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Features

One Man's Plan to Save Africa's Black Rhinos

By Mark Adams



Map Ives, Botswana's national rhino coordinator, searches for black rhinos in the Okavango Delta.

From the air, which is the only practical way for two-legged creatures to travel in northern Botswana, the Okavango Delta looks something like an 18,000-hole golf course. Even in the winter dry season, deep-green fairways of tall papyrus are punctuated by patches of sand, small stands of trees, and a vast network of water hazards crosshatched with the lines of "hippo highways." Amid the vastness of the Okavango, the six- to 12-seat bush planes that occasionally buzz across the empty sky, commuting from luxury lodge to luxury lodge, could be mistaken for dragonflies.

"This is a beautiful place, man!" Map Ives shouts. "I've been here 30 years and I still can't get used to it. Whooooo!" We are traveling, impractically, along a very bumpy sand road in the back of an open-air Toyota truck driven by Njunja "George" James, chief rhino monitor for the Botswana Rhino Project, on our way to receive a much anticipated airmail delivery.

At 60, Ives has the energy and the ruddy round face of a mischievous schoolboy, counterbalanced somewhat by his upright ex-soldier's posture and a Dumbledore-ish beard that hangs to his sternum. The Botswana Rhino Project that Ives oversees is a partnership between his two full-time employers — the luxury travel company Wilderness Safaris and the government of Botswana itself, which last year appointed him national rhino coordinator. It's a new position, because not so long ago the country had almost no rhinos to coordinate: A 1992 survey showed that Botswana's black rhinos had been wiped out. Ever since, Ives has wondered if black rhinos can be returned to Botswana, reintroduced like wolves in Yellowstone or reseeded like the prairie grasses in downtown Chicago.

In the last decade, however, poachers supplying rhino horn to shadowy buyers in distant lands have been killing Africa's rhinos at an increasing and unsustainable rate, in some cases slicing off faces and leaving the animals to die. As the price for an intact horn has soared as high as \$800,000, international crime syndicates have accelerated the illegal trade. If the slaughter merely continues at its current pace, the wild black rhino, one of Africa's signature species, will be extinct in about a decade. In response, the Botswana Rhino Project has evolved from a straightforward repatriation plan into a sophisticated joint-operations mission to fight what Ives calls a genocide.

SPECIAL REPORT: Following the Ivory Highway

After three hours of jolting up and down the circuitous paths that pass for roads in the Okavango, we park along the edge of a sandy airstrip. Ives, who has spent years trying to convince foreign bureaucrats that Botswana is now a safe haven for scarce black rhinos, double- and triple-checks preparations with members of his team before slumping down in the back of the truck. "It's like someone once said about the military," he says as some teenage boys shoo an elephant off the runway. "Hours of boredom punctuated by a few minutes of chaos."

The radio crackles; someone barks something in rushed Tswana. "I think the C-130's here," an assistant says, pointing at a black speck in the otherwise empty bleached-blue sky. The dot quickly begins to grow in size until the outlines of an improbably large airplane — certainly far too large to land on this ribbon of dirt — come into view. "This is a nervous moment for me, guys," Ives says. "Those are my babies on there."

Seemingly in defiance of the laws of physics, the gigantic bird alights softly and, with a deafening whoosh, stops like a balsa toy yanked by an invisible string. It vanishes briefly as its reverse thrusters kick up clouds of sand, then taxis a few hundred feet.

The tail pops open and out jumps a squad of Botswana Defence Force soldiers in camouflage uniforms and berets, each carrying an automatic weapon. Behind them emerge three animal-care specialists from Zimbabwe, a similar team from Botswana, the pilots, assorted people with video cameras, and Ives' sleepy associate Kai Collins, who has been up for 48 hours supervising the transfer. Strapped in the cargo hold are three small, brightly colored container cars, each with a somewhat dazed-looking black rhinoceros.



(Map by Pete Sucheski)

The animals have every right to feel confused. Two days earlier they'd been minding their own business hundreds of miles away in Zimbabwe when a veterinarian leaned out of a helicopter and darted them with a healthy dose of M99, after which they were blindfolded, relieved of roughly half of their horns (to prevent them from injuring themselves in transit), guided into crates, loaded onto trucks, driven to the airport (on this stretch mercenaries are frequently hired to protect the animals from hijackers), and hoisted onto the C-130. That's just the endgame. Prior to each transfer come months of negotiations, first with the foreign owners of the animals — usually a national park or, as in this instance, a private reserve — and then with various government officials. Once inside Botswana, the animals must clear customs. "Some wag was saying to me recently that no rhino will be moved until the weight of the paperwork exceeds the weight of the rhino," Ives tells me.

In ordinary times this might seem like an awful lot of effort to move three animals. But as Ives points out, these rhinos represent 0.15 percent of the world's members of their species. If all goes well, within a few weeks many more black rhinos will be roaming the Okavango, a green oasis encircled by the immense emptiness of the Kalahari Basin. Like any settlers, if they like it here, they will multiply, Ives hopes.

Ives works the runway like a party host, shaking hands and slapping backs, directing the members of his aerial stevedore ballet company ("Don't cut your bloody nuts off up there!"), and occasionally climbing onto the truck to peek inside a container. "Big Sam!" he reads, the name inscribed on the young male's crate. "Welcome to Botswana, you fine young man!"

The rhinos are driven a short distance and released into their temporary homes, high-fenced pens called bomas. When one female begins munching the leaves off a freshly cut branch of leadwood, the day's operation is declared a success. Even the boys in berets breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'll tell you up front: My mind works in strange ways," Ives warned me moments after we first met. "I love rhinos."

Martin Anthony Paul Ives and his native land have grown up together. He recalls his father helping to arrange "thousands of liters of free beer" for the public celebrations in Francistown on the day the British protectorate of Bechuanaland gained its independence, in 1966. Around that time, during one of the elder Ives' Saturday-night outdoor movie screenings — kids on blankets, a 16-millimeter projector aimed at a whitewashed concrete wall — the program began with the short documentary Operation Noah, about an improvised wildlife rescue mission. The Rhodesian government had dammed the roaring Zambezi River, which over the next few years slowly created Lake Kariba, the world's largest man-made lake. As the water rose, thousands of exotic creatures took refuge on shrinking parcels of land and were saved by a plucky Rhodesian game warden and his sparsely equipped crew. "These guys captured one rhino on an island and tied it down and rescued it," Ives says, describing a scene he's been replaying in his head for nearly 50 years. "It just captured my imagination completely."

Roughly the size of Texas, the newly christened Botswana contained only 600,000 people, a lot of sand, and animals (though by that time only a tiny remnant of rhinos), and not many job prospects for a restless young man carrying around what Ives calls "a great deal of aggression." His interests leaned toward cricket, hunting, drinking beer, and getting into fights. After high school Ives departed for neighboring Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and interviewed with its Department of Wildlife and National Parks. He was placed on a waiting list. "I had nowhere to go," he says, "so I joined the British South African Police," an unofficial branch of the Rhodesian military, in which he received six months of counterinsurgency training.

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The 1970s was a period of brutal civil war in Rhodesia. Guerilla groups, some allied with rebels in neighboring countries, were attempting to overthrow the white-minority-run government. Ives had learned to track animals as a boy — just the sort of thing kids did for fun growing up in Botswana, whose Kalahari Bushmen are renowned for their tracking skills. "They soon realized that I was an above-average tracker, and my services were often called on to follow up tracks of the enemy along the Mozambique border," where insurgents were infiltrating Rhodesia. When a wildlife job finally opened up, Ives was posted to Chizarira National Park, a remote game reserve near the border with Zambia. It was here, while on foot patrol looking for poachers, that he encountered his first black rhino in the wild, a "damned exciting moment" that he says "etched" itself in his 22-year-old mind.



(Ives has rescued dozens of black rhinos - including these two. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik)

Ives essentially worked two jobs — one day he might find himself studying plants; the next he'd be tracking rebel groups through the highlands. Chizarira was in the thick of the action. "Our camp was like a prison" guarded by machine gun nests, Ives says. "I saw a bit of combat, people dying and that." He is garrulous by nature and can deliver a 45-minute lecture on the unique shape of Botswana's sand grains, but his war experiences are one topic he doesn't like to discuss. Eventually the war got so hot that nature work became almost impossible. "If you went out to look for rhinos or count elephants, you'd get your ass shot off," he says.

Ives left the military, and after briefly guiding safari tours in South Africa, he returned home to Botswana in the early 1980s. He found work in the Okavango, where he cataloged the local flora for pleasure and led occasional trips to earn money. Things were a little looser in those days: An adventurous soul could spend 10 days floating the delta alone north to south in a mokoro, a pole-driven dugout canoe, or slip quietly across the Namibian border to have a throbbing tooth pulled at an army base. Tribal people told him stories of another solitary, hot-blooded creature that had once roamed the area. "I heard that there had been many rhinos here in the past but that they had been wiped out," Ives said. During this footloose period, he pondered what to do with his life and decided to channel his inborn vigor toward improving the world. Around this time he gave up hunting.

Even today the Okavango seems virtually untouched by the modern world. "This is a bloody remote place," Ives tells me during a wildlife-spotting drive. "Five hundred miles from the nearest factory. There are only a few of these left on Earth." Along with Botswana's low population density, the country's focus on attracting small numbers of guests willing to pay top dollar for an immersive, eco-friendly experience has allowed it to preserve the integrity of places like the Okavango while providing thousands of jobs. Tourism is now the country's second-biggest business, after its well-respected diamond-mining industry. Last year unesco named the Okavango Delta a World Heritage Site.

Ives met his wife when she was working at a photography camp in the delta. They married in 1985, bought a home, and settled down to raise two children. He joined Wilderness Safaris in 1992. As environmental manager, he is responsible for making sure the company's luxury eco-lodges are in compliance with Botswana's strict conservation policies. The longer Ives has worked in the Okavango, the more impressed he has become with the way its various plant and animal species work together almost as "a single living organism on a macro scale."

There was only one flaw in this otherwise perfect Eden, he says. "No rhinos."

Approximately 30,000 years ago, a Paleolithic graffiti artist in the Chauvet Cave in southern France grabbed a piece of charcoal and sketched one of the world's oldest known artworks: two tank-like animals using their enormous horns to attack each other. Humans have always looked at the rhino's armor-like hide and scimitar nose and assumed violence was the animal's top priority. Hippos may kill many more humans each year than rhinos do (the latter are mostly a danger to one another), but their rounded bodies inspire excellent plush toys. In Babar books, the elephants are wise and wear spats, while the rhinos are hotheaded.

There are two species of rhinos in Africa, black and white, and they look pretty similar. The far more common white rhinos — at 20,000 animals, they outnumber blacks roughly five to one — are slightly larger and eat mostly grasses. Black rhinos are browsers; the pointed, prehensile upper lip they use to feed on leaves and twigs is a primary difference between the two. Black rhinos in particular have a reputation as recluses who will charge with intent to kill any human who dares to come near — essentially pachyderm Unabombers. This aggressiveness, paired with the taxidermic allure of their facial trophies, has long made them prime targets for sportsmen. Today, Ernest Hemingway's 1930s journal *Green Hills of Africa* reads like a whose-is-bigger contest in which he envies the size of the black rhino horns bagged by a fellow hunter.

ALSO: Africa's Newest (Four-Legged) Poaching Police

In part because they inhabit scrubland not coveted by farmers, black rhinos survived at greater numbers than other species until around 1970, when about 65,000 remained in the African wild. But the revolutions of the 1970s, coupled with the departure of British colonial law enforcement and conservation agencies, left a vacuum in anti-poaching efforts. A surge in demand from suddenly oil-wealthy Yemen, where horns were used in crafting traditional ceremonial daggers, helped cut that number to 3,610 by 1993. After a fatwa was issued against the use of rhino horn, conservation efforts slowly began to reverse that trend. When Ives arranged a soft launch of the

Botswana Rhino Project in 2001 by trucking in four white rhinos, rhinos were no more endangered than many species in Africa.

Then suddenly, less than a decade ago, the numbers of white and black rhinos poached in South Africa — home to the majority of all surviving wild rhinos — began to climb precipitously. In 2007, 13 rhinos were poached there. The following year, 83 were. Year by year the numbers soared: 122, 333, 448, 668, 1,014. Last year 1,215 rhinos were killed. Early reports for 2015 indicate at least four killings per day, an increase of nearly 20 percent.

"There are maybe 4,000 black rhinos left on Earth," Ives tells me as we drive through the 1,900-square-mile Moremi Game Reserve, a wildlife sanctum sanctorum within the Okavango, searching for signs of any of the eight black rhinos they've released in the area since last year. He stops the vehicle and leans out the side. "See these parallel marks? A black rhino has come through here and defecated. It's urinated. It's scratched its back legs." He sounds as if he is reading the résumé of a promising job candidate.



(A container holding a black rhino being unloaded from a C-130 cargo plane. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik)

The increased demand for horn is coming from the Far East. In China, rhino horn has for centuries been used in traditional medicine to reduce fevers and purify the blood. Multiple studies have shown that rhino horn is composed primarily of keratin — the same protein in human fingernails and hair — and has no medicinal value. Vietnam seems to be the primary

driver of the current poaching onslaught. (Rhino horn is illegal in both countries.) The truth may be beside the point by now, since demand has driven the price to \$65,000 a kilo, more than double that of cocaine.

Efforts to rein in horn trafficking have concentrated on the supply side, but the picture there is just as murky. After decades of civil war, guns are not especially hard to come by in sub-Saharan Africa. Angola, just to the northwest, is awash in Kalashnikovs. Mozambique, a very poor nation that features an AK-47 on its national flag, shares a 230-mile-long open border with South Africa's enormous Kruger National Park, home to the world's largest population of wild rhinos. Penalties for poaching in Mozambique are almost nonexistent; as recently as last year, stealing a neighbor's chicken was considered a more grave offense than killing a rhino. John Sellar, an organized-crime consultant and former chief of enforcement to the UN's Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, who has worked with both Botswana and South Africa, says that at least 12 gangs of poachers are operating in Kruger on any given day. Ives believes the number might be closer to 20.

What makes the new wave of poachers doubly effective — and terrifying — is their link to international crime syndicates. "If you look at organized crime historically," Sellar says, "whether it's Al Capone or the Yakuza or the triads, they all get involved because there's lots of what they consider easy money to be made."

Ives' rhino project has the enthusiastic support of Botswana's president, Ian Khama, a Sandhurst-trained military pilot and conservationist who has placed the defense forces in charge of anti-poaching efforts. This level of commitment to wildlife is far from universal in Africa; Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe, recently served a baby elephant to guests at his 91st birthday party. President Khama's brother Tshekedi is minister of environment and tourism; Ives reports to him in his role as national rhino coordinator. Botswana's strict anti-poaching laws now allow the use of lethal force when armed perpetrators are encountered. This spring, three Namibian elephant poachers carrying a load of tusks were shot dead after opening fire on a patrol.

I ask Ives if he thinks Botswana's tough reputation and the Okavango's isolation, combined with a national educational initiative to demonstrate wildlife's importance to the economy, could be enough to dissuade poachers. "We'd be naive to think they won't come," he says. Botswana may be Africa's least corrupt country, but a Kalahari Bushman offered several years' worth of income for a single rhino horn is going to be tempted.

"I think it is fair to pose the question, Has Botswana been tested yet?" says Sellar. "I don't think it has. When I hear about the number of rhinos that are being relocated, the thought has crossed through my mind, 'Gosh, are you folks making a rope for your own neck here?'"

The day after the C-130's arrival, I spend a morning driving around with Ives and Kai Collins. We hope to spot a black rhino. Three mother lions with cubs parade past our vehicle, one cub triumphantly carrying a stick in its mouth. We watch an elephant violently shake a palm tree

with its trunk to dislodge nuts, and we see too many zebras, impalas, and lechwe to count. At one point our path is blocked for a full minute by a giraffe munching a mouthful of the gigantic, sausage-shaped kigelia fruit.

"This is the joy of Botswana," Ives says. "Completely wild animals. The project we're starting now, in a hundred years people are going to say, 'This is amazing!' " Ives foresees the day when thousands of rhinos once again roam here.

Collins, whose official title with Wilderness Safaris is group conservation manager (but whom Ives refers to as "that clever fellow who speaks French and is going to take over from me someday") explains to me later that the popular image of rhinos as stupid, angry troublemakers is based in ignorance. "Rhinos actually have very complex social hierarchies," Collins says. Because black rhinos have such poor vision and spend their days in the brush, it's easy to startle them. "They've got a phenomenal sense of hearing and smell, but their eyesight is terrible. So if you're downwind of them and more than a hundred feet away, as long as you stand dead still they'll hardly know you're there."

We spot some promising rhino tracks, but a circuitous spin through the bush turns up nothing. So we stop at the bomas to visit another group of recent arrivals, including a mother and son who came from South Africa the week prior. Up close, a black rhino is perhaps the most prehistoric-looking land animal still in existence, a triceratops accidentally beamed forward to the 21st century. Almost as interesting as its horn is its wrinkled armor, skin that Hemingway described as a "hide like vulcanized rubber." Collins approaches with a slice of sausage fruit and reaches through the fence posts to feed the mother as if giving his dog a treat. "They like to have their noses touched," he says. "Go on."

Her skin isn't at all tough but soft, like an old leather jacket.

A lot of strategies less complicated than the Botswana Rhino Project have been floated as solutions to the poaching problem. One popular idea is to cut off the animals' horns to reduce their desirability. But Collins points out that even a dehorned rhino isn't safe. "If a poacher's been tracking a rhino for hours and finds out that it's been dehorned, he'll kill it anyway just so he doesn't go chasing it again tomorrow." And while they'd prefer to have an entire eight- to 12-pound horn, they'll certainly settle for a one-pound stub.

Another idea up for debate, especially in South Africa, is legalizing rhino horn. The thinking is that a sudden influx of horn onto the market would depress prices, which would reduce poaching. (Some of the biggest backers of this plan are owners of private game reserves, who possess huge reserves of farmed horn that they can't dispose of legally.) But a 2008 sale of stockpiled ivory to raise money for anti-poaching efforts, supported at the time by conservation groups like the World Wildlife Fund, may have backfired by actually stoking the Chinese market for ivory. Other largely untested ideas include injecting dyes or poisons into the horn or (the inevitable Silicon Valley solution) flooding the market with 3-D-printed synthetic horn.

One reason Ives and his team are hopeful is that rhino relocation has worked before, in a more desperate situation. In 1960, all but a few hundred white rhinos had been exterminated, and the

species, crowded into a small area, faced extinction. The South African game warden Ian Player (brother of golfer Gary) organized a spectacularly successful plan by which small groups of animals were transported to other places to breed. Today, even with the recent slaughter, white rhinos are classified only as vulnerable, while blacks are critically endangered. A group run by the filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert, unaffiliated with Ives' project, has also begun flying white rhinos to Botswana.

But rhino relocation is an expensive business. Collins recently raised \$1 million from private donors to purchase a group of animals in South Africa. Ives says the crucial part of the project is monitoring the rhinos, for security purposes as well as to make sure they're thriving. "You have to put tracking teams in the field, five to seven guys each," he says. "I need to raise \$2 million to \$3 million a year for that."



(Ives gets friendly with one of his evacuees. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik)

One controversial fundraising strategy is to sell licenses to kill older bull rhinos, who've passed their breeding prime and, because they tend to be territorial, often kill other rhinos. This past spring, a Texas hunter named Corey Knowlton shot and killed a black rhino in Namibia after bidding \$350,000 for the right to do so. Since the money went toward rhino conservation,

Knowlton reasoned that he was doing a lot more to save the animals than those who simply click "like" on some rhino charity's Facebook page. The recent tsunami of social media rage directed at the Minnesota dentist who illegally hunted Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe may have been cathartic, but it probably had more impact on Twin Cities oral hygiene than it did on African wildlife.

Ives and Collins are an odd Kirk-and-Spock couple, the excitable self-taught naturalist and his levelheaded zoology Ph.D. sidekick, yet on most topics relating to rhinos they agree. Auctioning rhino-hunting licenses is one on which they don't.

"Setting aside the strange fetish to kill something, it makes perfect sense," Collins says. "You're getting \$350,000 for conservation. You always have excess bulls who fight and kill the other bulls and females. Either you're going to trophy-hunt them and get money to conserve breeding rhinos, or you shake your finger and say, 'Don't kill rhinos.' "

"I can't refute Kai's argument," Ives says later when I ask what he thinks. "We need money. Kai is a scientist; he can't be emotional. But you have to be emotional about this stuff. Maybe I'm like a reformed drinker." He did his share of hunting during his younger, wilder years. As a ranger he had to kill "problem animals": lions, elephants, and buffalo that ate farmers' crops and livestock or menaced settlers.

"I've shot a beautiful animal and watched the light go out of its eyes," Ives says. "Something dies inside of you, too."

Ives needs to fly back to Wilderness Safaris' headquarters the following morning, so I pile into a Land Rover for one of his team's regular afternoon recon missions with Collins, James, and boma manager Mike Fitt. Ives takes the wheel. The Rover was built for observing wildlife and has three tiers of passenger seats, like bleachers.

Each of the rescued animals has been fitted with an electronic tracking device and can also be identified by coded notches clipped into its ears. The technology is simple by design, but effective — though chasing rhinos this way feels more like stalking a Nazi U-boat than like a classic safari hunt. Once again we drive around looking for tracks and droppings. We stop so James can climb a tree. "Hold on!" Ives shouts, then turns the wheel sharply to plunge us deeper into the bush, driving through craters and over logs and thornbushes. Ives slows to point out some promising tracks, but James tilts his head over the side and says dismissively, "Giraffe."

Ives executes a few U-turns and is shifting into reverse again when James shouts, "There!" We slowly drive closer, and two dark shapes appear in the distance, obscured by a thicket of bushes. We circle around quietly for a better look. I catch only a brief glimpse of rhino butts before the creatures bolt.

"Make yourselves thin!" Ives shouts as we plow through a narrow gap between two acacia trees. The Rover comes to a jolting halt.

"Shhhhhh," he whispers suddenly. The two rhinos emerge from behind a bush and into the sunlight, followed by a third, a baby boy. We are perhaps 100 feet away. Mike Fitt starts making high-pitched whining noises. "It's the sound a baby makes to get the mother's attention," Collins whispers. Then he starts making them, too. It must work, because the mother turns toward us.

We roll 20 feet farther, then another 10. We are well within the mother's limited range of vision, and she is staring directly at us. Her horn is spectacular; it appears translucent, glowing from within in the late afternoon light.

Weeks later, trying to recapture the electricity of the moment, I stumble across an oddly familiar-seeming black-and-white video clip of a female rhino rescued from rising floodwaters. I email it to Ives, who responds, "Bloody hell, Mark, that's the very film that started me off." A few days later he emails again. While anxiously awaiting another airmail delivery, he's been watching the Operation Noah clip over and over.

The mother rhino glares at us for a minute, then takes two steps toward the vehicle. The evacuee in Operation Noah thanked her rescuers by puncturing their boat repeatedly as if it were an empty Coke can. I figure we might have a few seconds to escape before taking the full brunt of a charge from a protective parent. She might not have grown up around here, but this is her territory now.

"I'd suggest it's about time to go," Ives says quietly. "Her nostrils are flared. Let's not forget these are black rhinos." He pauses to soak up one more moment, then starts the engine. The rhinos turn and are gone before we can wave goodbye.