

OPERATION RHINO

By Bill Savaris

It was in 1952 in KwaZulu-Natal's Umfolozi Game Reserve that a young ranger called Ian Player saw his first white rhino.

Two bulls loomed out of the mist. I had a perfect view of their physical characteristics as they walked along a ridge. The mouth was square and the archal hump between the head and the body bulged prominently. They walked to their flanks and steam rose from their backs. These were truly creatures from another age. The two rhinos grazed on the grass, moved their heads swiveling in a 180-degree rotation as they fed on the grass. I watched them move through the reeds without making a sound. A cluster of sandalabra flies and mosquitoes buzzed about.

I had a sudden sense that my life would in some way be bound up with these prehistoric animals.

To hear Player read from this book in the living room of his home in rural KwaZulu-Natal was a thing for me to be transported back to those cancer-strain days when the life of the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) hung in the balance.

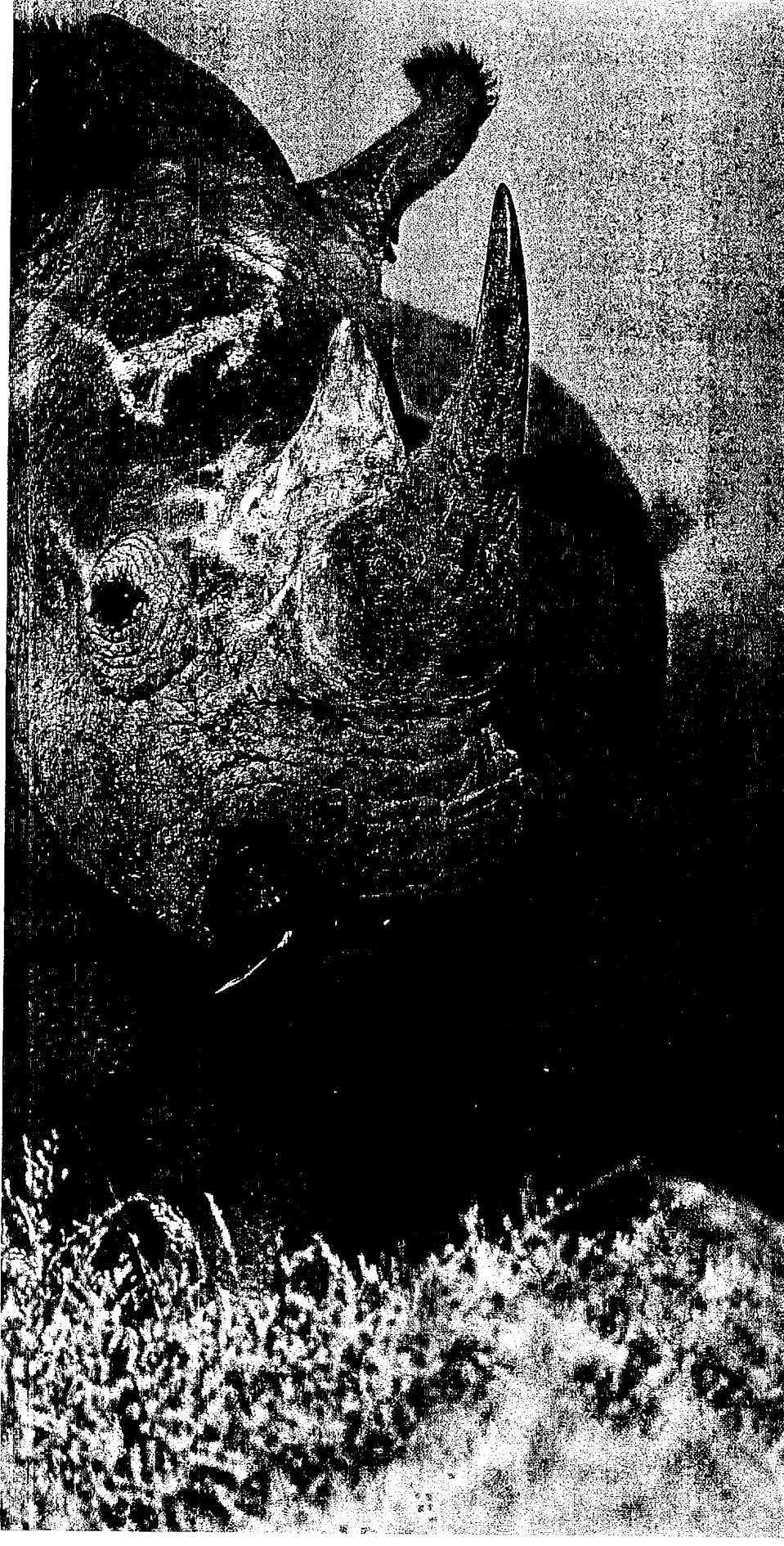
By 1894 the southern white rhino was almost gone. It had nearly disappeared through the destruction of habitat by game hunters. But that was a short-sighted policy. Some of them had been hunted in the black and white rhino sanctuaries. This was a public park and three rhinos had been taken. The rest of the rhinos were taken by the new animals from the remaining.

In April 1897 the white rhino of Lake St Lucia and Umfolozi Game Reserve were proclaimed as game reserves. The oldest existing ones in South Africa.

But by the time Player joined the Natal Parks Board in 1952, the only park considered to be a white rhino refuge was Hluhluwe. It was under assault from the demands of agriculture, particularly forestry, and there was increasing pressure from rural people living around the reserves.

Player was instructed to help with an aerial count of white rhino in Umfolozi Game Reserve and a total of 437 animals were counted. All that remained in the entire world.

"It was a critical time," he says. "We knew it was madness to have all our eggs in one basket. We were able





Head of the Umfolozi Game Reserve, James Basson



John Clark encourages a drugged white rhino into the holding pen at Moya rest camp in Umfolozi Game Reserve



Champion conservationist Ian Player initiated a conservation recovery programme that snatched the white rhino from near certain extinction. His strategy, first devised 31 years ago, of strict, present-day poaching controls and wildlife management has been fully vindicated, especially a minimum viable population in the early 1950s. White rhino numbers have increased tenfold to 5,000 animals with a common lineage stemming from the Umfolozi Reserve.



Nick Steele leads a white rhino away as the 1991 poacher's truck is burnt



The first capture with the team including Ian Player, Nick Steele, Maqubus Ntombela and Alphaeus Zulu

to protect them by putting a ring of steel around the game reserve, and by extending the hand of friendship to the local communities, who were pressing up against the borders."

But the poor, unfortunate displaced people were bringing cattle into the reserve, which was enclosed in those days – and we were terrified that one beast, diseased with anthrax, could be the end of the white rhino.

I was 33 years old and responsible for preventing the extinction of one of the rarest large mammals in the world."

The story of the trial and error setbacks and successes is vividly told in Player's book *The White Rhino Saga* (1977). The capture campaigns are perpetrated by the original team, one that is aged today, with some modern additions, many of whom come from local rural communities and ranches that are in the area.

While they were in the field, loaded with rhino horns, in 1991, his two friends and mentors, Maqubus Ntombela and Alphaeus Zulu, rangers of the reserve, were shot. Their skill and adventures were legendary. Players don't believe the story of my neck, Player says, mainly because:

"After populating some other Zululand reserves, such as Mzimba and Mkhize, in 1962, the first white rhino ever sent to the Kruger National Park, the last one there had been shot in 1896. There are now 2,000 all from the original Umfolozi rhinos."

"But there was another worry. The moment we took the rhino out of Umfolozi we'd taken away the raison d'être for the reserve," says Player. "It was still beloved for other bees."

He then, in his inimitable way, enlisted the help of the media and the world wide publicity, including an ABC which called rhino poaching such horrible crime, got the public concerned and money was generated. Vital players were recruited and he added to Umfolozi, ensuring the saving of the white rhino and the reserve.

By the end of 1970, 800 rhino had been captured and dispersed to countries like Britain, the United States (the San Diego Wild Animal Park has the white rhino as its symbol), Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Player concludes in his book, "our rhino capture was unique in wild life conservation. Other threatened species had first been taken to zoos, and as they bred they were reintroduced into their original habitats. The white rhino was first reintroduced into its former range in large numbers, then sent to zoological gardens as an added precaution. It could be said that the species was saved for posterity."

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