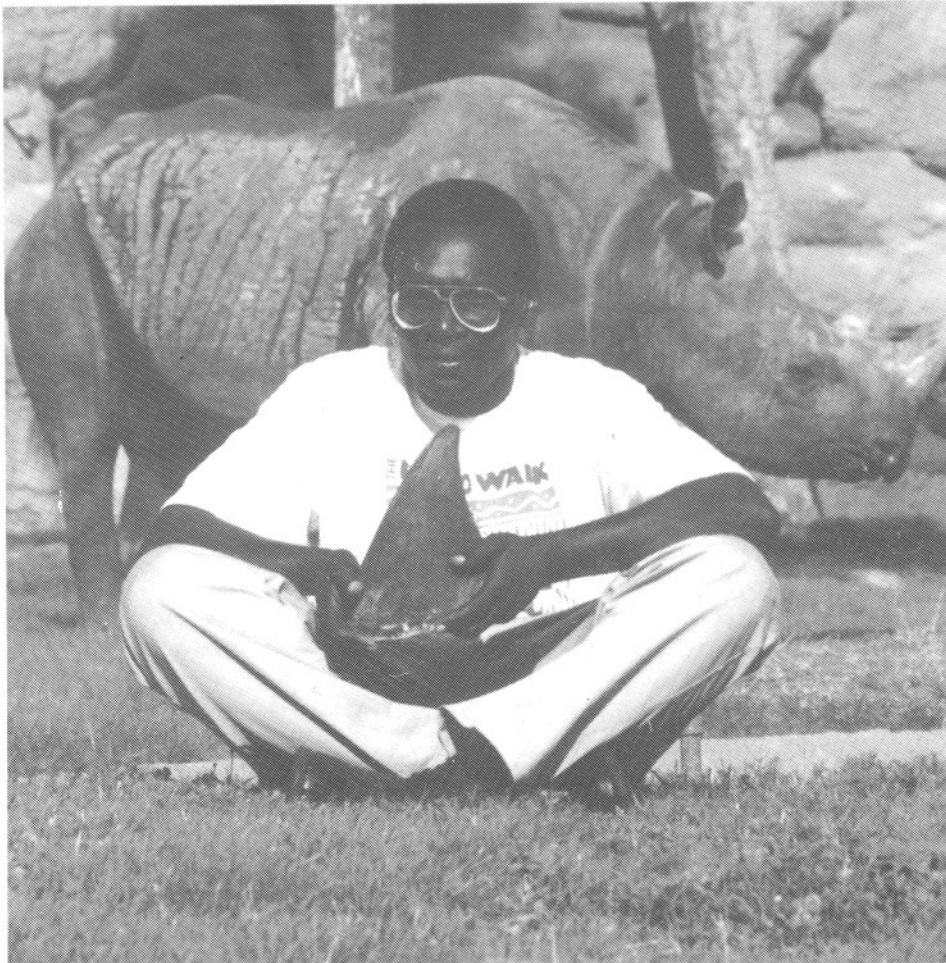


Rhinos are better than money

compiled by Fleur Ng'weno

Michael is still walking and talking his way across North America.



Michael with rhino horn in Santa Barbara.

As Michael Werikhe walked to the podium to bring the International Conference on Rhinoceros Conservation and Biology to a close, he could feel the tension in the air. The meeting of top scientists and policy makers in San Diego, California, had been highly charged. Debate had raged between the proponents of captive breeding programmes in zoos in the North, and those who felt that more results per money spent could be achieved by protecting rhinos in their natural habitat in the South.

'This was the atmosphere under which Michael had to give the closing address', said Helen Gichohi, chairperson of the Michael Werikhe Walk Committee in Nairobi, who attended the Rhino conference in San Diego. 'As always, he rose to the occasion.

'He spoke to a totally silent audience for over half an hour', Gichohi remembers. 'They were captivated by what he had to say, about his quest to save the rhino though he knew next to nothing of its biology, about his views on the role of the zoos and the field conservationist, and mostly, that nothing would be gained in conservation if the major players were divided and self serving in their aims and objectives.

'Michael received a standing ovation. I shed a few tears. I knew Michael was a good speaker, but I did not know he could be so compelling and captivating! His speech was hailed by many as the most balanced, reconciliatory, and most of all, well-delivered at a most appropriate time'.

Werikhe's address to the International Conference on Rhinoceros Conservation

and Biology was one of the highlights of his 2,400-kilometre walk in the United States and Canada to raise concern and funds for the black rhinoceros, one of Africa's most endangered animals. The walk is sponsored by the East African Wild Life Society, Wildlife Conservation International, Kenya Wildlife Service and the Gallmann Memorial Foundation in Nairobi; and in the United States, by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA) and the Discovery Channel, with support from the Art Ortenberg and Liz Claiborne Foundation and the Goldman Environmental Foundation.

The Rhino Walk kicked off under the bright glare of television on April 12th in Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida, which includes an African theme park with well-kept animals. 'Good morning, America', the highest rated national morning television show in the US, featured an interview with Werikhe, and 20 TV channels country-wide covered the start of the walk through a satellite uplink.

Robert Wagner, the Director of AAZPA, David Jenkins, Deputy Director, and Lois Kampinsky, coordinator of the Rhino Walk in the United States, were on hand to launch Werikhe on his way. Jonathan Kioko, a Kenyan craftsman from Busch Gardens, presented him with a rhino-topped hand-carved walking stick. Werikhe walked past the palms, pines and tall grass of northern Florida from Tampa to Orlando, then flew to the city of Miami near the tip of the Florida peninsula. He took part in Earth Day celebrations at Metrozoo in Miami with the enthusiastic support of hundreds of Boy Scouts from Miami. The newspapers covered his visit in both English and Spanish.

'As Werikhe walks and talks his way through the countryside, he also looks and listens', reported Star Smith in the Camarillo Daily News in Camarillo, California. 'I'm trying to learn as I go along, about environmental issues in other areas, he said.

Part of the learning process was a visit to the Everglades in southern Florida, the great 'rivers of grass' and one of the few National Parks in the eastern United States. Spending a day in the village of the Miccosukee Indian people near the Everglades, Werikhe learned about the concerns and outlooks of Native American people. He was greatly impressed by the artwork on rhino conservation prepared by students at the small Indian School, with classes from kindergarten through high school. On a boat tour of the Park, Werikhe also had the chance to see American wildlife such as alligators and the rare Florida crocodile in the wild.

Across the United States, on the scenic coast of southern California, April 28 was proclaimed 'Rhino Day' in honor of Michael Werikhe's visit by the Mayor of Santa Barbara. The Board of Supervisors of Santa Barbara County passed a special resolution declaring 'Black Rhino Awareness Day' and commending Michael Werikhe 'for his dedication and service to the Black Rhinoceros and the efforts of

nature conservationists around the world'. 'What a remarkable man!' was a phrase often heard during the Walk.

Werikhe walked on from Santa Barbara, across the Oxnard Plain and past rolling hills to Los Angeles. In the city, he was the guest of Jim Stewart, and attended a large reception in his honour. The Kenyan Consul in Los Angeles, J. O. Aduo, was among the hundreds of walkers at the zoo.

More than a year earlier, the Zoological Society of San Diego had invited Werikhe to the Rhino Conference, and in early May all systems were go for his arrival in San Diego, the sixth largest city in the United States. A booklet about rhinos was re-issued to coincide with the Rhino Walk, the magazine of the Society devoted much of its May issue to rhinos and Michael Werikhe, and a whirlwind, almost nonstop schedule had been organized.

Helen Gichohi, chairperson of the Walk Committee in Nairobi, and Lois Kampinsky, coordinator of the Rhino Walk in the US joined Werikhe on the two-day, 60-km walk from the Wild Animal Park north of the city to the San Diego Zoo. Gichohi noted that Werikhe carried a snake, as he had on his first walk (but this time it was a boa constrictor borrowed from the Zoo) and a rhino horn to explain the problem of the rhino horn trade. The walkers were followed by a support crew with a portable telephone, and Werikhe was inter-



Julie Stafford

Michael walking with supporters from Santa Barbara.

viewed over this 'rhino phone' as he walked!

'Along the way, Werikhe stopped at schools to talk to students about the rhino, why he was walking, and how each individual could contribute to the survival of rhino species', says Gichohi. 'In some cases, whole schools came out to see him and cheer him on'.

Other activities in San Diego included two mini-walks over the weekend, in which some two thousand walkers took part, a Mexican barbeque at a private ranch, and a meeting of East African Wild Life Society members in southern California, organized by Society representative Keith Tucker. Werikhe gave interviews to numerous newspapers and radio and TV stations. A brief CNN report on the Rhino Walk was shown on television all over the world.

The Discovery Channel, a highly-respected American cable TV channel, is broadcasting promotional spots for Michael Werikhe throughout his walk as part of its support. During June, Discovery Channel scheduled a series of programmes on rhinoceros and the rhino horn trade. Werikhe was also due to appear as one of 'Pet's Best Friends' on prime time US national television in June.

Lois Kampinsky reports that expenses for the Rhino Walk have been covered, and money is coming in for rhino projects in six African countries, with one-quarter of the funds reserved for captive rhino breeding programmes. The Rhino Walk continues to criss-cross the United States, ending in Washington, DC, in early September.

'I like money, but rhinos are better than money', six-year-old Jeffrey Freeman of Portland, Oregon, wrote when he sent a dollar to Michael Werikhe. 'I hope you get lots of money to save the rhinos'.

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