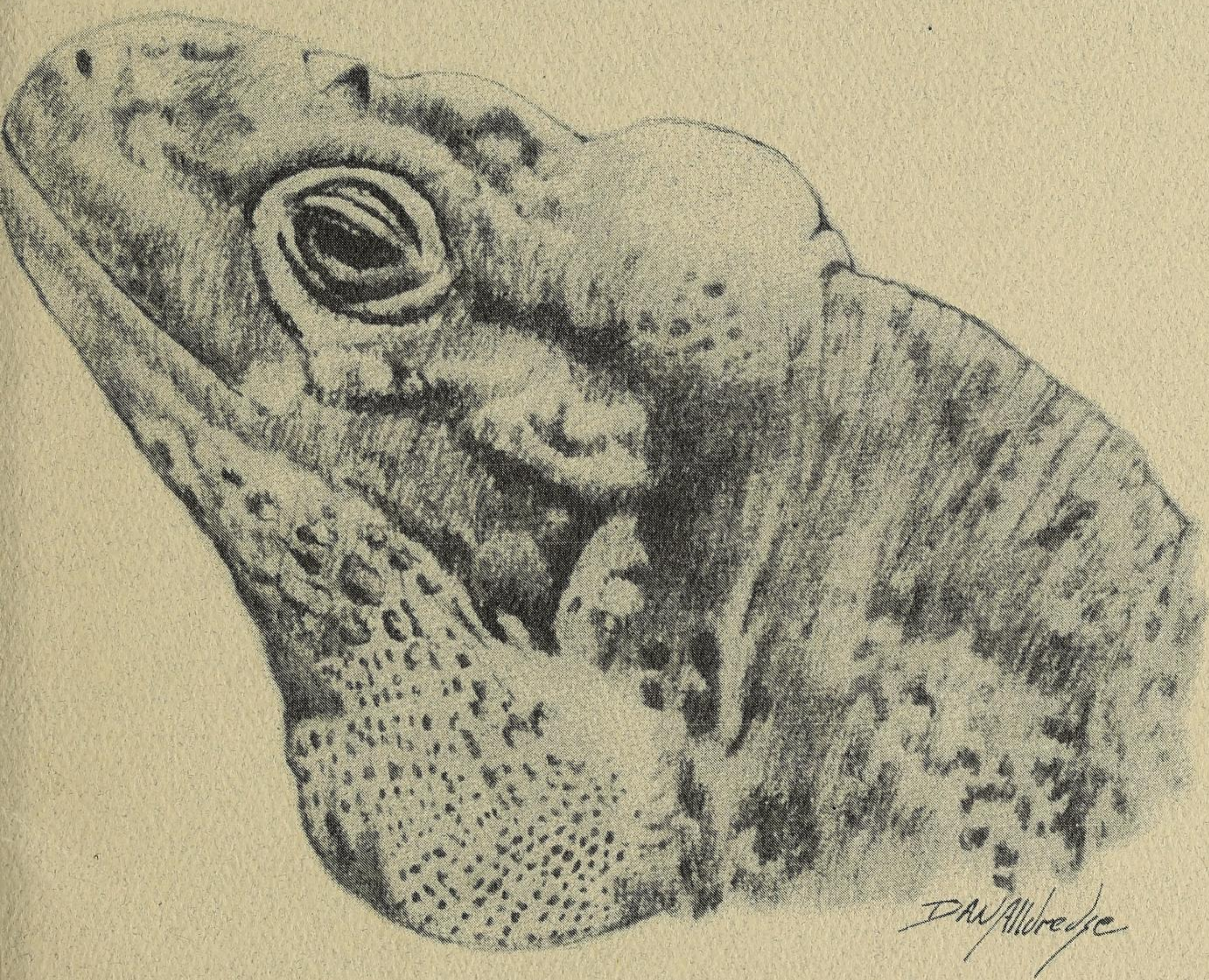


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# ANIMAL KEEPERS' FORUM



**The Journal of the American  
Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc.**

**SEPTEMBER 2003**

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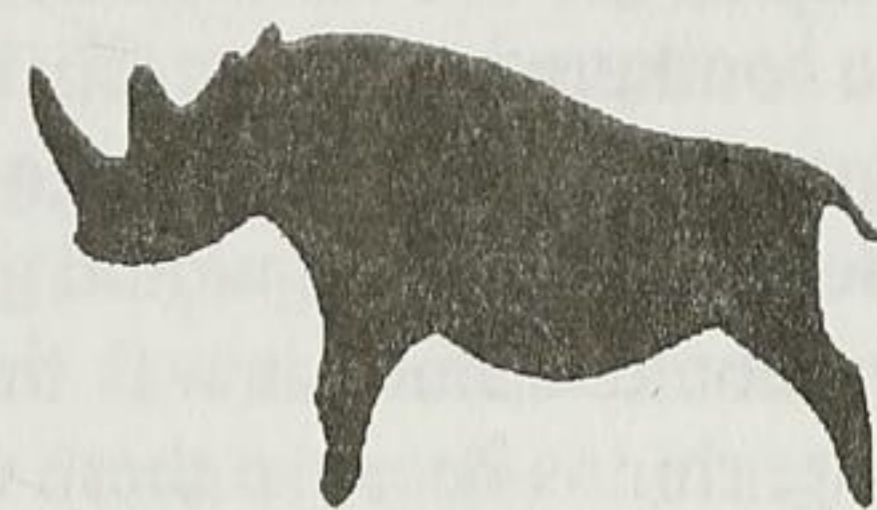
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# Making A Connection

A Save the Rhino Trust Journal

SAVE THE RHINO TRUST



By Peter T. Hnath, Elephant Keeper  
Reid Park Zoo, Tucson, AZ

In our daily lives as zoo professionals it is easy to forget the reasons why we are in this field of work. The fast pace of society keeps us constantly on the move- picking up the kids from school, grocery shopping, paying bills, car repairs, etc. We can quickly lose sight of the big picture and one of the fundamental points that we try to convey to everyone that passes through the gates of Reid Park Zoo: wildlife conservation.

With the generous support of the Tucson Zoological Society, I was able to spend two weeks participating in the field research and conservation efforts of one of the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) rhino tracking teams in Namibia. The opportunity to experience the day to day life of the dedicated individuals who work for SRT is one I will never forget.

During the Rhino Keepers' Workshop of 2001, I met Blythe Loutit, founder of Save the Rhino Trust. She was there to create opportunities for zoo keepers to volunteer for SRT in Africa. For Blythe it all began in the early 1980's when she came across six elephant carcasses at a waterhole, mutilated to remove their tusks. At another waterhole three rhinos lay dead, riddled with bullet holes from automatic weapons. In this sparsely populated region of Namibia (then Southwest Africa), near the Skeleton Coast, the South African army and government had a free hand, the culture of hunting was prevalent, and shooting game was done in any way possible. Blythe, a botanical illustrator and artist, decided to take action.

With the assistance of her husband Rudi, a nature conservator in the area, Blythe worked with conservation-conscious businessmen and community leaders to establish the Namibian Wildlife Trust. This eventually led to the formation of the Save the Rhino Trust. They began pushing the idea of community-based conservation and immediately began working with the local people to develop conservation practices and alternative ways of supplementing livelihoods. The education of local communities to appreciate the non-use values of wildlife such as tourism was considered essential to conserving the rhino. At the same time, a small group of people began to patrol and monitor the area- specifically keeping an eye on the black rhino (*Diceros bicornus bicornus*) and the desert adapted savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana africana*) populations. This was the basis of developing a community conservation system. Along with the goal of involving local people in the fight against the killing, was the aim of saving the wildlife of the western desert for the day when Namibia would be free from the "scorched earth" policy of previous rulers.

By 1990 Namibia was given its independence from South Africa and all of SRT's hard work was starting to pay off. In 1985 only 56 rhinos were counted during the first census; there are now over 130 records of individual rhinos. Gradually teams of trackers have been established to patrol the different rhino areas. Each team has its own vehicle, cameras, GPS (global positioning system), camping equipment, identification forms, binoculars, uniforms, rations and communication system. At present there are five teams of trackers in the field. Because of the vast distances covered and the rugged nature of the terrain, the teams often spend weeks at a time in the field. Each team must be completely self-sustaining and rely heavily on their equipment.

I already knew that this would be a very remote part of the world, with little outside communication and few of the amenities to which I have grown accustomed. I also knew that the trackers could cover 10-20 miles a day by foot when they were on the trail of a rhino. By the time I boarded my plane, my treadmill had hundreds of extra miles on it and all my camping gear was stuffed into one

very large bag. I felt prepared. Twenty-two hours later I landed at Walvis Bay, Namibia, where I was met by Bernd Brell, the project manager. From here it was a five-hour drive to the Ugab River Base Camp in the southern rhino range. On the way to camp I was given an overview of the operation. The southern tracking team consisted of Bernd and two trackers (Fulai and M'teos). There were 13 rhinos in the southern range and they were spread out over 5,000 sq. km. (~1930 sq. mi.) From the base camp the team would go out in the field for 4-7 days twice a month and cover as much area as they could. Since it was the beginning of the rainy season it would be exceptionally difficult to locate rhinos because there were many more seasonal waterholes to check. The black rhino, being a solitary species, would make the job even tougher.



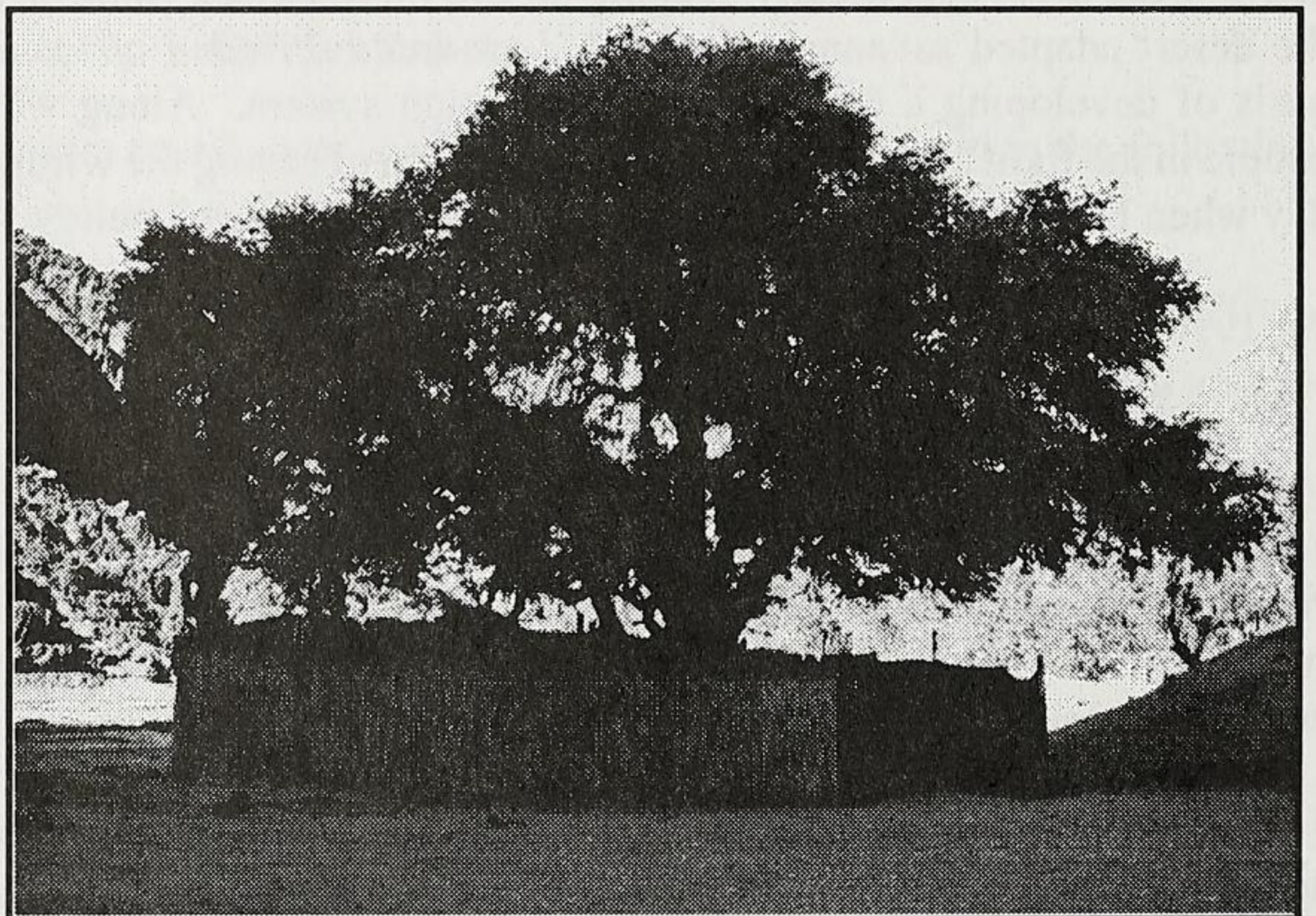
**Trackers Fulai and M'teos**

The ride was as exhilarating as it could be after a long flight. Walvis Bay is at the edge of the Namib Desert, the oldest desert in the world. The vast expanse of rolling sand dunes was a breathtaking sight. From there we traveled up the coast past the many shipwrecks that give the Skeleton Coast its name. Then it was inland east to an area known as Damaraland, a rugged rocky area that was carved from ancient volcanic activity. This habitat is home to the Welwitschia plant which can live to be over 1,000 years old.

When we finally arrived at the Ugab Base camp I felt like I was back in Tucson. Sand, scorching sun, bright blue sky and plenty of dry riverbeds. If you could replace all the

acacia trees with palo verde and mesquite you couldn't tell the difference. It was the beginning of summer and daytime temperatures were already in the mid- 90's. I was given a four-man domed tent nestled under a large acacia tree. Around it was a five-foot fence made from reeds for privacy. This would be home for the next two weeks, except for the times we camped in the field. The trackers called my tent site the "elephants favorite" because whenever a herd came through camp they would always feed from this tree. Bernd said he hadn't seen the herd for a while and couldn't be sure when they would be coming through again. Even though there was old elephant tracks and dung all around the camp, I wasn't expecting any elephant interactions.

That night after dinner I settled in for a good night's sleep. About 2100hrs that evening, while writing in my field journal, I heard the unmistakable sound of a large tree limb snapping. I knew only one animal was capable of doing that but the sound seemed to be coming from upriver so I kept on writing. A few minutes later -"snap"- only this time it was much closer. I shut off my light and sat on my cot listening for any noise that would signify that the herd was coming through



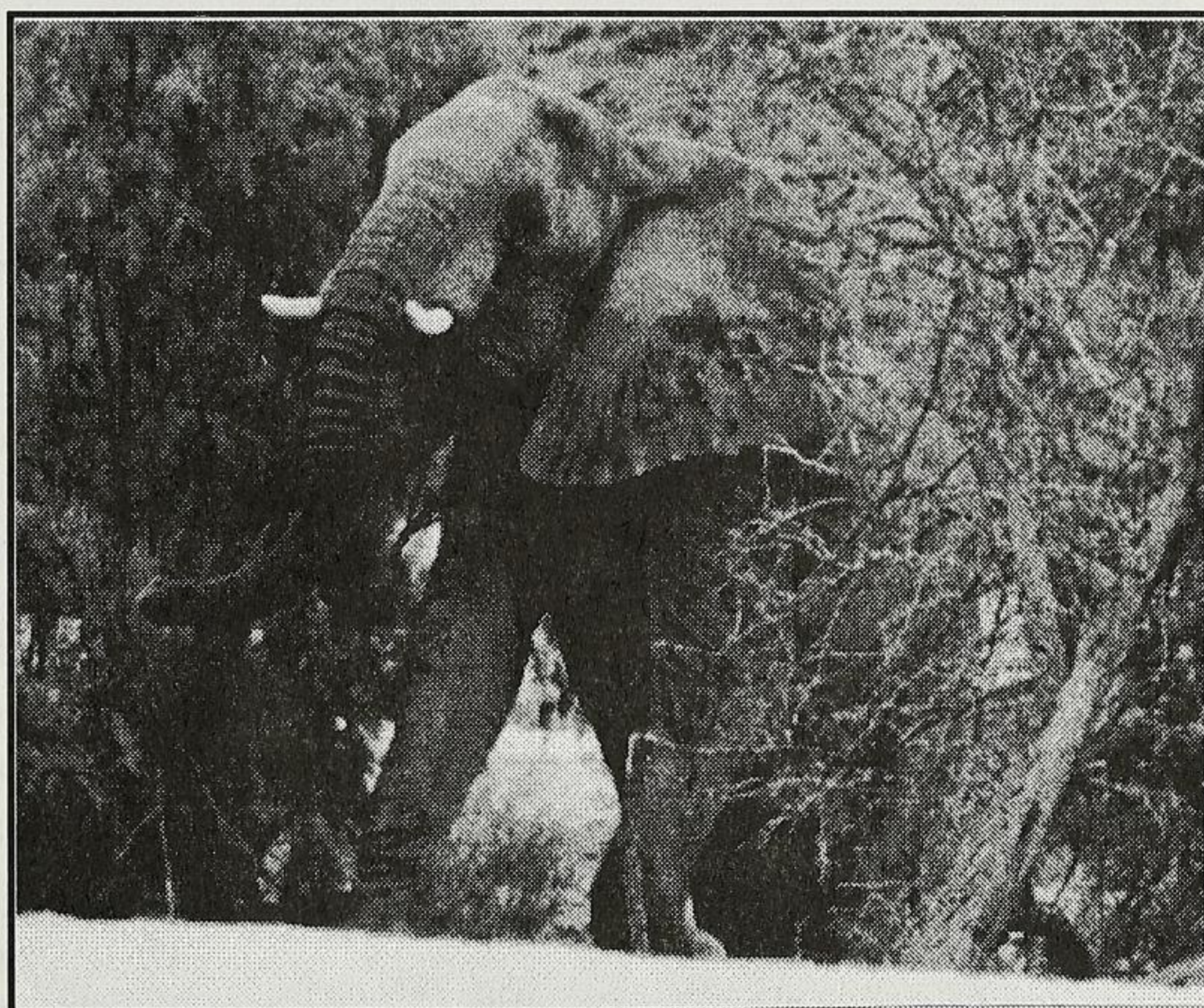
**"Elephant's Favorite" - the author's campsite**

camp. From my seat I could look out the tent window and view acacia branches silhouetted against a starry desert sky. I heard some shuffling around outside similar to the noise our elephants make when walking around the exhibit. Except it sounded like at least ten elephants. Next thing I knew, I saw two trunks reach up to pull seed pods from the acacia over my tent. Everything happened so fast after that. There was a trumpet, a series of low rumbles, bubble blowing from the well, defecating, urinating, flagellating, destruction of underground water lines and lots of foraging from my tree. At times there were so many pods falling on my tent that it sounded like rain. It was quite an auditory experience. It ended as quickly as it had began when they all moved down river for the night. Needless to say, I did not get much sleep the rest of the night.

The following morning the remainder of the herd came down river to join the troublemakers from the previous night. After spending a day at the waterhole the entire herd came through camp one last time before heading back up river. The final count was 22 elephants (four six-month old calves, two adolescent bulls and 16 cows). These elephants were part of only two groups of desert-dwelling elephants in the world. The other group lives in Mali, North Africa. They have adapted to their dry, sandy environment by having a smaller body mass and larger feet than most other elephants. Today over 300 elephants live in Western Namibia, 70 exclusively along the coast.

After two days with the elephants it was finally time to track rhinos. Bernd, two trackers and I packed up our Toyota 4x4 pickup with all the gear we would need for four days out in the field. This was the beginning of one of the most physically demanding experiences of my life. Our days started at sunrise (about 0600) and ended 10-12 hours later. By this time we were so exhausted that we could barely set up our camp for the night. Camp was simple. We parked under an acacia tree in a river bed, made a fire for cooking dinner, unloaded our bedrolls, cleaned up the best we could then fell asleep under the African sky.

Many nights we were serenaded to sleep by the sounds of local hyenas. The mornings were even simpler - boil water for coffee, pack up the truck and go.



**Desert Elephant climbing up the river bank.**

During the day there were endless hours of driving over the most rugged, rocky terrain I had ever seen. When it got too rough for the truck it was time to set out on foot. Our search was concentrated on the existing waterholes in the area. Some days we hiked up to two hours just to reach one of these water sources. If there were no fresh tracks it was back to the truck and off to the next waterhole. If there was fresh evidence that a rhino had visited then we were off and running. There were days we hiked over 10 miles and up to six hours - sometimes without the payoff of finding our elusive quarry. It was certainly nothing to complain about because there was an endless amount of game to view along the way- mountain zebra, oryx, kudu, giraffe, springbok, etc.

The days we did find a rhino were very exciting and uplifting for the team. Not to mention dangerous. One day, after about an hour of tracking, we ran into Mike. He was one of the dominant bull rhinos in the area. Now, when I say "ran into" I mean literally. We were following a fresh trail and all had our eyes to the ground trying to figure out which way the trail went. The pace was slow because it

was hard to pick up clues in this rocky area. A few bent blades of grass or an overturned rock could be the only hint which way to go. As soon as we reached the top of a small ridge, there he was, no more than 30 feet in front of us. We stopped dead in our tracks but it was too late. Mike spun around to face us, put his head down, snorted and charged. There were no trees or rocks to hide behind, he caught us in the open. He only took four steps in our direction but it was enough to make us scatter. After standing his ground for a few very uneasy minutes he triumphantly ran off. Occasionally he would look back to make sure we were not following. We were successful in tracking and recording seven of the 13 known rhinos in the southern range, but none more closely than Mike.



**“Mike” the rhino stands his ground**



**Author Peter Hnath with truck and equipment preparing to head out on patrol.**

All notes collected in the field are entered into a database. Tracking teams are paid a bonus for each clear photo and accurate I.D. form that is turned in. Fecal samples are collected to obtain rhino DNA for the calculation of relatedness. If the rhino population is too closely related it may be necessary to translocate individuals to maintain genetic diversity. SRT's rhino project has been in full swing for many years and they are now beginning to gather data on the desert elephant population as well. With all of SRT's efforts there have only been three recorded cases of poaching in the last 10 years. All the poachers have been caught and have served time in prison.

After spending two weeks in the field with SRT staff it is easy to see the concern and dedication that is needed to make a field conservation program successful. These people have given up a "normal" lifestyle to save the wildlife in northwest Namibia. Their efforts have helped the desert rhino, along with other wildlife, survive and increase in numbers. Most importantly, without the support of traditional leaders and local communities this success story could not have been told. What we have to realize is that all of our information, every fact and figure that we recite to the public comes from people in the field- people who live and breathe conservation seven days a week. They are the real heroes.

*(Editor's note: Check out the Save the Rhino Trust website at <http://www.rhino-trust.org.na/>)*

