 1991), then perhaps Merz should be dubbed the "Rhino Woman" for her own efforts to save one of the continent's best-known megavertebrates.

The following interview was conducted with Merz while she was on a 12-city tour.

nonhuman creatures.

ZOOLIFE: What is life on the sanctuary like for the rhinos?

MERZ: Simple, much like it was for thousands of years before people began killing them for their horns. We do not interfere with their normal habits—only feed them during droughts, as we are experiencing now, and protect them from poachers.

ZOOLIFE: Tell us about the poaching situation around Ngare Sergoi.

MERZ: The Somali Shiftas are the most dangerous gangs of poachers. They travel from the north armed with machine guns.

Because there are no large towns or military stations between the sanctuary and the border, no one can stop them before they reach Ngare Sergoi. Fortunately, no rhinos have been lost to poachers. Guards watch over the animals every day, and the electric fence alerts us to anyone who touches it. We also are fortunate in that the villagers near the reserve, who are very grateful to us because the fencing protects their crops from animals, are watchful of poachers, too.

ZOOLIFE: Are you considering dehorning the rhinos to protect them?

MERZ: I think it would be a shame to mutilate an animal to protect it, but I also think it is better to have a dehorned rhino than a dead rhino. However, the black rhinos at the sanctuary are the property of the Kenyan government, and at this point, it is the government's policy not to dehorn rhinos.

ZOOLIFE: What can people in the United States do to help rhinos, and why should they?

MERZ: They can learn about them, understand why they are such wonderful creatures and support organizations that work to protect them. Why any-

one should help rhinos is akin to asking why anyone should help older people and innocent children. People should have reverence and respect for every living thing.—Karen Kane



GERRY ELLIS

ANNA & A BLACK RHINO

The American Association of Zoo Keepers sponsors its annual "Bowling for Rhinos" each spring. For more information, contact the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Trust, 6208 SW 32nd Ave., Portland, Oregon 97201; (503) 293-0920.