



**At the Mauricedale ranch in South Africa, an endangered black rhino charges**

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**In Africa, hunters  
are paying \$150,000 to  
kill an endangered  
black rhino. And that  
may save the species.**

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# The Sacrifice

**By Brendan Borrell  
Photographs by James Oatway**

**I**n June 1996 a game rancher named John Hume paid about \$200,000 for three pairs of endangered black rhinos from the wildlife department of the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal. Among them was a male who would come to be called “Number 65,” and whose death would play a central role in the debate about conservation.

South Africa did not start the auctions because it had a surplus of the animals. Quite the opposite. Although the black rhinos had been reproducing, they were still critically endangered. Only about 1,200 remained within the country’s borders. But black rhinos are massive animals, and with just under 7 percent of the country set aside in protected areas, conservationists and wildlife departments had run out of room to accommodate them.

Hume’s 6,500-hectare ranch, Mauricedale, lies in the hot, scrubby veldt in northeastern South Africa. Hume, 68, made his fortune in taxis, hotels, and time-shares, and Mauricedale was his Xanadu, a retirement project of immense proportions. In the late 1990s he began buying up many of the neighboring farms and ranches, and his triangular estate would soon be boxed in on all sides by roads and sugar cane plantations. Hume also was rapidly becoming the largest private owner of white rhinos; there are currently 250 split between Mauricedale and another similar property. He also raises cape buffalo, roan and sable antelopes, hippos, giraffes, zebras, and ostriches.

When the black rhino bull arrived, Hume’s farm manager—a burly Zimbabwean named Geoff York whose typical mode of dress is army boots and a pair of purple shorts—tranquilized him, clipped two notches in his left ear and two in the right, and gave him a number: 65.

With a horn worn down to 20 inches from rubbing it against rocks, Number 65 was not a beautiful bull. It wouldn’t take long for him to cause trouble at Mauricedale. Very soon, Number 65 started fights with a young male, who died in November 2000 following a particularly nasty run-in. He chased the other bulls off to an area of the farm called Thanda Nani so he could have the females all to himself. For two years he mingled exclusively with Hume’s cows, yet they never bore him a calf. He was no longer able to breed. “He dominated the farm,” says York. “We knew he was a problem.”

Hume was not the only one struggling with his black rhino bulls. As far back as 1992, the African Rhino Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

had discussed the “surplus male problem,” says the group’s longtime scientific officer, Richard Emslie. Females can raise only a single offspring every two to three years, but males can sire many. As in cattle ranching, population growth rates are highest when the number of bulls in a herd is limited. It was beginning to look as if, for the first time since they were added to Appendix I—the highest level of protection under the 1977 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)—a black rhino should be legally hunted and killed.

More conservationists, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), are embracing the notion that legalized hunting—and the creation of a market for the right to shoot and harvest an animal—may help endangered species. The black rhino is a trophy for many hunters, who are willing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to shoot them. Such men travel to Africa from Russia, Japan, Spain, and Eastern Europe, but Americans dominate the market. Fred Leonard, who once had a Michigan business designing plastic parts for the auto industry, is a typical client. Despite two open-heart surgeries, Leonard has made 13 trips to the continent to bag leopard, lion, elephant, buffalo, and various antelope. He’s got more than 75 dead animals—all of them legal—displayed in a special room in his house outside of Grand Rapids, Mich. Leonard bemoans the common confusion of hunters with poachers. The difference, he says, is that hunters care about the environment—and the law. “Most hunters are decent people,” he says.

Hunting and trade of an internationally endangered species such as the black rhino is governed through CITES. From 1970 to 1992, Africa’s black rhino population plummeted from 65,000 to fewer than 2,500 as professional poaching gangs sought the horns, used as decorative dagger handles in the Middle East and ground down and ingested as a supposed aphrodisiac and stomach aid in Asia. The species, under a general hunting ban, had rebounded since, to about 3,610 by December 2003. Even if South Africa had a lot of, and maybe too many, black rhinos in some areas, the country could not act alone. South Africa’s deputy director of biodiversity compliance at the Environmental Affairs and Tourism Dept., Sonja Meintjes, would have to persuade two-thirds of the parties of CITES to vote to allow a hunt at the next meeting in Bangkok the following year.

Meintjes’ general argument runs counter to everything conservationists have taught the world about endangered species, but she and many others believed hunting could reward both wildlife and investors such as Hume, who were setting aside huge parcels of land for the animals. Proof that hunting works

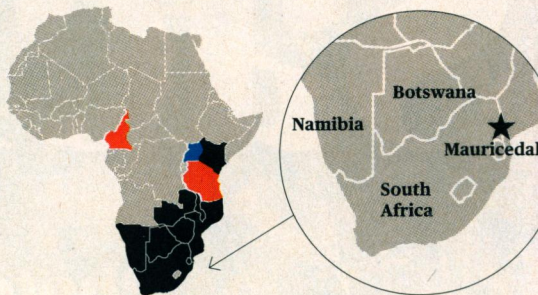
# Rhinos in Africa

## Geography:

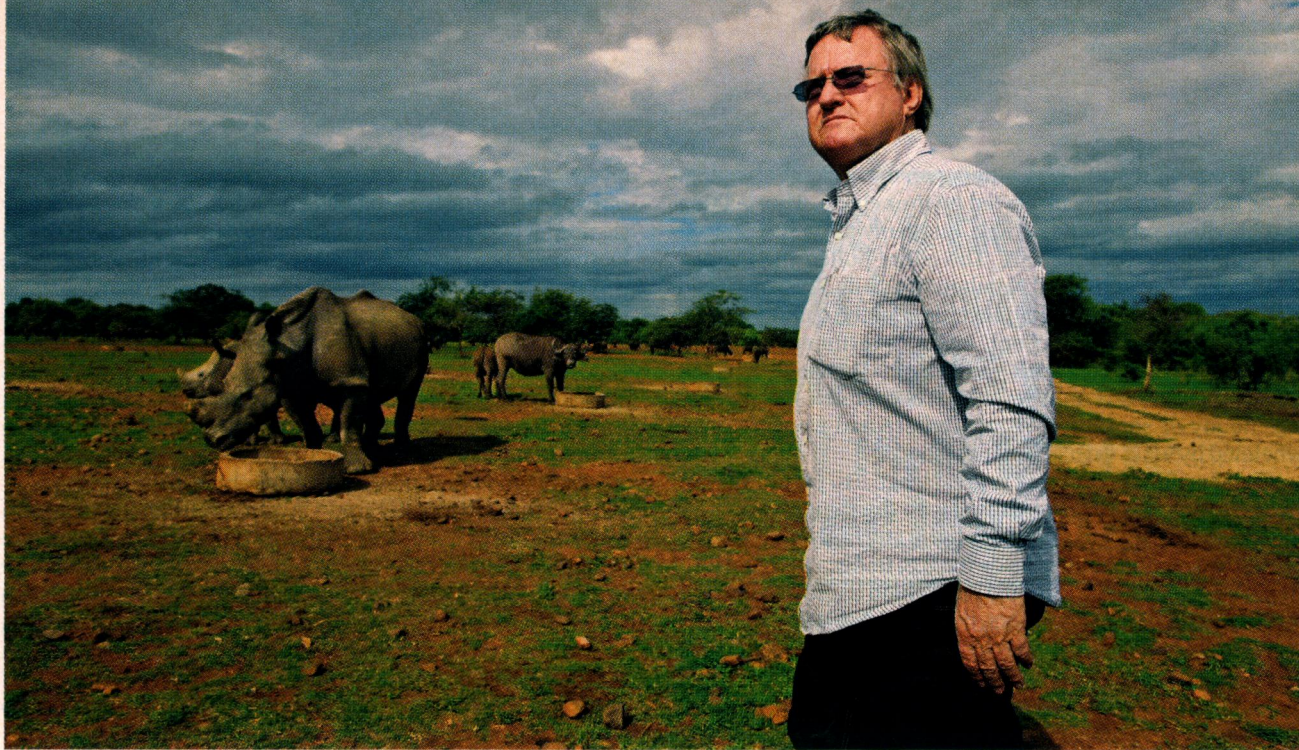
Black rhinos once ranged across the savannahs and deserts of sub-Saharan Africa, but now exist mainly in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Tanzania. White rhinos roamed throughout southern Africa and in a pocket in north-central Africa.

### HABITATION REGIONS

- Black + White Rhinos
- Black Rhinos
- White Rhinos



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Hume at Mauricedale ranch; behind him, dehorned white rhinos feed

can be seen in the success of South Africa's white rhino populations, says Emslie. "They started hunting in 1968 when there were 1,800 in the country. Now we are looking at 19,400." Still, black rhino hunting is hotly debated. Animal rights groups, such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare, have long opposed killing wildlife for any reason. The Endangered Wildlife Trust, a South African conservation organization, has also come out against the hunts, although it supports trophy hunting of more common species, such as leopard. "Our attitude with the rhino has been to err on the side of caution until we are sure of the stability of the population across Africa," says Tim Snow, manager of the Trust's wildlife conflict mitigation program.

As the political and scientific debate developed in the lead-up to the 2004 CITES meeting, professional hunters began jockeying for the right to guide the first legal black rhino hunt in decades. The black rhino's secretive habits and aggressive nature make it one of the most dangerous and difficult big-game animals to kill, and it has long been one of the "big five" trophy game animals, along with the elephant, lion, buffalo, and leopard. Among the contestants was Peter Thormählen, a South African of German descent, who had earned an MBA and a degree in organic chemistry in the 1990s at the University of

the Free State in Bloemfontein but abandoned a future in fertilizers for a life in the bush. Hume had worked with Thormählen and picked him to run the hunt. "Professional hunters are not the most honest guys in the world," Hume says. "Peter has been by far the best we've dealt with."

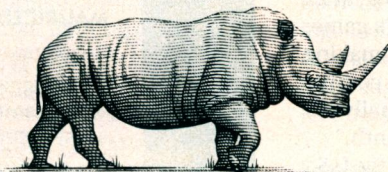
In October 2004, when word came back from Thailand that Meintjes had obtained five tags for older males in South Africa, Thormählen went to the U.S., where the hunters and the money are, to find a client. He soon connected with an American hunter in the financial services business, who within days wired a \$25,000 deposit on a \$150,000 fee for a seven-day hunt. Most of that would go to Hume.

On July 21, 2005, the hunter, whom Thormählen declines to name, arrived in South Africa with his double-barreled shotgun in his luggage. Thormählen's game scouts and Hume's trackers had already been following Number 65's footprints and scratch marks for several days. Occasionally they might glimpse his hind end in the shadows or hear him rustling through the thorn bushes. At dawn on July 23, Thormählen was rumbling along in a beige Land Cruiser with the client in the passenger seat and a couple of scouts on the roof seats. Just after 11 a.m. they spotted Number 65 taking a dust bath in a shallow ravine. The bull had not yet noticed the hunters, which

## Species:

There are five species of rhino in the world; all but the white rhino are endangered. White and black rhino possess two horns made of keratin, the same material that makes up hair, fingernails, and claws.

### WHITE RHINO

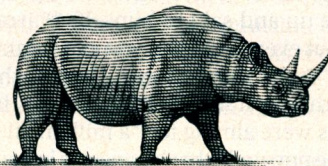


**Avg. weight:**  
4,000-6,000  
pounds

**Characteristics:**  
square lip,  
grass eater

**Price to hunt:**  
\$50,000+

### BLACK RHINO



**Avg. weight:**  
1,750-3,000  
pounds

**Characteristics:**  
hook lip for eating  
trees, shrubs

**Price to hunt:**  
\$150,000+

would have either sent him running or, more likely, charging.

As the rest of the team stayed by the vehicle, Thormählen and his client proceeded on foot. Suddenly the rhino noticed them and rose from the dirt. The client pulled the trigger, and the first bullet pierced Number 65's skull. The rhino, still standing, turned. A second bullet hit, and the rhino dropped dead. Thormählen, the client, and a government observer walked over to the rhino that had caused so much mischief on Mauricedale. "It was unbelievable," Thormählen says. "There was no joy or stupidity. We stood there and we were overwhelmed by what we had accomplished."

That first hunter has gone to great lengths to protect his privacy: He took no photos of himself with the rhino and according to Thormählen had at least the horn, and likely the head, exported to a second home outside the U.S. under a permit with a friend's name on it. Because the black rhino is also listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service would have had to issue an exception for the import of black rhino body parts, which it has never done. Louisiana lawyer John Jackson, through his organization Conservation Force, has been pressing the agency to develop a trophy-hunting policy compatible with CITES. In November 2009 he submitted a permit application for another Thormählen client, Colorado-based David K. Reinke, who paid \$215,000 for his successful hunt that year, according to the application. The agency has not responded to the application and declined requests for comment.

Since then, Thormählen has led hunts for one or two black rhinos each year at Mauricedale and government game reserves in KwaZulu-Natal. He says one of his clients, Russian petroleum billionaire Rashid Sardarov, had a gun worth €450,000. Shooting one black rhino was not enough for him, and he has since shot two others. Georgi Brilling, a Russian businessman, was one of Thormählen's most reverent clients. When he shot his black rhino in 2007, he leaned over it and touched it around the eyes in awe. Thormählen tried to take photos of him with his prize, but Brilling stopped him. A snapshot of the hunter and the hunted—a fixture on the walls of most outdoorsmen—suddenly seemed cheap in the presence of one of the most extraordinary and endangered of animals. "I didn't shoot it for photos," Brilling said. "I shot it because it was one of the biggest compliments I could give to the black rhino."

Late one May afternoon at his Mauricedale office, Hume stands in khaki shorts, scooping handfuls of live mealworms and tossing them to his bird, Princess, a purple-crested lourie. A tiny klipspringer antelope teeters on hooves atop a polished wooden boardroom table. "Hello my baby, hello my baby," Hume says sweetly as he tempts the antelope with a wriggler.

Hume grew up fishing and hunting on his parent's cattle farm in southeastern Zimbabwe. He left school at 14 and soon had three farms of his own. Although he loved farming, at 25 he woke up and said to himself, "Farming is a mug's game: Just about every business you can think of is better at making money." So he started buying hotels, then a few taxi companies in the capital of Salisbury, now Harare. Eventually his 250 cabs were aiming for "a million kilometers a month."

Hume pursued other businesses in South Africa and the U.S., all the while dreaming of returning to the veldt. "The idea was just to hang out and go game driving," he says. "I don't even hunt anymore, although I will shoot something if it's wounded." In 1992 he purchased the first chunk of Mauricedale, and within

a year or two he realized he could make money by breeding rare species. He began expanding the ranch, restoring land once cleared for agriculture and stocking it with antelope, Cape buffalo, and eventually white and black rhino. Today he says the farm is slightly profitable and certainly more valuable than when he bought it. It has revenue of 25 million rand (\$2.5 million): About 80 percent comes from selling live animals to fellow farmers and exporters and 20 percent from hunting.

Mauricedale is more than a source of income. It's become Hume's proof of concept that the free market is the best way to conserve wildlife. Just as he was a force behind legalizing black rhino hunts, he has now hired a full-time lawyer who works to legalize international trade in white rhino horn obtained by tranquilizing the animal. Once as endangered as the black rhino, the South African white rhino was downlisted by CITES to Appendix II in 1994, meaning it is no longer endangered although it is still under threat from poaching. "White rhinos are the most incredible animals on earth," Hume says. "I'm desperately sorry for them because they need our help."

Since 2002, Hume has been cutting his white rhinos' horns every two years like a farmer shearing his sheep. They grow back. He believes this protects the rhinos from poachers and eventually will make raising them on private property economically viable. Indeed, he doesn't allow hunting of his white rhinos anymore: They're too valuable for their horns. Cobus Raath, a former veterinarian from Kruger National Park, sometimes helps him tranquilize members of the herd to cut off their horns with a chain saw. It sounds cruel, but Raath says it's just like clipping very large nails.

Mauricedale is home to more than 20 endangered black rhinos and has offered hunts for four of them



Today, Hume has over 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) of white rhino horn individually measured and registered with the provincial government, implanted with government-issued microchip IDs, similar to the ones inserted in pets, and housed in safety deposit boxes at three banks around the country, awaiting a time when trade would be legal. The argument against trade in horn has always been that the legal avenues for horn can never quench the demand from Asia and may in fact fuel it. "My argument is that's nonsense," Hume says bitterly, "You give the farmer a valuable asset, and he'll do the job for you."

Until recently, horn buyers advertised openly in *Game & Hunt* magazine for "tusks and rhino horns" that have been "legally obtained." It is legal to trade horn within South Africa's borders with appropriate permissions. Hume followed up on one such offer in July 2006, when he obtained permits to ship 84 kilograms of horn to a buyer in the North West province of South Africa. Hume believes the horns subsequently left the country. He sold the horn for just 8,000 rand (\$1,200) per kilogram; according to a 2008 report by the Congressional Research Service, horn sells for up to \$50,000 per kilogram in Asia. At the high end, Hume's current horn stash has a retail value of about \$25 million. That is, if international trade is ever legalized.

If such a scenario remains unlikely for the white rhino in the near future, it is inconceivable for the black rhino, owing to its smaller size, rarity, and reclusive habits. For that species, says Hume, trophy hunting may be its only salvation.

Before dark, Hume takes his sister out for a game drive. She climbs into the back of the white truck with his wife, and he grabs a couple beers for himself and a visitor. He drives out of the shady shelter of his homestead and slowly passes the supplemental feeding area where white rhino and their calves congregate like cattle, munching on alfalfa. It isn't quite wild, but it is still wildlife.

Evidence that the free market may be wildlife's best hope lies in the different approaches taken over the last decades in southern and East Africa, and particularly in South Africa and Kenya. In Kenya landowners have no right to use wildlife, which is controlled by the state. That has made wildlife a liability; anyone who wanted to make money legally from their land cleared it of native vegetation, chased away the antelope, rhino, and elephant, and turned to cattle and agriculture.

In the 1960s and 1970s in southern Africa, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe began managing wildlife populations through regulations and licensing fees, allowing profits to accrue directly to landowners. Fred Nelson, the founder of Maliasili Initiatives in Tanzania and a member of the IUCN sustainable use specialist group, says southern Africa has become a model for the rest of the continent. "Although they may not say it publicly, among conservation organizations that work deeply in Africa, there is little doubt that hunting can be part of a successful conservation regime," he says.

In 2007 a study by Zimbabwean biologist Peter Lindsey in the journal *Biological Conservation* showed that nearly 1.4 million square kilometers of land in 23 countries were preserved for trophy hunting, an area exceeding that encompassed by national parks or other protected areas. Lindsey, whose work has been funded by the Safari Club International, Wildlife Conservation Society, and the WWF, is not himself a hunter and says that the hunting industry has failed to own up to

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## Hume's horn stash is worth about \$25 million. That is, if trade is ever legalized

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problems such as canned lion hunting, in which lions are sometimes drugged and released from cages moments before being shot. But removing hunting from the conservation landscape would be, in his view, "disastrous."

In 1977, Lindsey points out, Kenya banned the use of wildlife for trophy hunting or ranching. Without the financial benefits of wildlife trickling down to local communities through regulated pathways, Lindsey and other conservationists contend, Kenya has lost between 60 and 70 percent of its large mammals, largely because of poaching and the conversion of land for livestock and agriculture. Kenya once had more than 20,000 black rhinos; the roughly 600 left in Kenya today survive only in protected areas.

Although most conservationists agree with Lindsey's general assertion, it's not clear that game farming can save every species. "Even if you produce a tiger in captivity, you have to sell it at a certain price to make a profit," says Nelson of Maliasili Initiatives. Tigers are reared for medicinal purposes in China, but economic studies have shown the price of raising the animals on an all-meat diet is so high that poachers will always be able to undercut it.

Poachers are precisely what Tim Snow of the Endangered Wildlife Trust fears the most when it comes to rhinos. As of November, poachers have killed 253 white and 8 black rhinos in South Africa in 2010, up from 122 in all of 2009, according to the national parks agency. "We are at our worst ever for rhino poaching," he says. Until Snow sees a more detailed population viability analysis for all of the African states, he is not willing to support trophy hunting.

Back in 2004, Chris Weaver of WWF in Windhoek, Namibia, had concerns about the scientific rigor with which older males would be selected for hunting, among other issues. Weaver has spent many years working with indigenous groups in Namibia to help rebuild and manage wildlife populations on communal lands and open them to trophy hunting. Today, for example, Damaraland—a Bantustan, or black African homeland in Namibia's northwest—boasts the largest free-ranging population of rhinos in the world. No fences. No feeding lots. Just black rhino with record-breaking horns.

Five years after the killing of Number 65, the program continues to be debated. One early hunt involved a landowner who purchased a new male specifically for a hunt, precisely the type of perverse economic incentive conservationists had warned about. Rather than creating sustainable

breeding populations, private ranching could end up creating a canned hunting economy. South Africa quickly tightened oversight, and permit applications are now reviewed at a national level and sent to external scientists. Thus far, the country has never granted all five permits in a year, in part because there have not been enough high-rolling hunters to pay for them. Every January, at the Dallas Safari Club convention, the Safari Club International convention in Reno, and countless smaller exhibitions, Thormählen and other operators meet prospective clients, show videos of their hunts, and regale them with tales of the black rhino and the itinerant life of the professional hunting guide.

A separate controversy in South Africa, however, has blurred the line between trophy hunting and the illegal horn trade. When the black rhino hunts were approved in 2004, WWF warned that “there are still weaknesses within South Africa’s internal control of white rhino trophy hunting.” In 2005 demand for white rhino hunts, which cost about \$50,000, soared. Government officials soon discovered that many of the horns from white rhinos shot by Vietnamese hunters were being ground down and sold for purported cancer prevention and treatment in Vietnam and China, a commercial use prohibited under CITES. The South African government responded by limiting each hunter to one rhino hunt a year. While the episode made for graphic headlines, even Snow admits that the white rhino population is secure enough to sustain such behavior, at least in the short term.

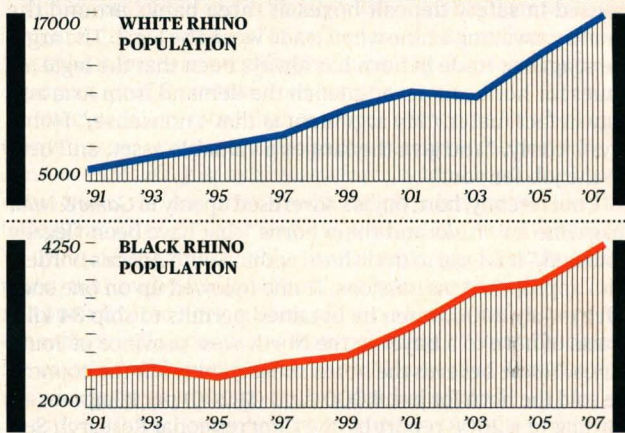
Hume says he’s had three of his own animals poached on Mauricedale. He was devastated. One of the rhinos had a bullet in her nose for three days before she slipped and drowned in an artificial pond. The three poachers went on to Kruger National Park, where one was shot dead by rangers and the others were arrested. Hume sees a direct correlation between the tighter regulations and a surge in poaching in South Africa, and there is some support for his view. A November 2009 report prepared by the IUCN and WWF’s wildlife trade monitoring wing, Traffic, shows that the Vietnamese legally exported their first 20 rhino horns in 2003 and that number grew to nearly 150 by 2007—a majority of the horns exported that year. Poaching was as low as it has ever been, but following the more stringent curbs imposed in February 2008 after the practice was exposed, legal Vietnamese hunters all but vanished, and poached horns appear to have made up for the difference.

Hume has no pity for the poachers, but he views the legally hunting Vietnamese as engaging in a legitimate business transaction. “Our government forced them to pretend to be trophy hunters,” he says. “Because if the rhino is alive, you cannot get an export permit for the horn.”

Even Peter Thormählen has been prosecuted for leading hunts feeding the horn trade. In 2006 at the Loskop Dam Nature Game Reserve, he paid a token fine after his Vietnamese hunter casually told an official that he did not know how to shoot. The second time, in Limpopo province in 2008, Thormählen was indignant and fought the citation in court with the help of lawyer Tom Dreyer. The judge dismissed the case, calling it a technicality that the client had not actually fired the fatal bullet—a privilege that may have gone to Thormählen’s teenage son. “We hunted a few,” Thormählen says, “and the Game Dept. was present on nearly all of the hunts.” Although he defends the practice, he says he stopped guiding the Vietnamese after the Game Dept. informed him

## Rhinos on the Rise

Rhino populations have grown since 1986, when auctions to private landowners began in South Africa, where most of the white rhinos live



DATA: IUCN AFRICAN RHINO SPECIALIST GROUP

they were involved in the horn trade. “I want the rhino to be there 20 years from now and 50 years from now for my son,” he says.

The market for hunting black rhino continues to grow, and with it, rhino populations. In April 2009, inside the crowded Oryx ballroom of the Windhoek Country Club in Namibia, Thormählen gripped a cardstock paddle and glanced at a sea of khaki and sage. The Namibian government was auctioning off its first nine black rhino hunts, hoping to add more than \$1 million to its conservation coffers. Thormählen’s business, however, was suffering from the financial crisis. He wasn’t sure how much money he should front on a major hunt. “It’s the wrong year,” he said, shaking his head.

Thormählen, exhausted from a leopard hunt the night before, was seated at the end of a long row of chairs, staring dead ahead. One hundred people were in the room as the barker, Neil Engelbrecht, started up from behind the podium. “The right to hunt one black rhino each year for the next three years,” he blasted. “What do I say? Where do we start? 500,000. Thank you, sir. You’re a scholar and a gentleman.” Engelbrecht was starting the bid at 500,000 Namibian dollars (\$58,000). From there the price soared in increments of N\$50,000. Within seconds the price was up to N\$1 million, and Engelbrecht warned, “The first one will be the cheapest. The last one will be the most expensive.” At about N\$1.3 million many bidders fell out, with the exception of a woman up front with a broad hat, the representative of a company based in Lusaka, Zambia. Engelbrecht shouted: “1.775 for the right to hunt the black rhino. No more! No more! Sold!”

As Engelbrecht announced the next concession, Thormählen kept his poker face. He was not expecting the rhinos to go so high. It was absurd. It wasn’t worth it. Then, as the price crossed the threshold of N\$1 million, the hunter lifted his own number, 24, and nodded his head almost imperceptibly. Again and again, he stood his ground as the price climbed.

“At 1.5 million for the third and final call,” Engelbrecht shouted. “Sold for 1.5 million to buyer No. 24.” **B**