



Bertie's most dire plight

By Tommy Fraser

The full moon was idyllic, shining down on us from the heavens as my hunting friends and I sat around the campfire on our farm in Limpopo. We were discussing hunts we've experienced together, and we reminded one another of how blessed we were to be there. So blessed to smell the veld and hear the jackals call in the distance. Blessed like no other men on that night. I, in particular, felt blessed because our rhino on the second farm had already had two calves, the cutest little bundles of joy, carefree and happy.

I had recently started a project called *The Threatened Wildlife Protection Academy* with Leslie Brett, a veteran game ranger and ex-member of the SA Special Forces. Our goal: to train and equip WRSA members, SAHGCA members and members of reputable hunting and conservation organisations in the basics of anti-poaching.

My story and plight begins here: That night next to the fire . . .

I remember looking up at the moon as we were chatting about the hunting season, past hunting

seasons and what we were planning for future hunts. Out of nowhere, shining brightly like a beacon in the night, appeared a flare, floating in the skies over the farm. I thought to myself: maybe it is trying to tell me something or give me a message, and in a way I felt uncomfortable.

Little did I know that only 80km away, on the reserve where we are planning to launch this project aiming to protect wildlife, poachers were closing in on one of our rhino cows and her three-week-old calf.

Fast forward ten hours . . . I received messages on my cellphone from both my partners, including

WRSA's vice-president, Dr Peter Oberem, and our farm manager, asking me to call them urgently. I was oblivious of the events that had just transpired and that were about to transpire nor how they would change everything I thought I knew about poaching and the fight to stop it.

When Martin Roux, my friend and reserve manager, answered the phone, his words sent chills down my spine: "Tommy, they got Bertha. I'm sorry, but they killed her, the baby is okay though but Bertha's gone, she's gone!"

My eyes were instantly filled with tears and I cried uncontrollably. Rage, I felt rage, I was so furious at myself, why wasn't I there for them, for the rhino? Those savages, animals, scum, had entered the reserve with one mission only: kill

for personal gain, for a myth that Asians grew up with.

My Land Cruiser couldn't drive fast enough and the road felt longer than ever. As I approached the crime scene, I recall seeing Bertha lying there as if she was sleeping. These murderers knew what they were doing – one shot to the head was all it took. When I saw her mangled face, the tears came again. She was such a perfect animal, flawless, now completely unrecognisable.

As I sat down next to her massive corpse, I heard the calf, little Bertie, still drugged, in the back of Dr Louis Greeff's game

trailer. He made soft whistling sounds, crying for his mommy to come back. Poor little Bertie was three weeks old, just three weeks! They tell me that when they found Bertha, he guarded her lifeless body fearlessly, trying to drink milk now and again, unsuccessful obviously. Through all his fear and trauma, he would not give up on her.

I knelt down next to her one more time, and said goodbye. I apologised to her that I wasn't



Brave Bertie, standing by Bertha's side hours after the poaching incident.

there to protect her and vowed to never stop fighting for rhino, and any other animal targeted by those savages. I also promised her to look after her baby forever. Her eyes were open and it seemed like she understood me, and I am certain that I saw peace in her big brown eyes as I vowed to fight for her kind until my dying day.

When I closed her soft eyelids with my fingers, something happened to me, and I vowed to do everything I can to fight poaching. I made that promise to Bertha and to Bertie. Now every time I visit her little boy, I tell him how many poachers were caught

or shot around the country, and I could swear that he smiles when I pass the news on to him.

While this was going on, our government and the anti-hunting and anti-trade activists were still having meaningless meetings, and CITES was still failing wildlife. Our government is still happy to be the lapdog of their business partners in Asia – we should not upset business agreements.

This has to stop, I thought, but how? When CITES was formed by the IUCN, WWF and UNEP in 1975, its principles were sound and the goal was clear: to regulate the trade in wildlife and wildlife products; to make sure that sustainable utilisation is maintained. I ask you, the reader, to answer the following question: Is this what is happening in South Africa? Is

CITES benefitting us or is CITES failing our wildlife?

I could never understand how countries such as China and Vietnam can execute a tourist who had drugs in his/her possession without any negotiations, but we, the custodians of the greatest wealth of wildlife, sit back and grant bail to poachers, farmers and vets involved in poaching and poaching kingpins after they are caught. Why are we wasting time like this?

How could we, a once proud nation with the greatest national parks, just let an organisation that was built on sound principles, which are not being implemented

correctly, stand by and watch our precious heritage being destroyed? The mind boggles!

The numbers aren't looking good, with 668 plus rhino poached in 2012. We can easily add 10% to that figure as there are many poached rhino not accounted for. We were already close to, if not over, 100 rhino for 2013 when I was writing this article. I do not want to bore you with more stats and figures – I am rather going to ask for your help.

I speak on behalf of farmers out there, who do not know to whom they can turn for assistance. Your fellow countrymen, the people whose farms we hunt on every year, are in need of your help. We have an obligation, a duty and a calling as hunters and human beings to act.

Keep in mind that poaching isn't exclusive to rhinoceroses. Those savages are targeting lions, elephants, vultures and many other animals as part of their quotas to supply the illegal wildlife trade markets.

A new war

Can we win this war? The answer is undoubtedly yes, yes and again yes. We shall defeat these men when we realise that we have one thing that poachers lack: we have conviction! We have the belief that we must do something to stop this and the belief to be better people, the faith to do it and the will to stand together and eradicate our country and the world of this disease called poaching and the illegal wildlife trade.

You see, my friends, these people are driven by money, not by a heartfelt conviction to conserve and protect through sustainable utilisation. Within that lies our advantage, our edge, our survival.

Those cowards, be they a poacher, veterinarian, farmer, seller or buyer, have miscalculated what might happen when we stand up and say enough is enough.

Take a stand

"Not responding is a response – We are equally responsible for what we don't do." – **Jonathan Safran Foer**

Game farmer, hunter, conservationist and wildlife enthusiast, with the abovementioned quote in mind, I call on you today to join us in this fight against poaching. Certainly most of you support WRSA's PROA or the Rhinos Alive campaign, have bought a bracelet, a key ring and too many other things to mention in aid of rhino protection, but I have no doubt that some of you wish you could be involved more directly.

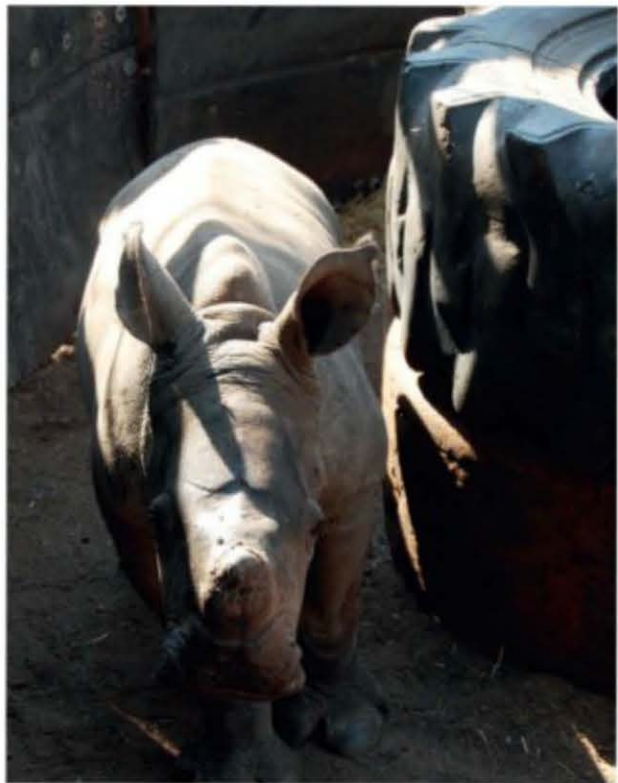
My mission today is not to try and stop you from donating money, in fact, finances are the one thing these syndicates might have more of than our conservation organisations. My mission is to stir you, my fellow hunters, to stand up and become physically involved.

I receive phone calls every week from the public who wants to join us on patrols, assist with road blocks, help us during full-moon cycles and assist us as we try to stop poaching. I can hear their desire to become more proactive

in the fight against poaching. It warms my heart every time because I know there are still good and willing people out there who will stand between a rhino and a poacher.

When I approached Dr Peter Oberem, Dr Gerhard Verdoorn and Dr Krappies Els of SAHGCA, they all agreed that this could be a great defence tool against poaching – having our own WRSA members and hunters on farms as trained volunteer antipoaching personnel. Private rhino owners have little or no support from government, but, armed with extensive knowledge of the law, antipoaching skills and the will to serve and protect, we as WRSA and SAHGCA members can make a huge impact.

Let me be very clear, the TWPA level 1 and 2 APU course, exclu-



A rapid intervention and coordinated rescue, where the appropriate handling, rearing and rehabilitation protocols are implemented, poaching orphans and casualties can be rescued successfully, humanely and responsibly, and reared in such a manner as to maximize their full rehabilitation and return to the wild.

sively for the members of recognised hunting and conservation organisations such as WRSA and SAHGCA, is aimed at equipping you with the basic knowledge to set up antipoaching operations in any reserve. This includes law, how to execute a legal arrest, road block procedures, crime scene protocol etc. To become a full-time antipoaching unit member is quite a different ball game. This, though, will be discussed in detail during the course.

During the course, some training will be facilitated by current Special Forces personnel and professionals in various fields, such as hand-to-hand combat and firearm handling.

Our reasoning for choosing a programme such as this is that experienced hunters know how to handle firearms, are familiar with firearm laws, and they know the basics of tracking and reading signs in the bush; thus, we are halfway there. After completion of this course, you will know what the law says and you will know your

rights as a civilian acting as an antipoaching officer.

Because members of WRSA and members of SA Hunters are obligated to adhere to the code of conduct of their respective associations, we can confidently deploy those who have completed the course in various private reserves to patrol during high-risk times such as full moon, the Easter holidays and school holidays. The syndicates are very busy during these times.

Training is intensive and trainees will not get much sleep, but the rewards are great. Knowledge is power, and you'll be gaining a lot of that! On completion of the course, you will be added to a database, and the TWPA office will send out e-mails to request members to assist us during these patrols, road blocks or at crime scenes. Every road block and most crime scenes will be carefully supervised by the Special Task Force and the SAPS.

I have to emphasise that civilians may not take the law into their own hands, and we rely heavily on

Task Force personnel for back-up during patrols on public roads and the related road blocks. During the course we will drill the use of lethal force in self-defence situations into the students and explain what the law says about the use of lethal force. The safety of our members comes first and we do not want anyone to act outside of the law.

.....
Action!

Action!

Action!

Fellow game farmer, conservationist and hunter, this is where my story ends, and hopefully where ours, the custodians of South Africa's wildlife, begins.

You see the newspaper articles every day, you read the statistics every month, and now you have the opportunity to take action and the next time you see a rhino say: "I am helping to save them."

Hurry up and do not wait – if we linger much longer, it could be too late!

For more information on upcoming courses or questions on poaching, please e-mail us at tommyfraser@villacrop.co.za, ipiti@netactive.co.za and sandrief@kunkura.co.za, or visit our website at www.twpa.co.za. **W**



Made to order - available in steel, aluminium and stainless
083 596 0899 • buffaloboxes@gmail.com

WR WILDLIFE RANCHING

R25.00 (VAT incl)
Vol 6, No 1
AUTUMN 2013



WRSA-publikasie vir die wildbedryf van Suid-Afrika



BIODIVERSITY
threatened

Commercial
value of the
Big 5

Rise of
environmental
education

CRIME
JUSTICE

VELD-
transformasie

SPECIES
under siege

Livingston eland DNA debate | WRSA-wildveiling | Ethical hunting