Cover picture of B Gissibl, S. Höhler and P. Kupper, eds, *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York & Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2012).

If you could suggest one event for entry into the collective environmental memory of the world, what would it be?

Jane Carruthers

"OPERATION RHINO" – KWAZULU-NATAL SOUTH AFRICA 1961

For visitors to South Africa's world-renowned Kruger National Park, the sight of military helicopters and uniformed army personnel have become familiar. Regular national park game rangers alone are unable to stem the current tide of rhinoceros poaching in Kruger and other South African protected areas, as well organised and amply resourced international criminal syndicates orchestrate large-scale killings of rhinoceros for their horn. With a street value of $65 000 per kg, in countries like Viet Nam and China, the horn – composed entirely of keratin – is highly valued for its medicinal properties.[1] Just a decade ago, around fifteen rhinoceros were poached each year in South Africa. However, during the last three years (2010, 2011 and 2012) the total was 1 049 (it almost doubled every year), 823 in the Kruger Park alone. Most of the slaughtered animals were white rhinoceros.[2] There are as yet no signs that military intervention has had any effect.

White rhinoceros are the world's second largest land mammal, an adult male averaging 2 300kg, a female 1 700kg. The two species, the white (square-lipped) *Cerathotherium simum*, and the black (hook-lipped) *Diceros bicornis*, were once widely distributed. Today South Africa contains about 18 000 white and 2 000 black rhinoceros – about 90 per cent of the African population. Behind that abundance, and despite the present rampant poaching and indeed its very irony, is an event that warrants entry into the collective environmental memory of the world. For the first time, in 1961, in what is now the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, rhinoceros were successfully tranquilised, thus enabling their translocation and proliferation throughout the subcontinent and indeed around the world. This timely intervention rescued this remarkable species from the brink of extinction to become the world's most common rhinoceros.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the abundant wildlife in southern Africa had been decimated by market and sport hunters and by settlers seeking to farm domestic stock and crops. Moreover, in the 1920s government's efforts to eradicate tsetse-fly, the vector of trypanosamiasis, a fatal cattle disease, included abolishing of a number of colonial game reserves in what is now the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal. What little was left of the large mammal fauna, including rhinoceros, was

almost entirely exterminated. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, with the re-establishment of the protected areas and the growth of a conservation mentality, white rhinoceros numbers in the Umfolozi area exploded from close to zero to more than 1 000 and they began to outstrip their limited food resources. A remarkable partnership developed between veterinary physiologist Dr Toni Harthoorn who devised appropriate drugs and dedicated game rangers including Ian Player, John Clark and Maqubu Nthombela who, using their knowledge and experience of animal behaviour, constructed suitable holding pens and transportation and other technical equipment. The collaboration of science and wildlife management resulted not only in successful white rhinoceros relocations to game reserves throughout southern Africa and zoos in Europe, the United States and the Far East, but also enhanced a knowledge base for other relocations, spawned a nascent wildlife ranching industry, and with it, eco-tourism. Such sustainable development is both the hallmark of, and the future of, our natural world.

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[1] The Guardian (UK) http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/oct/16/record-rhinos-killed-south-africa. Accessed 2 March 2013.

[2] Department of Environmental Affairs, media release, 28 February 2013. https://www.environment.gov.za/?q=content/rhinopoaching_interventionsandpositionofsa_16copofthecites. Accessed 2 March 2013.