

MICHAEL WERIKHE THE RHINO MAN

1956 - 1999

By Fleur Ng'weno

Michael Werikhe set off from Mombasa in 1982, to walk 500 kilometres and 1500 metres uphill to Nairobi, to draw attention to the plight of the black rhino. In 1982, less than 500 black rhinos remained alive in Kenya, once home to many thousands.

Michael Werikhe walked alone, carrying his camping equipment and two pet snakes to use as talking points with the people he met. It was a long and dangerous journey, but he had a valuable asset: the support of the East African Wild Life Society.

Nehemiah Rotich, then Executive Director of EAWLS, had seen the potential in this young factory worker, and agreed to publicize the walk and collect funds donated for each mile walked. It became a partnership of more than a decade, as Werikhe undertook walks around East Africa; across Europe; and in the United States.

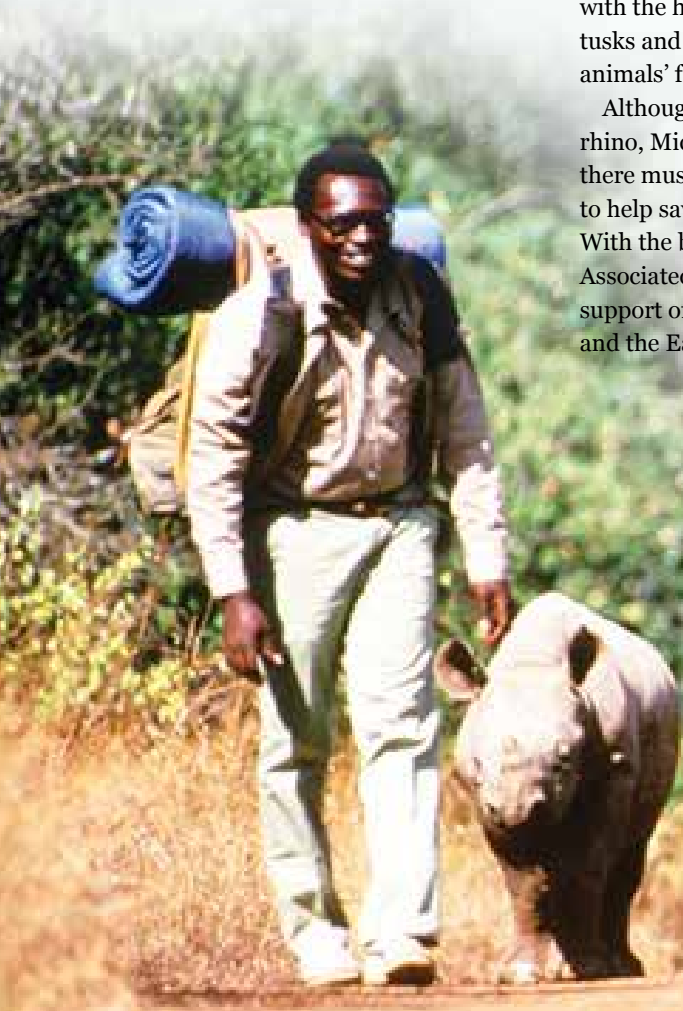
As a boy growing up in Mombasa, Michael had roamed the mangrove forests at the ocean's edge. At school in Nairobi, he spent his free time at the Snake Park of the National Museums. After a family break-up and poor exam results, he worked briefly for the Game Department where he came face to face with the horror of poaching: elephant tusks and rhino horns torn from the animals' flesh.

Although he had never seen a live rhino, Michael Werikhe decided that there must be something he could do to help save the rhino from extinction. With the blessings of his employer, Associated Vehicle Assemblers, and the support of the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya and the East African Wild Life Society,

he set off on his first walk. The funds and awareness that Michael Werikhe raised on his walks supported the study and conservation of the black rhino. Rhino sanctuaries were established in national parks such as Nairobi National Park, as well as private ranches. As Werikhe walked and talked, poaching continued and rhino numbers declined to below 400 in Kenya. ...and then, slowly, rhino populations began to increase again.

Michael Werikhe, now known as The Rhino Man, was honoured in 1989 as one of the United Nations Environment Programme's "Global 500"; and in 1990, Werikhe was among the first winners of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize.

Michael Werikhe sadly died in 1999, when he was only 42. He leaves a powerful legacy, however. Black rhinos are pulling back from the brink of extinction, and now number some 600 in Kenya and over 5,000 in Africa. And other dedicated people walk in his footsteps to raise funds and awareness for our endangered animals.●



**THE RHINO WILL LIVE
OR DIE BECAUSE OF US**

MICHAEL WERIKHE