

# WILDLIFE #1 Ranger

A Journey of Conviction and Courage



**By Peter Milton with Sandra Robbins**

Published by Nikela



Wildlife Ranger #1 – *A Journey of Courage and Conviction*

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By Peter Milton with Sandra Robbins, published by NIKELA, Dec. 2013



## Dedicated to Jomo

A young rhino bull who changed my life.

- Peter Milton



## Volume One

When we embarked on this project Sandra and I had no idea the amount of stories Peter has... and how many of them simply need to be captured. Need to be shared to give us a glimpse into the heart and soul of what inspires a human to devote everything to protect wild animals.

It was after our second lengthy Skype call that we knew that Wildlife Ranger was meant to be a series.

This first volume is a journey of conviction and courage as we follow a few key days that molded Peter and give us glimpse into what drives him.

“Stay tuned” as we periodically publish a new compilation of stories and audios (possibly even videos) from the life of ‘our’ Wildlife Ranger, Peter Milton.

Volume #2 will include:

- > *When a man from the bush goes to parliament*
- > *“To legalize or not to legalize” the trade of rhino horn.*

*Margrit*

Founder of Nikela



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## Introduction

***Wildlife Trafficking is a multibillion dollar industry.***

To put Wildlife Ranger in proper context it is important to include that at the time of this writing (December 2013) over 900 rhino have been brutally killed in South Africa by powerful wildlife trafficking syndicates.

***Why this slaughter?***

The value of a pound of rhino horn powder on the streets of Asia is greater than an equal amount of cocaine.

***What is rhino horn powder used for?***

Due to myths and greed in Asia rhino horn is ground up and used by the new rich to add it to their drink. It serves as a status symbol like a Rolex watch. There is also a long standing myth that rhino horn powder cures all kinds of ailments, from impotence to cancer.

***Who is involved?***

Because of the huge price tag on a rhino's horn temptation and corruption leaves no one immune. From locals to government



officials and wildlife veterinarians to game ranch owners. People at all levels have been implicated or arrested for being directly or indirectly involved in the 48 hour journey it takes a rhino horn from being on a living breathing animal to being available on the streets in Hanoi.

It's a war out there! The battlefield is the African bush and the players are well funded and armed militia trained poachers versus passionate and dedicated wildlife rangers.

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## Preface

We immediately ‘connected’ Peter and I. As the Founder and Executive Director of NIKELA (a U.S. based charity helping people saving wildlife in South Africa) I take finding the right people and projects to support very seriously.

Peter is not only a seasoned and experience Wildlife Ranger, with tons of awesome stories, but a deeply motivating man, in an almost spiritual sort of way.

His work\* to protect the rhino from poachers and crime syndicates has grown to include innovative and effective technology. Despite the disappointments, heart breaks and struggle of being a wildlife ranger and protection strategist, Peter retains this quiet optimism and hope. His journey is inspiring... it had to be told.

Sandra Robbins, a gifted story teller (author of “Frank and the Rhino Horn” and “Return and Live”) was the perfect fit to skillfully work with Peter to craft this first compilation as we adventure into the heart, work, dedication and skill of one of South Africa’s unsung heroes – the Wildlife Ranger.





To protect rhinos and people, names and places may not be mentioned or may have been changed. Written like a journal you are drawn into the world of rhino protection. At times you'll even hear Peter sharing snippets... like the haunting encounter with the orphaned rhino calf, the gentle old man's gift, the mysterious elephant bull, and other gems. Of course the life of the Wildlife Ranger includes ordinary mundane tasks and is not all adrenaline pumping pursuit of poachers through the unforgiving bush.

An extra bonus are actual audio snippets from our interviews and Peter's answers to questions you asked.

The Wildlife Ranger is more than passive entertainment. We hope you'll get involved, share this book, volunteer, donate monthly, visit your local wildlife rescue center, or jump on a plane to Africa.

Of course, don't forget to write an Amazon review.

And now, drop into the bush with Peter and his team pursuing a group of rhino poachers.

- Margrit Harris, Founder of NIKELA

\**Strategic Protection of Threatened Species (SPOTS)*



Wildlife Ranger #1 – *A Journey of Courage and Conviction*

# Wildlife Ranger

Volume 1

A Journey of Courage and Conviction

[www.SPOTS.org.za](http://www.SPOTS.org.za) - [www.Nikela.org](http://www.Nikela.org)

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## Common Enemy

The static crackle of the radio woke me from a shallow sleep.

"Sierra Charlie come in for Sierra Pappa One....Over".

"Go Sierra Pappa One....Over". I heard Robi respond

"Sierra Papa One, what is the status on the Tango...Over".

"Sierra Charlie, Tango is still static at same loc. Tango will probably move at daybreak...45 minutes. We will launch Alpha Romeo in 30 mins for final status and standby...Over".

"Sierra Papa One...Roger. Out".

I unzipped the fly screen of my small bush swag, climbed out and put on my shirt and boots. Sleep had eluded me again, but I am sure nobody else on this operation had slept either.

Two days prior, a routine bush patrol had come across the carcasses of two rhino...a mature cow and a 2-3 year old juvenile. Both had their horns savagely hacked off. The bush patrol had immediately started tracking the poachers who were estimated to be some 12 hours ahead. Back at the main



base we received the situation report and started planning the interception.

A fresh team was put on the spoor of the poachers and we had stopper groups in place...the classic guerilla warfare tactic. We flew an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) on both nights and observed how the poaching team went into cover in the early evening. Moving around in Big 5 territory is a dangerous undertaking, especially at night, so this team rested up and ate at night. As soon as the sky paled with the dawn, they would get going.

I felt confident. We had all the bases covered and our planning, although fast, had been meticulous. All the hours of reconnaissance, the days, weeks and months of learning the area, studying aerial photographs and topographical maps, meant that we knew this area like the back of our hands. We had spent many days determining the infiltration and escape routes that poachers were likely to use. We had determined the best locations from which to launch and control UAV flight operations. With the UAV's, we owned the night. Teamed with our scouts manning the stopper groups, we owned the heights as well.



Even so, the last minute "what if's" still cross one's mind. What if one of the stopper groups gave away their position by allowing the reflection off a rifle scope?...what if the poaching team didn't follow the route we figured they would? ...what if they spotted or heard the UAV that we were about to launch?

The success of this operation depended very heavily on absolute stealth. Thus far, we had made no mistakes...I could only trust and believe that we wouldn't make any now.

Robi and Danie were preparing the Air Ranger UAV for launch. I looked at them as I walked up to the small control centre. The flight path of the Air Ranger had been programmed. I didn't have to ask whether the co-ordinates had been checked...Danie would have done that ten times over with Robi cross checking him. The small, electrically powered flying marvel looked so fragile nestled on its cradle. But this wonderful little machine, is what really gives us the edge.

Equipped with different imaging payloads, it allows us to fly day time operations, recording HD video and stills and it flies nighttime operations with highly sophisticated thermal imaging cameras. It can fly in total stealth



mode...unheard and unseen...and provide the command centre with live-streamed video data. This data is what we rely so heavily on to co-ordinate and control mission critical objectives...our eyes in the sky.

We desperately needed a success in this sector. Each time a poaching team returns to Northern Mozambique with their ill-gotten spoils, either rhino horn or ivory, their boasts and immediate financial reward reverberate through the remote villages like an African drum. Many more are tempted to take up a provided rifle and poach rhino and elephant. The syndicates that drive this assault on Africa's wildlife gain an increased source for potential poachers.

These thoughts stayed with me since the poaching report had crackled across the radio. I began to feel desperate...this operation simply had to be a success. We had to balance the risk/reward ratio in our favour.

I went over the plan in my mind again. It was all so simple.

We launch the UAV and observe the poaching team leaving their location. We monitor whether they are remaining on the route we figured they would follow. They would be moving



directly towards the stopper groups we had put in place overnight. Both groups were on high ground, looking down onto the dry river bed that the poaching team would be following. The stopper groups range to target is no more than 120 meters, and they have a clear arc of fire. The poachers had around 3 kms to cover before they would walk into the stopper groups. I had hoped it to have been further, to have them more tired and drained by the heat, but we could not allow them to move out of this perfect valley. If they did, our task would be much more difficult.

There were 4 of us in the command centre location. The computer laptop screens, although shielded from the south, seemed too bright. Robi, as usual, sensed my apprehension and answered my unasked question. -He knows me so well...and I him. The trust we have in each other is implicit and we can communicate without saying a word. The hours, weeks, days and years we have spent in the bush together has forged a friendship, respect and trust, like no other.-

"Time to fly" Robi said.



Danie's face was pale in the light from the screens. With his eyes red ringed and mosquito bite welts on his face, arms and neck, I knew he hadn't slept at all.

"Robi, should we just check-" He didn't get to finish his sentence as Robi's quiet voice said,

"Danie, trust yourself and fly the thing".

Air Ranger launched into the early morning sky. We immediately started seeing images on the screen. They were perfect...we had very clear black(cold)/white(hot) separations. The Central African sun would soon change that as the earth heated up. Already I could feel it was going to be a sweltering summer day. The past few days had been like sitting under a wet blanket in the noonday sun. We had to get this over with before the sun got too far above the horizon.

It was a 05h15 and the sky was a beautiful glowing red in the east. Air Ranger flew unerringly toward her first waypoint and as she disappeared from our vision I whispered my oft repeated wish to her,

"Fly true little bird".





"Sierra Pappa One, Sierra Pappa Two come in for Sierra Charlie....over".

The replies from the two stopper groups came in quickly. I advised them that Air Ranger was enroute to their location and would be overhead in about 11 minutes. They were to advise us if they could see or hear the aircraft. Air Ranger would then fly to its second waypoint...the poachers last known position. It would then fly in orbit, providing us with live stream data. We would know when the poachers were moving and which direction they were heading.

I called the tracking team on the radio and gave them the command to start moving towards the GPS coordinates of the poachers' overnight location. They were about 3 kms behind the poachers.

Air Ranger was not seen or heard by the stopper groups and soon we had thermal visual of the poachers making final preparations for their days march towards the Northern Mozambique border. I glanced across at Span, our master tracker. He looked at me and gave me a shy smile. He knew that he was right. They were following his projected path.



I radioed the status to the stopper groups and I could almost hear them doing final checks on their rifles and arcs of fire. We intended to get this operation concluded with no casualties, but have to be prepared for the poachers firing on them and be prepared to return fire.

Our eyes never left the computer screens. We watched as the poaching team headed straight towards the stopper groups. We heard the warning rifle shots. I knew well the sound of a 7.62mm round clapping over-head and the thermal images of the poaching team freeze. Though I knew the sound wouldn't carry, I strained to hear the shouted warning for them to put down their guns and lie down. One poacher started to run to his left, heading for the thick trees. We clearly heard the staccato reports of the stopper groups' fire and saw the poacher throw himself prostrate.

All five poachers were lying in the river bed. They were told to crawl forward ten meters and to leave any equipment behind them. We saw four members from each stopper group on the east and west banks converge on them. Once their weapons were secured and they were under rifle cover, the rest of the stopper group teams moved down into the river bed to secure



the poachers. Their hands were tied behind their backs with nylon cable ties.

Sometime later, I stood in the river bed. The Central African sun beating down on us. Two Ak47 rifles, an old and much used .375 rifle, a few machetes and a panga, lie at my feet in the sand. One of the rifles was lying with its trigger right in the middle of a perfectly formed elephant spoor. An assortment of water bottles and meager rations had also been piled together. I looked into the eyes of one of the poachers and I saw raw fear.

My thoughts turned to an air-conditioned office, a Chinese man in a suit. Where in the world was he...he who entices these people to risk their lives, to wreak the havoc that they are on African wildlife? I felt little anger towards this man lying in the sand...I was relieved that he didn't have to die.

I knew that he wished he hadn't taken up the offer that he did, I knew that he was probably thinking of his family and scared of what would become of him.

And I knew, in that moment in time, we shared a common enemy.



## Problem Human

The evening came and went. The world unaware of our victory. The night hushed the chattering vervet monkeys and gave way to the calls of nightjars. Somewhere close an eagle owl announced his evening hunt, as we sat in celebration around a meager fire, my mind drifted to the path that led us to this fight for the rhino.

We had established an operating base on a farm, deep in the Waterberg, from which we were conducting leopard conservation operations. We would capture "problem animals", who had come into conflict with agricultural expansion and we would relocate them to game reserves who wanted them. We were always very careful to ensure that these animals would not be relocated onto farms or reserves where they would be hunted.

The manager of this farm was a big, quietly spoken and deeply religious man. I got on very well with him. We had spent many hours around the campfire talking well into the night. The farm was very beautiful and afforded us the perfect base from which to operate. We were free to establish



our camp sites wherever we wanted...next to streams, up in the mountains and down next to tranquil lakes and waterfalls. I had come to love the place and respect the person who made it available to us.

One early morning, he arrived at our camp site in the bush. He appeared to be uneasy and on edge. Over the camp-fire and with a cup of coffee in his hand he said,

"A leopard has taken one of my calves and caused a stampede. One of our prime cows got tangled in a fence and broke her neck".

This was bad news and we immediately set out for where this had occurred.

We scouted the area thoroughly and I could find no sign of leopard spoor (tracks), only domestic dog spoor were evident. We found a pool of blood in the sand but could find no sign of the calf that had been taken. There were no drag marks, and the nearest dense vegetation was a good 1km away. We continued to scout the area for a few hours casting for spoor, but found nothing.



"Have any of the workers seen sign or spoor of the leopard...have they seen the leopard in a tree with the calf carcass?" I asked of one of the head herders.

"No boss, they found the calf carcass over here and they took it back to their camp to butcher rather than to leave the meat for the hyenas".

I could now guess what had happened. The workers had decided that they wanted fresh meat and had organized an informal hunting party. They had singled out a calf and cut its throat. The excited farm dogs had joined in the fray and stampeded the herd.

I found the farm boss, intending to tell him my theory.

"Peter, we have a big problem." He shook his head as I stepped to him.

"Yes we do, that is what I have come to talk with you about." He then said that he had spoken to the farm owner in Cape Town and been told to pass on the following instruction:

"Capture and remove all leopard and rooikat (caracul) from the farm, or they will be shot".



My blood ran cold. I felt my whole body tense and anger start coursing through my very being.

"Can we talk about this?" I heard myself say.

"No, he is emphatic...you know how he loves his cattle".

"Well then, I have no option but to pack up our camp, take our equipment and leave." I leaned toward him, "- and you tell your owner this...if he so much as harms one leopard, one caracul on this farm, I will hear about it...and I will personally ensure that he is formally charged and appears in court." I breathed, then added "Or perhaps I won't because he has the money and the connections to tie the court up for years, so tell him that I will pay him a personal visit, a visit that he will regret."

A few hours later, we crossed the little stream and drove through the farm gates for the last time. But to this day, I hold good on the promise I made. I hope I never have to pay that visit to a retired merchant banker who believes he has the right to exterminate any wildlife as he sees fit. And the farm manager? When I see him again, I will buy him a beer.



## Drugged Leopard

On the way back to Johannesburg, we stopped at a favorite bush bar for something to eat and drink. From the pub window, patrons had a clear view of who was arriving. As we walked into the bar, a small group of men were propped up against one end of the counter. One big, broad-shouldered man dressed in camo bush gear had his back to me and was regaling his audience with tales of leopard hunting. The other four were also dressed in bush wear. It became apparent that three of them were American hunters whilst the other two were local professional hunters.

The smaller of the two local hunters had seen the SPOTS Land Rovers pull into the car park and said to his associate,

"Hendrick, be careful what you say...those conservationist are here."

The big man turned and for the second time in a few hours, my blood boiled. Hendrick was one who offered canned leopard hunting to foreign hunters. He would have leopard





captured in cages, sedated and moved to one of his hunting farms, where he would offer hunting packages to foreign hunters. More often than not, the leopard was still heavily sedated when released for the hunt. The poor animal stood no chance and didn't know what hit it.

My eyes remained fixed on Hendrick. Piet's calming hand took me by the arm,

"Don't Peter." he said.

The tension in that little bar was palpable and time seemed suspended. I walked across to the group and addressed the Americans.

"This loud mouth has made you an offer to hunt doped leopard, but I will make you a better one...one which will give you an insight into real hunting. I know a place where we can go now. 15000 hectares of prime bush veld. He gets 10 bullets. I get one. Then you can watch us hunt each other."

Hendrick did some more loud mouthing, but the look in his eye told me everything. He was a coward. I simply repeated my offer. What would have happened if he had accepted my offer? I do not know. But I do know this, I would have



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enjoyed every minute of it. People like him, do not even deserve to see a leopard in the wild.

It is interesting to note, that Hendrick is currently facing multiple charges of rhino poaching. Perhaps he will one day wish, from a dreary prison cell, that he had taken me up on my offer.





## Human Gift

News travels fast in the Waterberg. It did not take long for our exit from our operating base to start doing the rounds.

We had nowhere to operate from and I was not sure how we were going to proceed. How I wished some kind donor could give us land on which we could build a base. But wishes don't often come true in conservation and we would just have to find a way forward.

"Ok maestro, you have got us kicked out of our base, so what do you propose we do now? Focus our attention on conserving ducks on zoo lake?" Robi's attempt at humor belied the seriousness of the situation.

I felt like a homeless man and concerned that all the hard work we had put into establishing our presence in the Waterberg was coming unraveled. I was deeply concerned for the animals that needed our efforts...and the rhino issue in particular was hitting the Waterberg hard.

Sitting pondering on the problem and unable to answer Robi's question, my cell phone rang.



"Is this Peter Milton from SPOTS?" a ladies voice asked.

I confirmed that it was.

"My husband and I have heard that you do not have a base for your conservation operations. I have heard a lot about you guys and we think we can help. Would you be interested in meeting us?"

Would we be interested? If I could have climbed down the phone and popped out the other end I would have!

The next day, we made our way up to the Waterberg. It is a large area, a UN declared World Heritage site and an area of great beauty. Almost the size of the Kruger National Park, the UNESCO Waterberg Biosphere Reserve has it all. We were heading towards the eastern sector, whereas our previous base had been in the central/western sector.

Whenever we had travelled to our previous base, we had made it a tradition to stop at a point where we looked up at the Seven Sisters of the Waterberg mountain range and drank a cold beer. The beauty and massive presence was something we could never get enough of.



Now, we found ourselves driving up the famous "Bokpoort", a cutting through the mountains with a stream of crystal clear water running down on our right. I just had to stop. As we sat with our feet in the cold water of the stream, sipping a beer, we heard the distinctive grunt of a leopard up in the cliffs. It was like the welcome of a trusted friend...a good omen. A woodland kingfisher called and then in a display of vibrant turquoise blue, took flight from across the stream. Brightly colored sunbirds flitted around the hundreds of wild aloes. I could happily have fetched my bedroll from the Landy and just spent the night right there.

As the Land Rover left the tarred road, we found ourselves on the dirt road heading further north. I felt like I was heading home.

We followed the directions that had been given us and wound our way along a dirt track. We drove across a low-level bridge straddling a stream and came across a lake on our left. Now, Robi does not travel far without his espresso coffee pot and a little gas burner. He demanded that we stop for an espresso. As we stood with the coffee starting to bubble in the pot on the Land Rover bonnet, the call of an



African Fish Eagle echoed off the cliffs above the dam...arguably the most beautiful sound to be heard in Africa. I felt all the weight and worry of the past week lift from my soul.

A few kilometers further, we entered the gates of a beautiful secluded game reserve. We had been given directions to the owners' house and wound our way down the track. Suddenly, I stopped the Land Rover. In front of us, where four beautiful white rhino - a mature cow, a young bull, another very young bull and a young cow. We sat looking at each other for what seemed an eternity...their magnificence difficult to comprehend or absorb. The young bull in particular, was to me, the most beautiful rhino I had ever seen. It was as though he was looking into my soul. Then quietly and without haste, they ambled off down to the little lake.

The owners were waiting for us at the house. With a coffee pot and a jug of ice-cold Oros, we sat and talked. After an hour of gracious hospitality, SPOTS had a new operating base.



In a narrow valley, flanked by beautiful cliffs and a little fresh water dam, stood an old pump house. The pump house had been converted into a hut and in a passage running behind the hut was a flushing toilet and a shower supplied with hot water from a fire fed boiler. Up and to the left of the hut and at the base of the cliff, were magnificent old shade trees and down towards the dam, a huge wild fig tree.

A large variety of plains game: Eland, wildebeest, kudu, impala, waterbuck and others roamed across the valley grazing contentedly. The whole place was stunningly beautiful.

On leaving, the lady of the house said

"Oh, and I saw that you met the rhinos on your way in." She told me their names, but the only one I really heard was that of the young bull...." Jomo". My meeting Jomo would have a profound effect on my life and the direction that SPOTS would take.



## Remembered

Over the coming months, I spent much time at our new base. I learned every inch of the reserve. Knowing the area in every detail, its weak points of entry, every detail of its high ground, every road and path etc. are of critical importance when analyzing risk and determining a security/anti-poaching strategy. We did the same on many adjoining reserves, our intention being to throw a security blanket over the whole area. We manned general area patrols, day and night. We had vehicles covering the major access routes and the message quickly got out that this sector was a "no-go" area for poaching.

But, I spent as much time as I possibly could around my new little boy Jomo. He crept into my heart. He taught me more about rhino's and their behavior than I could ever have learned from books or lectures. He let me see his soul and it moved me beyond words.

The mature cow was pregnant and, as they do, the day came when she took her maternity leave. She selected the place for the birth of her calf and she discouraged the others of





the crash to follow her. We would not see her for at least 2 weeks, while she prepared herself for the birth of her calf. She would keep it in hiding until she was comfortable to bring it out to meet the others...and she would be fiercely protective over it.

A turning point had come in the life of young Jomo. At the tender age of 4, he had become the leader for his step brother and step sister. He seemed to puff his chest out and take his new duties very seriously.

In time, he got to know the sound of my Land Rover and, being a young man of good taste, he loved it. He would come to its sound and I often just sat whilst he rubbed his horn along the cable branch spreaders, or decided to draw pictures on it with his horn. He loved the company and, I think, the assurance that he wasn't totally on his own. His little brother and sister followed him wherever he led.

One night, the field rangers reported that they hadn't seen him or his siblings. My heart ran cold and I patrolled his normal areas without success...no sight of them or fresh spoor. With a feeling of dread, I started up the Land Rover, loaded a rifle and took to the tracks of the reserve. I drove



for hours with the side lights of the vehicle lighting the bush on both sides and I beamed a handheld search light as well.

I covered all the normal area that he would range in. I found nothing. I was breaking one of our rules and working on my own, but I was desperate to find them. While searching, I was on the radio. Asking had anyone heard shots in the area? Had anyone seen a low flying helicopter?

There had been incidents of poaching were rhino had been darted with the potent sedative called M99 before having their horns hacked off. No anti-dote was delivered and the rhino would regain consciousness, in agony, and bleed to death or die from shock. Nobody could report anything.

Sometime after midnight, I thought to cover the areas that this crash never went into. The challenge was that the track was a treacherous one to follow, particularly on a moonless night and with nobody to spot for me. It would be easy to drive the Land Rover off an edge, into a hole, or into a hidden rock. I simply had to do it.



After some 45 minutes, I found their spoor on the track and followed it for a few kms. Then, it veered off into the bush. It was difficult for me to determine how old the spoor was, but then I found fresh dung...very fresh. I now had no option, but to follow the spoor on foot and hope that I heard, saw or smelt them before they saw me. I left the Land Rover engine running, hoping that Jomo would recognize the sound and be put at ease.

I hadn't followed the spoor for more than 200 meters, when I heard a blowing snort. I was flooded with relief. Moving carefully forward, I beamed my torch ahead...and there he was, with his head resting on his sisters back, trying to look like Romeo, love light in the eyes and all. I could have thrown a stone at him!

It took me a while to encourage them back towards the track. Cleverly, I had loaded a bale or two of lucerne and the scent of that provided them with extra encouragement.

Once I had them back on the track, I could drive slowly behind them and encourage them back down into the valley. Every now and then Jomo would turn his head and give me a filthy look, like a teenager who had been caught bunking



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school...guilty but defiant. I felt like getting out of the  
Landy and giving him a bloody good hiding.

Once we were down in the valley, I threw out one of the  
bales of lucerne, radio'd their position and asked for a 24  
hour monitoring of them.

Back at the hut, thankful. The bush was alive with night  
sounds and with that beautiful music filling the air, I fell  
asleep.



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## Touched by a Rhino

Early the next morning, I was awakened by the baboons. There were two resident troops of them. One lived on the southern side of the valley and the other on the northern side. They were always angry with each other, barking threats and insults across the valley. My peaceful little hut right in the middle.

I went out and built a fire under the boiler, in 40 minutes or so, I would have piping hot water. I noticed that one of my more frequent visitors to the hut, a beautiful Mozambiqan spitting cobra, had decided to overnight in the shower passage. No worry, the fire under the boiler at the other end of the passage would soon encourage him to leave.

Around the hut, I also noticed the spoor of other visitors. The brown hyena who often passed by and an African Civit, who seemed to like paying a visit and for who I sometimes left scraps.

The day dawned beautiful under a wide African sky. I made a pot of coffee and encouraged flame from the fire, some eggs



and bread were in order. A TV documentary team had arrived to film a story on rhino poaching and were camped a little way up the valley.

Later on in the morning, I decided to go and find my boy Jomo and see how he was doing after his activities the previous night. One of the guys from the documentary crew asked to accompany me. I found Jomo and his siblings in a clearing not far from the hut. As usual, at the sound of the Land Rover, his ears pricked up and he slowly ambled across, leading the others.

Through the open window, I spoke to him in a low, monotone drone which always seemed to pacify him. His head would droop and I could swear that his eyes got sleepy. So I asked him what the hell he thought he was doing the previous night, that ranging too close to the boundary left him visible to potential poachers. I told him that he had to take his duties more seriously and that I didn't enjoy having to follow his fat backside by the light of a dull flashlight.

"Did you know that there are big leopard in that area and they may be scared of you, but they certainly aren't scared of me?" I asked him.



While I scolded Jomo, I noticed that the other two had moved around to the back of the Landy and were showing keen interest in the lucerne I had loaded the previous night. I decided to give them a treat...a special breakfast. I was about to clamber over the back seats to open the rear door and push the lucerne bail out when, on impulse, I decided to get out of the Landy. I slowly moved around the vehicle to the rear and opened the door. Keeping a keen eye on my young friends, I pulled the bail out and placed it on the ground. As I moved away, they moved to it and began to chomp away at it. Sitting back in the vehicle, the photographer was in rapture. He had never been so close to a rhino.

I sat talking to him, telling him how serious their plight was, how poaching was increasing, how they stood on the brink of possible extinction. I said for the first time, the words I have often said since

"If we are that useless that we cannot protect and save a species as iconic as rhino, then what chance do the many other threatened and endangered species stand?"



I have never had any desire to touch a wild animal, other than to help it. But, I felt an over-whelming need to place my hand on those rhino, to assure them that I would do all that I could to protect them and their kind, that I would commit the rest of my life to that goal.

I found myself getting out of the Landy, thinking how stupid this was. I moved quietly towards them. Jomo looked up at me with complete trust, his body language showing no agitation or stress. Slowly, I got down on my haunches in front of him, monotoning all the while as to how big and strong and handsome he was. I reached out my hand towards his horn. He let me. He let me hold in my hand, that part of him that was causing so much tragedy, so much heartache and suffering.

And in that surreal moment, I whispered a silent prayer,

"With each sunrise, please give me the strength to protect them for even just one more day...and with each sunset, renew my commitment to do so".





## Carry On

I leaned back against a stone, my eyes refocused on the small fire in front of me. The others continued in the excitement of catching the poachers earlier that day. With stopper groups and the UAVs, we had come a long way since that quiet moment I had with Jomo. Yet we had only begun the fight. The crime syndicates seem to grow stronger daily. We need more strength in our numbers. We need more resources, more passion for good in the world. The task ahead, at times seems too great. But in my darkest hours, when my motivation seems shattered by yet another poaching, in my moments of fear or dread, I think of Jomo and his trust in me...and I think of that prayer and the commitment I made to him.



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By Peter Milton with Sandra Robbins, published by NIKELA, Dec. 2013



## Listen to Peter

We have a special treat for you. Actually listening to Peter tell some additional stories, share information, insights and answer some of your questions about life as a Wildlife Ranger.

To listen simply click on the link and it will open up in YouTube.

- Why saving the rhino is about more than saving the rhino [0.15]  
<http://youtu.be/Yqi5jEe2i4Q>
- Why some laws must be changed [0.55]  
<http://youtu.be/BzWgPxy2AUE>
- Handling fear [0.42]  
<http://youtu.be/kcOV0tRfVio>
- How the Air Ranger deters and finds poachers [8.11]  
<http://youtu.be/OAkKpqx5R3I>



## Answers to Your Questions

When we contemplated this project we wanted to get a sense of what people wanted to know. We posted this on Facebook:

***“What do you want to know about life as a Wildlife Ranger?”***

Peter Milton personally responds to the most pertinent questions.

### ***What motivates you to put your life on the line?***

I think that when one works in conservation and with the animals as I do, then motivation to conserve and protect them is not an issue. They are so beautiful that I cannot imagine a world without them. Secondly, I have been given so much joy, enjoyment and peace by them that I feel that I have to *"give back"*. When one has witnessed just one poaching, the emotions, the anger that you feel cannot be described - and I think that most people would feel a strong need to ensure that poaching is stopped. I am in a fortunate position to be able to take direct action against poaching and I would be letting the animals and future generations down if I did not do so.



***Why out of all the animals in the world who need protection did you choose the rhino?***

There are many species that are as threatened as rhino....some even more so. Furthermore SPOTS has never been a "species specific" conservation organisation. But, in rhino we have an iconic species...one which the whole world knows. When the rhino poaching problem escalated as rapidly as it did, we decided to focus most of our attention on this problem.

The reason is perhaps two-fold:

**Firstly**, if we as mankind are that useless that we cannot save this iconic species, then what chance do the lesser species stand?

**Secondly**, the solution to the rhino problem is a multi-faceted one which will require, amongst other things, international/diplomatic will, concerted effort to shut down international wildlife trade and trade in animal parts, international activism and support of endangered species and education regarding the bad state of our wildlife heritage, strong anti-poaching commitment, worldwide intelligence on wildlife trafficking and a number of others. We believe that the

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work being done on the above with regard to rhino poaching, will have immediate knock-on benefits to many other species.

Rhino are, in a sense, leading the way. But our work with many other species must, and will, resume and continue. We are currently also working on the lion bone trade, leopard, cheetah, honey badger and a few others.

***How long have you been working with rhinos?***

I have been involved with many species for a number of years....most of my life. But it would be true to say that my primary focus on rhino came about in around 2009...when rhino poaching started to show signs of alarming growth. My love for and commitment to many other species stays as strong...but right now, rhino is holding centre stage.

***Have you had actual encounters with poachers?***

Yes, I have had many encounters with poachers over the years...not just rhino poachers, but others as well. There are



many forms of poaching and, unfortunately, there is also poaching of many different species. Over the past few years, as rhino poaching has escalated, the chances of armed conflict with poachers has increased very significantly.

***Do rangers have all the correct equipment to protect themselves from poachers?***

It is difficult to say whether all rangers have the necessary equipment to fight poachers. Certainly, in the areas in which we operate, they do. But, as we win successes over poaching gangs, so the syndicates who fund the poachers keep trying to improve their capability - and we therefore have to also be better trained and equipped.

This is one of the reasons why we at SPOTS are working so hard on getting our UAV/Drone (Air Ranger) capability as good as it can be. And we have to keep doing that as new technologies and equipment becomes available.



***What does it feel like to know you could get hurt doing our job?***

We don't really think about getting hurt...but we do think about being as well prepared as we can be, with training, equipment, intelligence, good planning and operational deployment.

We have to keep managing the risks involved.

***Who do you blame for this horrific crime against rhino?***

The question as to who is to blame for rhino poaching is a complex one. Perhaps the best way to consider it is against a backdrop of the old business dynamic of demand and supply.

Historically, the demand for rhino horn has stemmed from the practice of traditional medicine...mainly amongst the eastern nations and China and Vietnam in particular. These societies and their practices believe that rhino horn holds many different medicinal properties and advantages....from being a cure for fever to being a cure for cancer, from being a cure for over-indulgence and hangovers to simply providing an energy and health boost.



There has been much scientific and medical research conducted on the properties of rhino horn and all these research has proved that there is absolutely no substance to these claims.

Rhino horn is made up largely from keratin...the same as our finger nails and hair, or cows hooves....so the claims of medical benefits are totally false.

The second market and demand driver is that stemming from the new middle to upper income sectors who believe that rhino horn offers a statement of wealth and affluence....people are buying and consuming rhino horn in night clubs etc., flaunting the fact that they have the money to do so.

Therefore, the first portion of the answer, is that the consumer of the product stands guilty for the poaching that supplies their demand.

We must then consider who is on the supply side of the equation. Here we essentially have two components...the poachers and the syndicates that hire them. It is true to say, that each of these have their own various levels of middlemen and couriers etc.





In South Africa, the majority of poachers are from Mozambique. Mozambique shares a porous border with the Kruger Park on its western side and the Ezemvelo KZN national parks such as Tembe, Ndumu on its southern borders. Both Kruger and Ezemvelo are also surrounded by private game reserves which are host to rhino. So these have really become the killing fields...and Mozambique's citizens, largely the killers.

As anti-poaching efforts have escalated in these areas, so the focus of poachers and syndicates has also shifted to other areas of South Africa, but the large majority of rhino are still poached in the prime target areas.

The syndicates are largely comprised of Vietnamese and Chinese nationals. They are sophisticated criminal networks with global reach and capability....and a lot of money.

Whilst China banned the trade in rhino horn, it does little to apprehend and prosecute these crimes. Vietnam has done very little, if anything, to ban trade in any animal parts...and they turn a blind eye to the trade in rhino horn, ivory, and other wildlife body parts.



Although there are nationals of other countries who have involved themselves in rhino horn trade, the vast majority of the syndicates operate from China and Vietnam.

**There exists therefore little doubt that the main enemies we face in our fight for rhino are China, Vietnam and Mozambique.**

What is of major concern, is that the huge profits to be made from rhino horn are and will motivate others to enter the market...Singapore as an example is appearing on the radar as a growing conduit, Yemen as a traditional consumer for rhino horn used in the manufacture of ceremonial daggers is poised to become a major player and in a number of African countries which have seen a significant influx of Chinese nationals, the alarm bells are ringing loud.

And, behind it all, stands basic and vulgar human greed.



***What is the best way to fixing the poaching issue collectively?***

There is no "*golden arrow*", no "*silver bullet*", and no single solution to fix the problem.

**First**, it will take a multifaceted strategy and approach to successfully win the battle for our rhino. But I believe, that at the heart of it must lie diplomatic and political pressure on China, Vietnam and Mozambique. Every citizen of the world has a role to play in this regard, albeit one which is based on activism. the right to demand of their government and representatives that pressure be brought to bear on countries allowing the trade in rhino horn, ivory and other wild animal parts.

We have been encouraged by the actions and stated commitment of the government of the USA ...we need to roll out the big guns.

**Second**, education is also critically needed...the education of Chinese and Vietnamese citizens. This education must bring awareness not just as to the true facts regarding rhino horns mythical medicinal properties, but also the brutality of poaching and the suffering it causes.

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If I went to China and shot a panda, I would probably be hung in the town square and yet these people see nothing wrong in consuming rhino horn....perhaps if they were made aware of the true facts and the consequences of their demand, they would view the situation and their role in creating the crisis through different eyes.

**Thirdly**, we have to bring the full capabilities and advantages of technology to bear in our anti-poaching efforts. Worldwide intelligence networks, satellites, UAV's, the DNA database which South Africa has implemented, shared apprehension and prosecution capability etc., all have their role to play.

And we must remember, that this fight is not just about rhino...it is about an assault on our wildlife heritage. Now that tigers have virtually been exterminated, the focus has shifted to lion bone.....African rock pythons are replacing the traditional medicine demand for Boas, and Africa lost over 30,000 elephant in 2012. The list is endless and more and more species are coming under threat of extinction.



***Would you like to see your son/daughter follow you into this line of work?***

The old American Indian saying “*we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children*”, whilst having become quite clichéd....remains so true.

It is also probably correct to say, that my generation has not done a very good job of protecting and conserving our natural heritage for future generations, but many are now focused on that and are trying very hard to do so. Part of our work, must be to encourage our successor generation not to make the same mistakes that we did, not to be as complacent as we have been...to attach a far greater value to our natural world than we did.

I hope that many youth will benefit from my work, humble as my contribution may be...and realise in themselves a desire to fight for that which they hold dear. Yes, I will encourage anyone to do so...my children included.

In so doing, I know that they will face times of hardship...it is not an easy path to follow, I know they will face many times of frustration, disappointment and anger. They will often

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question themselves as to whether it is all worth it...that to live a life surrounded with comfort and the benefits of modern society would be more enjoyable.

But I also know, that if they get to save just one rhino from a poacher's bullet, one lion from a canned hunt or even just one beautiful bird from being decoration on a hat, then they will never turn back.

>>>> <<<<



## About the Authors

### Peter Milton

Early on Peter's objective was to set himself up financially so that he could commit himself fully to conservation.



Born in the Kalahari, a desert wilderness area, in South Africa to parents who loved everything nature. Peter came by his deep respect and love for fauna, flora, wildlife and its conservation quite naturally.

Being drafted into the South African Army interrupted his wildlife studies and put his bush and survival skills to a different test.

On leaving the army his quest for financial independence began in earnest as he stepped into the early years of information technology.

Upon reaching his goals he immersed himself in wildlife conservation and soon formed the Strategic Protection of Threatened Species [SPOTS] to more clearly focus on his conservation ideals and strategies.



## **Sandra Robbins**

As a child Sandra lined up her dolls and stuffed animals and told them stories.

For Sandra, a born Texan (raised mostly in the Midwest), her love for animals and the outdoors came naturally from her South African mother and snow ski loving father.



As the youngest in a family of intellectuals she says, her mother taught her to love the sunshine, her father to love others, her brother to use her talents, and her sister taught her she is a person worth living for.

Nine years ago, Sandra married her best friend whose gentle encouragement and support brought out the writer in her about two years ago.

Today, when Sandra is not tending to the chickens, dogs and cats (and any local stray human) she devotes her time to writing.

She is the author of “Return and Live”, a one act play, “Frank and the Rhino Horn” with a screenplay and second novel in the works.





## Appendix

### SPOTS

Strategic Protection of Threatened Species (SPOTS) was founded by Peter Milton, Gavin Wilson and Robi Benica to conserve and protect threatened species. SPOTS uses a multi-faceted security and anti-poaching strategy that involves everything from armed anti-poaching teams to sophisticated UAV and intelligence technologies.

SPOTS gets the job done by engaging local businesses, other conservation organizations, people in the community and collaborating with government departments whenever possible.

Although the rhino, elephant and lion may call Africa home, as citizens of the planet SPOTS believes we are all their guardians and SPOTS is but one vehicle to assure that happens.

Saving iconic species like the rhino is also about saving all species, including humans, and their right to exist.

*For more information visit [www.SPOTS.org.za](http://www.SPOTS.org.za)*



## **Air Rangers**

SPOTS utilizes the latest technology in the form of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV's) to assist with its conservation wildlife management which includes anti-poaching efforts, animal tracking, biomass management, wildlife census, burn assessment and capture cage monitoring.

SPOTS plays a leading role in bringing innovative technological solutions to the world of conservation. Through investigations and evaluations, SPOTS viewed many other UAV initiatives, and that path led to a tailor-made South African developed solution: a lightweight UAV that can perform the job of a virtual game-ranger in the sky, meets with unique local operating conditions and provides the flight, imaging and communications needed.

In the context of anti-rhino poaching, the contribution of such a tool is particularly relevant. Airplane and helicopter patrols are extremely expensive to run, and easily heard and spotted. The noise factor compromises the stealth factor and thereby eliminating the element of surprise.

*For more information visit <http://www.spots.org.za/uav.html>*



## **Nikela**

Nikela raises awareness and funds for those who protect Africa's wildlife.

A volunteer run organization, founded by Margrit Harris as a US based public charity, Nikela serves as a vehicle so that people anywhere who care to give and get involved, can.

Nikela's mission is twofold:

One: To share the beauty of Africa and raise awareness of its vulnerability due to the increased demand for wildlife products from elephant ivory to bird feathers. Besides Asia, of particular concern is the US, the second largest consumer of wild animal and bird parts, in the form of beads, bags, boots and other bobbles.

Two: To protect Africa's wildlife, especially the rhino, on the ground by supporting people like Peter who are dedicated, passionate and know what they are doing.

*For more information visit [www.Nikela.org](http://www.Nikela.org)*



## What You Can Do

Most of us can't read a story like this and not feel motivated to do something. Here are a few suggestions:

- 1) Share this ebook
- 2) Make a donation to Peter's work
- 3) Volunteer a few hours

**Make a donation**

*Click on the link below*

<http://www.nikela.org/portfolio/stop-rhino-poaching>

**Find out how you can help**

*Click on the link below*

<http://www.nikela.org/nikela-volunteer>

Thanks for joining us in the quest to save Africa's wildlife  
for the sake of our children and theirs.