

# Departments



## RHINO RESEARCH

In South Africa, conservationists work to stop poachers (see page 33).

THE PACIFIC



## DEPARTMENTS

- 8 **CNT Digital** Some favorite Gold List properties and New Year's resolution ideas.
- 10 **Forces of Nature** Editor in chief Klara Glowczewska on the irresistible spell of nature's power.
- 12 **Contributors**
- 16 **Readers React** A statistics lesson and some Polish perspicuity.
- 118 **Where Are You?** The glass house.
- 140 **Word Trips** Solve the puzzle for a chance to win a spa trip for two!
- 148 **Room with a View** The Waldorf Astoria, Chicago.

## WORD OF MOUTH

- 19 **On the Road Again** The Beat Generation hits the big screen.
- 24 **Honolulu A to Z** Tips for Hawaii's most happening city.
- 28 **"The Greatest Indulgence Will Not Be a Ferrari—It'll Be a Week in Kathmandu"** André Balazs on the future of hotels.
- 30 **See the Light** Pastel-colored carry-ons.

## THE INFORMER

- 33 **Is This the End of the Wild Rhino?** Africa's rhinos are being slaughtered at a staggering rate. Graham Boynton reports on the poaching pandemic threatening to wipe out one of the oldest species on the planet.
- 38 **A DNA Detective Story** How science may save the rhino.
- 51 **Ombudsman** Fleeced by an online agent.

AFRICA 33, 55

ASIA 55

AUSTRALIA 55  
Sydney 30

CENTRAL AMERICA 55  
PANAMA 120

EUROPE 55  
NETHERLANDS  
Amsterdam 106

MIDDLE EAST 55  
OMAN 132

NORTH AMERICA  
CANADA 55  
CARIBBEAN 55  
MEXICO 55  
UNITED STATES 55  
HAWAII  
Honolulu 24  
ILLINOIS  
Chicago 148  
TEXAS  
Dallas 20

THE PACIFIC 55

SOUTH AMERICA 55

## Live the Cover

**THE BACKSTORY** Among the many reasons certain places are chosen for our annual roundup of the best of the best in hotels, resorts, and cruise lines (see Gold List, in this issue), a great view—and location—are at the top of the list. In Rome, readers love the opulent Beaux Arts Westin Excelsior, an Eternal City landmark since 1906.

**HOW TO GET THERE** Grab a taxi at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino airport (about \$57) to make the 45-minute drive through agricultural towns and suburbs to Rome proper; you'll know you're almost at the hotel when you turn onto the Via Veneto and see Bernini's stately stone Triton Fountain in the Piazza Barberini and pass the creepy Capuchin Crypt (whose six rooms contain the bones of more than 4,000 monks). Banish such macabre thoughts by gazing down the famously fancy Via Veneto, where the Westin is next to the U.S. embassy. Fellini fans may spot backdrops from *La Dolce Vita*, which was shot largely in the neighborhood.

**THE 360** Our model stands on a terrace of the Westin Excelsior's 10,000-square-foot Villa Cupola suite, which overlooks the Via Veneto. But even the standard rooms here are lavish, with damask walls, Italian marble bathrooms, and Biedermeier-style furnishings. Step outside and walk five minutes north and you're in the Villa Borghese, where gardens provide peaceful respite amid shady greenery (39-06-47-081; doubles from \$382).



**Witching Hour** The Via Veneto, as seen from one of seven terraces of the extravagant Villa Cupola suite at the Westin Excelsior. Photograph by Williams & Hirakawa.



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# The Informer



SPECIAL  
REPORT

## Is This the End of the Wild Rhino?

They've lived through the Ice Age, the rampant hunting of the Victorian Age, and even climate change, but the African rhinoceros may not survive the poaching pandemic raging in Africa today. **Graham Boynton** reports on the race to save one of the oldest—and most magnificent—creatures on earth

**p. 38 A DNA DETECTIVE STORY**  
How science may arm authorities with the weapon they need to save the species.

**p. 47 FALL OF THE WILD**  
Africa's wildlife crisis extends well beyond the rhino. Here, ten other species at risk.

**p. 51 OMBUDSMAN**  
A hotel booking site leaves a reader feeling fleeced at a Paris hotel.

Its horn now more valuable than gold, the African rhino is under siege by well-armed poachers eager to feed Asia's growing demand. South Africa—with some 90 percent of the continent's rhinos—is the front line in the battle to save those that remain.

**MY GUIDE JUAN PINTO** comes bustling toward me, a grim expression on his face. I haven't seen him for a year, but he clearly has no time for niceties. "Throw your bag in the back of the vehicle," he barks. "They've found a rhino carcass 35 miles north of here. We're going."

I have just landed at the rural Hoedspruit Airport in South Africa's Limpopo Province to begin a three-week journey that will take me through the eye of the rhino poaching storm that is swirling across the continent but is centered in South Africa. As Pinto and I hurtle north toward a dusty village called Gravelotte, he updates me on what has been happening since he first told me about this poaching epidemic last year.

"We're fighting a war out here," Pinto says, "and right now we're losing." The enemy is poachers who have set their sights on South Africa, which, thanks to decades-long conservation efforts, is home to 90 percent of the continent's remaining rhinos. A year ago, Pinto says, South Africa was losing one rhino a day, mainly in the northeastern part of the country around Kruger National Park and the adjacent luxury private game reserves that run along its southwestern borders. Today, that number has doubled to two rhinos every day, slaughtered for their horns by a motley assortment of criminals that include Chinese and Vietnamese gangsters, corrupt veterinarians and national park game rangers, and poverty-stricken villagers from all over southern Africa but mostly from the country's eastern neighbor, Mozambique.

This current poaching spike, which follows years of relative calm, began in 2008 after a Vietnamese government official claimed to have been cured of cancer after taking rhino horn. The horn, which, like our fingernails, is made of keratin, has long been used in traditional Asian medicine to treat aches, fever, and a host of other maladies. But rhino horn had never before been thought of as a

treatment for cancer, and this most recent development has filled South African officials with horror. "There are now potentially three billion end users of rhino horn [in Asia] and only 21,000 rhinos left in South Africa," says Albi Modise, spokesman for the country's Department of Environment Affairs. Tom Milliken, head of the Global Elephant and Rhino Programme for the wildlife conservation group TRAFFIC, calls the current situation "a perfect storm of deadly consumption." While rhino are still reproducing at a rate that exceeds the killing, conservationists warn that if the poaching pandemic continues to grow at the current rate, the wild African rhino will be all but extinct in a decade.

The rhino that Pinto and I are on our way to see was found on a private conservancy, a small property that is no more than 2,000 acres in size and which, after this loss, has 23 white rhinos (white rhinos can be privately owned and traded in South Africa and are primarily used as tourist attractions or offered as hunting trophies to high-paying foreigners). "This rhino was probably shot in the middle of the night, and by now the shooter is long gone, his weapon already handed back to the

**"There are now potentially three billion end users of rhino horn and only 21,000 rhinos left in South Africa"**

middleman, and the horn is in Johannesburg or even Mozambique," Pinto says.

As soon as we arrive, we meet Vince Barkas, and he's mad as hell. A wild-eyed, wild-haired man in his late 40s, Barkas works for Protrack, the country's first and biggest privately run anti-poaching company. He waves his arms and proclaims, "There are no guards to protect these animals except one guy on a horse who patrols every now and then. And all the rhinos on this land have been de-horned by the farmer." De-horning is a controversial and, judging from this dead creature, sometimes ineffective anti-poaching strategy that has been adopted by conservationists in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as by private rhino owners in South Africa. It involves trimming off the top two-thirds of the horn to deter poachers, but the amount left on the rhino (the entire horn cannot be removed) can still fetch up to \$100,000 on the black market.

Barkas leads us through the bush for 100 yards, and there in a clearing is the carcass of an adult female white rhino. The Protrack team have already conducted an autopsy and found a .375-caliber bullet in the lung. Barkas points to two deep ax wounds on the animal's spine. "These guys were pros. A single clean shot and two chops to the spine to make sure she was dead. We think there were two poachers, one armed with an AK-47 or an R5—military assault rifles, to shoot any game guards who got in the way—and the other with a .375 hunting rifle."

Poachers sawed the horns off this female rhino and left her to die. She survived but was unable to care for her calf, which perished.



Anyone who has seen a rhino in the wild will tell you that these Sherman tanks of the bushveld are magnificent creatures. But the rhino at my feet lies disfigured in death, swarms of flies buzzing around her gaping wounds, the carcass beginning to bloat in the heat of the African afternoon. Her eyes are still intact, open in what looks like an accusing stare at the humans gathered around.

**HUNTED ALMOST** to extinction in the nineteenth century, the white rhino found refuge in the Imfolozi and Hluhluwe (pronounced *shloo-shloo-wee*) reserves, created at the turn of the twentieth century after their numbers dropped to around 100. By the time noted conservationist Ian Player was head warden of Imfolozi in the late 1950s, this cradle of rhino conservation held South Af-

rica's entire population of 650 animals. Determined to ensure the species' survival, Player and his colleagues launched Operation Rhino in 1960, a translocation program that would move Imfolozi's excess rhinos to other reserves in South Africa, to other African countries, and to zoos around the world, creating breeding programs that were unmatched in modern wildlife conservation. The fruits of this program are evident in South Africa's significant white rhino population of more than 16,000, the very rhinos that are now under threat from poachers.

Millions of dollars are being pumped into save-the-rhino campaigns and anti-poaching activities both public and private, yet South African conservationists are anticipating a loss of 600 rhinos in 2012 (final counts were not available at press time), compared with 448 in 2011 and 330 in 2010. The main target is Kruger Park, which at 7,700 square miles is about the size of Israel and is estimated to have more than 10,000 rhinos—the largest population on earth. There were 252 Kruger rhinos poached in 2011, a 73 percent increase from 2010. Contributing to the spike is the fact that the park's 500 rangers each patrol roughly 15 square miles (the International Union for the Conservation of Nature recommends at least one ranger per four square miles); furthermore, Kruger shares a 200-mile-long border with Mozambique, allowing poachers from that country to cross the border with relative ease. And though most rangers are reliable and honest, some have been lured into helping poachers in return for a slice of the high price for rhino horn: It sells on the Asian black market for almost \$30,000 a pound, which makes it more expensive than gold. "This is a huge area to patrol, and you're lucky if you find a set of footprints," says Ken Maggs, head of the South Africa National Parks' Environmental Crime Investigation unit. "The elements, the remoteness, and the vastness of the place are against you."

Over my first seven days in the country, 18 rhinos are reported killed by poachers.

## Rhinos, in Black and White

In prehistoric times, rhinos roamed widely, with a range that included what is now North America and Europe. Today, there are five remaining species. Two of them—the black and the white—are found in Africa, while the remaining three are found in Asia. All are threatened.



### Black

**NUMBER REMAINING** 4,200.

**APPEARANCE** Gray in color and about half as big as the white rhino, reaching a maximum 3,000 pounds and 12.5 feet in length, black rhinos are also more aggressive and have **pointed mouths that allow them to hook leaves and twigs** from bushes and trees.

**RANGE** Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

**LIFE SPAN** Up to 35 years in the wild; 45 or more years in captivity.

**STATUS** Rampant poaching caused a 96 percent decline in the black rhino population between 1970 and 1992, when fewer than 2,500 survived in the wild. Today, anti-poaching activity has allowed the numbers to climb to some 4,200 animals, although the recent increase in poaching threatens to diminish the population once more.



### White

**NUMBER REMAINING** 20,150.

**APPEARANCE** Gray, not white—their name is thought to derive from the Afrikaans word *weit*, for their **wide mouths, made for grazing**. They can weigh between 4,000 and 6,000 pounds and reach 15 feet in length.

**RANGE** Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

**LIFE SPAN** Up to 50 years.

**STATUS** Its numbers dwindled to just 650 in 1960, but the white rhino is now the least endangered of all rhino species, thanks to the work of conservationist Ian Player, whose Operation Rhino protected the species through translocation and breeding programs. Even so, **the northern white subspecies is now believed to be extinct** and some populations of southern white are on CITES Appendix I, reserved for the most endangered species.

**WILLIAM FOWLDS** is a 41-year-old wildlife veterinarian whose family owns Amakhala, one of a group of privately operated Eastern Cape game reserves that have sprung up over the last two decades. They appeal to American and European tourists because they are malaria-free and stocked with wildlife brought in from other reserves. Amakhala received its first rhino in March 2003.

"The day the rhino arrived, the local children were given the day off from school. It was an amazing experience, and you could feel the change in the place just because of the presence of this animal. We took a giant leap forward that day from being a farm to becoming a wilderness."

The rhino eventually gave birth to a male, which Fowlds named Geza and sold to a neighboring reserve. In February 2011, he received an emergency call from the staff at that reserve. They had found a rhino that had been darted by poachers with M99, a chemical compound 10,000 times more potent than

morphine, and whose horns had been hacked off with axes. The rhino was still alive. Fowlds rushed to the reserve and recognized the rhino right away, despite its disfigured appearance. It was Geza. •

“Seeing a living animal without a face was truly horrendous,” Fowlds recalls. “One leg was badly damaged, so he was stumbling around, faceless, with pieces of tissue hanging off his wounds. I darted him again, assessed his injuries, and decided to put him to sleep. That changed my life completely. I was transformed from someone who was quite hard and didn’t show his emotions easily into an emotional basket case, which I remain. We have

to stop this hateful trade. But how long will it take to do this, and how much time do we have?”

**NOT ALL** of the rhino darting going on in South Africa’s private reserves is being done by poachers. In fact, some of it may well begin to turn the tide against them. Fowlds belongs to a small group of conservationists who are darting rhinos to take DNA samples that are then submitted to a central database at the Onderstepoort Veterinary Genetics Laboratory in Pretoria.

This program, known as RhODIS (Rhino DNA Index System), has been in operation for less than two

## A DNA Detective Story

A record number of South African rhinos were poached last year—549 as of mid-November, with more than 270 killed in Kruger National Park alone. But anti-poaching authorities now have a powerful new tool that is leading to increased prosecutions and improved protection: RhODIS (Rhino DNA Index System). Created by the University of Pretoria’s veterinary genetics laboratory, RhODIS catalogs rhino DNA in a central database to be used as evidence in prosecuting those involved in the illegal trade in rhino horn. Here’s how it works



**1.** DNA collectors anesthetize a rhino with a dart, then gather horn shavings and hair and blood samples that they send to RhODIS.



**2.** A poacher kills a South African rhino and saws off its horn. The poacher then sells the horn to a smuggler who supplies an Asian syndicate selling horns as medicine.



**3.** The smuggler is stopped for a routine search at Johannesburg’s airport when a security dog recognizes the scent of rhino horn. The poached horn is seized and the smuggler arrested.



**4.** A piece of the horn is analyzed to see if its DNA matches any RhODIS samples. It does, allowing law enforcement to zero in on the rhino’s terrain and ultimately to find the animal’s carcass—proof that the horn was poached.



**5.** The smuggler is sentenced to a minimum of ten years in prison; the case may lead law enforcement to other smugglers and poachers in the network. Before the DNA system was established, there was rarely enough evidence to prove that a poacher had killed a rhino or that a smuggler was dealing in poached horn. Most suspects claimed to have simply found the horn lying on the ground. Now, RhODIS helps authorities track the horn back to a specific rhino, providing physical evidence that the horn came from an animal that was poached. This leads to convictions and harsher sentences for both poachers and smugglers.

**6.** Since the matching DNA allows authorities to trace a horn to a particular rhino, it also provides information on areas where poachers are active and, as a result, allows law-enforcement to concentrate anti-poaching efforts in that region. The increase in security protects the rhinos and deters would-be poachers.



## GAME PLAN

Four strategies to help save the rhino

### POSSIBLE SOLUTION

**Legalize the trade in horn.** **PROS** Could take the profit motive out of poaching and smuggling. (Supply would come from existing horn stockpiles as well as harvesting from rhinos that die naturally.) **CONS** Could make laundering and selling poached horn even easier. **STATUS** South Africa has commissioned a study to see whether legalization would help reduce poaching.

### POSSIBLE SOLUTION

**Remove the horns.** **PROS** Deterrent to poaching (the horns are made of keratin and grow back in about two years, causing no harm to the animal). **CONS** Horn removal can alter mating and social behavior; the stub that remains can still be worth as much as \$100,000. **STATUS** The practice is spreading, but its effectiveness is still being evaluated. ►

Rhino horn stored in a secret South African vault. Armed gangs have raided other stockpiles to sell on the black market for as much as \$400,000 apiece.

years, and 3,500 animals are already in the database. Conservationists say that the potential of RhODIS as a crime-fighting weapon is enormous: DNA profiling can link those in possession of a horn to a particular crime, establish a connection between rhino blood found on perpetrators and a particular horn or carcass, and link end-users of horn with the dead animal. The program has already contributed to successful prosecutions for both possession and smuggling of horns. Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe are also beginning to submit DNA profiles to Onderstepoort. The \$2,250-per-rhino price tag is steep, especially for cash-strapped conservancies, but Ken Maggs, the head of South Africa National Parks' environmental crime investigation unit, says that RhODIS has been the single biggest breakthrough for criminal prosecutions (see "A DNA Detective Story," page 38).

Arrests of poachers and traffickers have increased from 165 in 2010 to 232 in 2011, with 170 already made by mid-2012. Sentences are also becoming more and more severe. For instance, a Vietnamese national who was convicted in 2009 of possessing four rhino horns received a \$5,700 fine and a two-year suspended sentence. In early 2012, three Mozambicans who were caught poaching rhinos in Kruger Park were each sentenced to 25 years with no chance for appeal. At the center of the stiffer sentencing is magistrate Prince Manyathi, who has sent out a clear message that he will impose lengthy sentences on poachers and smugglers alike. In November, Manyathi sentenced a Thai man to 40 years in prison for leading a smuggling ring. Other magistrates are now following his lead.

**TRADE IN RHINO HORN** was outlawed more than 30 years ago by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and

Flora (CITES), but white rhinos can still be bought and sold as livestock and even legally killed as trophies: Each year as many as 100 hunters—most of them American—pay upwards of \$60,000 for permits that allow them to kill and export a South African rhino. Selling the horn, however, remains illegal. The growing demand for horn and the absence of any legitimate supply has driven the black market price of the average rhino horn as high as \$400,000.

This grim economic reality has led to a groundswell in South Africa to persuade CITES to overturn

**As we watched the wretched drama on his laptop, Fowlds—who had seen the footage a hundred times—and I had tears running down our faces**

its 35-year moratorium on the international trade in rhino horn. The ban is seen as a miserable failure by many, one that has merely driven the market underground, where it has made considerable profit for criminal organizations. Proponents of trade argue that the 20 to 40 tons of rhino horn in government strong rooms from natural deaths and confiscations, combined with a normal mortality of more than 650 animals a year, gives South Africa enough legal horn to satisfy demand, drive prices down, and force the black market and poachers out of business. A Central Selling Organization (CSO) would act as a broker, and most of the proceeds would go to the countries, parks, and individual farmers supplying the horn. South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs has already commissioned a feasibility study on international trade.

One of the leading proponents of the scheme is Michael Eustace, a former merchant banker and a founder of the African Parks Network, a nonprofit that partners with governments to help manage national parks. "The argument that demand from the East is insatiable doesn't stand up," Eustace says. "Legal trade will satisfy the market, leaving the criminals to trade at low prices and high risks."

Those opposed to this plan contend that it could actually hasten the demise of the rhino. As evidence, they cite the spike in elephant poaching that came after CITES recently permitted the sale of ivory stockpiles after an outright ban on ivory sales for more than 20 years. "The legal sales of all those stored ivory caches have not stopped ivory poaching, nor brought down the price of ivory," says leading South African conservationist Colin Bell. "The reality is that ivory poaching increased exponentially after the trade was legalized. I cannot imagine that selling the stockpiled horns from a few hundred or even thousands of rhino will be able to keep pace with potential Asian demand." Bell says that the only way forward is to stop all rhino hunting immediately, to further increase fines for illegal possession, to radically step up



A mother and calf near South Africa's Kruger National Park, where poaching is at a record high. Tracking dogs were recently introduced to help authorities in the fight to protect the park's rhinos.



## GAME PLAN

### POSSIBLE SOLUTION Inject horns with an insecticide that

would sicken humans who ingest it or with a pink dye that shows up in X-ray scanners.

**PROS** Deters people from consuming horn and helps officials find illegal horn.

**CONS** Could have unknown side effects to the rhinos' health.

**STATUS** Members of the Rhino Rescue Project have injected insecticides and/or dye in around 100 rhinos since 2010; none have been poached so far.

### POSSIBLE SOLUTION Make rhino horn taboo.

Nonprofit WildAid is rolling out celebrity-endorsed PR campaigns to educate consumers against buying rhino horn, particularly in countries like China and Vietnam, where the demand is greatest.

**PROS** Similar to anti-smoking ads in the United States, an aggressive anti-horn campaign could make it socially unacceptable. **CONS** Could take too long to make a meaningful impact. **STATUS** The Chinese government recently gave a prime time TV spot to one of WildAid's anti-poaching ads.

anti-poaching efforts, and to "track down every one of the hunting permits issued to Vietnamese in recent years and find out what happened to those horns" (there is a widespread belief that many permits applied for by Vietnamese "hunters" were in fact procured by traffickers who then illegally sold the horn).

But even the emotionally charged Fowlds says that pragmatism appears to be the only solution. "Nothing we have tried is working, so there's a sense of desperation. We have to try something else—and maybe that something else is the legal supply of horn."

Ian Player, whose conservation work brought the white rhino back from the brink of extinction, also sees legal trade as a possible solution. "What needs to be stressed," Player says, "is the huge difference between emotion and sentimentality. I am emotional about rhinos but not sentimental, and the problem is that most of the so-called pro-rhino organizations which have sprung up in recent years base their thinking on sentimentality. These are NGOs that have made their money through sentimentality, not through sound conservation beliefs." There are now approximately 270 rhino conservation charities operating around the world—most of which appear to be decidedly anti-trade.

"If we don't succeed in legalizing the horn trade through natural mortality," Player says, "I think we could lose this battle." Indeed, it was the success of Player's Operation Rhino that led to the re-introduction of rhino hunting in 1970. And as he says, "Ironically, it is through the death of rhinos that there has been life. Hunting on private land with privately owned rhinos has helped plow a significant amount of money back into conservation and given these animals a market value."

In South Africa's KwaZulu Natal Province, home of Player's great rhino conservation success, there is strong support in both the public and private

sector for the introduction of trade in tandem with a program that makes local communities beneficiaries of profits made from wildlife, be it through tourism or the trading of assets such as rhino trophies. The Phinda conservancy, my last stop on this investigation, has a long tradition of community conservation work. It has a population of 160 white rhinos and 28 black rhinos and, despite its vulnerable location near the Mozambique border, has managed to buck the national trend by creating information networks in the community and a strong anti-poaching presence.

Consequently, both Phinda and the neighboring Imfolozi and Hluhluwe reserves reported an 18 percent drop in poaching between 2010 and 2011. Phinda's Les Carlisle says that it is the "white glove and iron fist" conservation ethic they have practiced for 20 years which will save the rhino. "Everybody recognizes that if we win the hearts and minds of the community, it reduces the pressure on wildlife," he says.

**AT THE END** of my first visit with Fowlds, he sat me down in front of his laptop and said he wanted to show me something that would be painful to watch. "If I thought the poaching of Geza was bad, I wasn't prepared for what happened last March." Again, he said, it began with a call from a nearby reserve. This time three rhinos had been poached using dart guns. One had died, but two had survived and, like Geza, were stumbling around the bush in terrible pain with their faces removed. Fowlds alerted a cameraman and headed out to help the stricken animals. Watching this wretched drama unfold on his laptop, Fowlds, who had seen this footage a hundred times, and I had tears running down our cheeks. He treated the male rhino, Themba (Xhosa for Hope), and the female, Thandi (Love), cleaning their wounds and stabilizing them. Themba lasted 24 days, but then rangers found him drowned in a shallow water hole. Thandi has miraculously survived.

I spent my last day in the bush with Fowlds. He wanted to show me Thandi, who is living in the Kariega reserve, where her horns were poached. Her condition has improved dramatically, and despite her disfigurement, she is prospering alongside another female white rhino and her calf.

We could not find Thandi and her companions in the open grassland, so we entered the thick bushveld on foot. This was risky behavior, because a spooked rhino charging out of dense vegetation could easily flatten fragile *Homo sapiens*. Fowlds laughed: "Just make sure you're near a tree you can climb quickly if they come at us."

In fact, Thandi and her traveling companions spent the afternoon carefully avoiding us. Normally, white rhinos can be found on the open grassland, grazing in the mild winter sunshine. But these three were keeping out of our way. It seemed appropriate behavior, given what we humans have visited on these magnificent creatures. Appropriate, too, that unarmed and on foot, it was man who was the most vulnerable creature in this wild habitat. □

TO SEE VIDEO FOOTAGE OF WILDLIFE VET WILLIAM FOWLDS TREATING WOUNDED RHINOS IN THE FIELD, AND AUTHOR GRAHAM BOYNTON'S PHOTOGRAPHS FROM HIS TRIP, GO TO [CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM/INFORMER](http://CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM/INFORMER).