

by Peter J. R. Whitehead

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NATURAL HISTORY

Rhino revival

IAN PLAYER:

The White Rhino Saga

254pp. Collins. £2.50.

Of the five species of rhinoceros, the so-called White Rhino is the largest. Sometimes weighing more than three tons, it is second only to the elephant in sheer bulk. Once enjoying a wide distribution in tropical and southern Africa, the depredations of hunters and poachers in the last century reduced its natural range to small areas in Zululand and, as a northern form, to parts of Uganda, South Sudan and the Congo. F. C. Selous, one of Africa's greatest hunters, left the continent in 1892 with the expectation that the White Rhino was unlikely to survive into the coming century. Two years later, a shooting party in Zululand bagged six animals and it was this that finally stirred the authorities and led to the formation of the Umfolozi, Mbuluwe and Lake St Lucia game reserves.

By 1953, however, the Umfolozi was overburdened with some 500 rhinos, far more than the land could carry, and the problem was now one of distributing these riches. While his brother won distinction on the world's golf courses, Ian Player set about solving the Umfolozi problem,

partly by supplying zoos and partly by attempting to repopulate other areas.

Immobilization of large game animals was at that time a rather new technique, but Mr Player and his colleagues had the benefit of personal instruction from Toni Harthoorn, a pioneer in the use of drugs with dart gun. He had modified Red Palmer's original Captur gun and suggested an impressive array of drugs for trial on the Umfolozi rhinos. Trials, failures, the first few successes and yet more trials followed until a system was perfected and the moment arrived when White Rhinos began to leave the reserve for destinations as far afield as Canada, Czechoslovakia, Burma and Taiwan.

Between 1961 and 1972 more than 1,000 rhinos were captured, some to be sent to game reserves in Africa and others to zoos. The success of the project, in terms of both conservation and financial reward, was such that by 1969 Mr Player was acting the part of travelling salesman encouraging zoos to purchase rhinos in tens and twenties. What Selous had seen as the extinction of a species had turned into its opposite, the conservation of a noble animal in a way that would give the most pleasure, interest and use to mankind.