

A man in a full camouflage uniform, including a hat, stands in profile on a hillside. He is looking towards the right, where a vast, hazy landscape of rolling hills and mountains stretches out under a bright sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

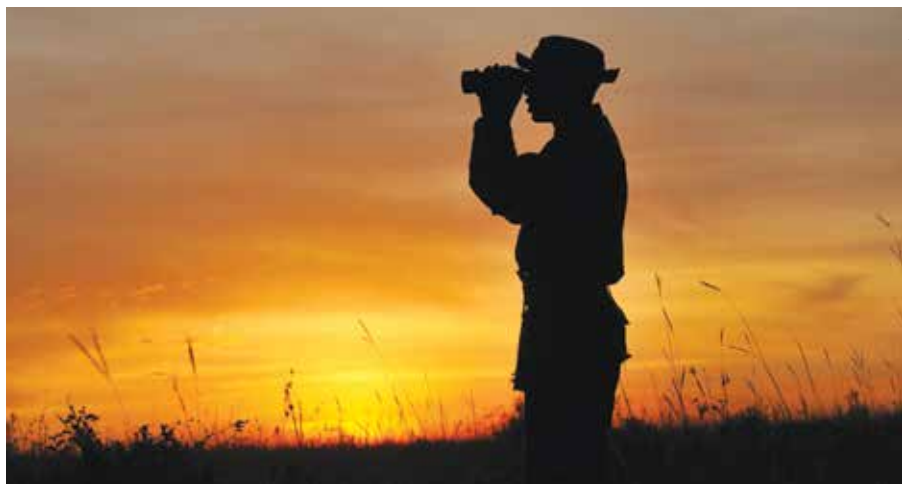
Fighting for Rhinos

**Dennis
Rotiken's
story**



They're like dinosaurs. With a thick hide, rough skin, and immense horn jutting out from the center of their faces, rhinos almost perfectly parallel the long extinct beasts that roamed the earth millions of years ago. Unfortunately, like dinosaurs, rhinos are also at risk. But because of efforts by people like Dennis Rotiken, they have a fighting chance of survival.

Rotiken is the lead rhino ranger at Maasai Mara National Park. For the last five years, Rotiken has been dedicated to the conservation of the



PHOTOS BY: NAROK COUNTY GOVERNMENT/WWF



Robert Magori is the Head of Communications and Development at the East African Wild Life Society and has co-authored numerous books and publications in the natural resource development sector in Kenya and the region.



Maxx Kinert is an undergraduate student at the American University in Washington DC majoring in International Relations with a specialization in Environmental Sustainability. Maxx interned with the East African Wild Life Society.

TOP: Dennis Rotiken (centre) and some members of his Masai Mara Rhino Team

BELOW: Dennis Rotiken looking out for poachers.

Mara's minuscule black rhino population, leading a small team of 20 rangers who monitor and protect them from the poachers. Here at the Mara, rhinos are the only species with their own security squad because they are so extremely vulnerable.

"Poachers are the most major threat to rhino populations," states Rotiken. "Poachers do not go through the gates. The park is not fenced. So there are several parts of the park that need to be continuously protected."

Because of poaching black rhino populations saw a steep trough in 1984, with only 18 individuals remaining.

**Dennis Rotiken
peers through his
binoculars in an
attempt to identify
a black rhino in a
thicket**

However, due to the Mara's rhino programme, populations have steadily risen in the last 30 years but still remain very few.

"When I took over from one of the wardens who led the department, five years ago, the population was 37 rhinos but at the moment we have 54 rhinos. So I can say it's a great achievement. It's because of the effort because if I had not been serious about my work I could

have lost many rhinos like other parks did. But I only lost one."

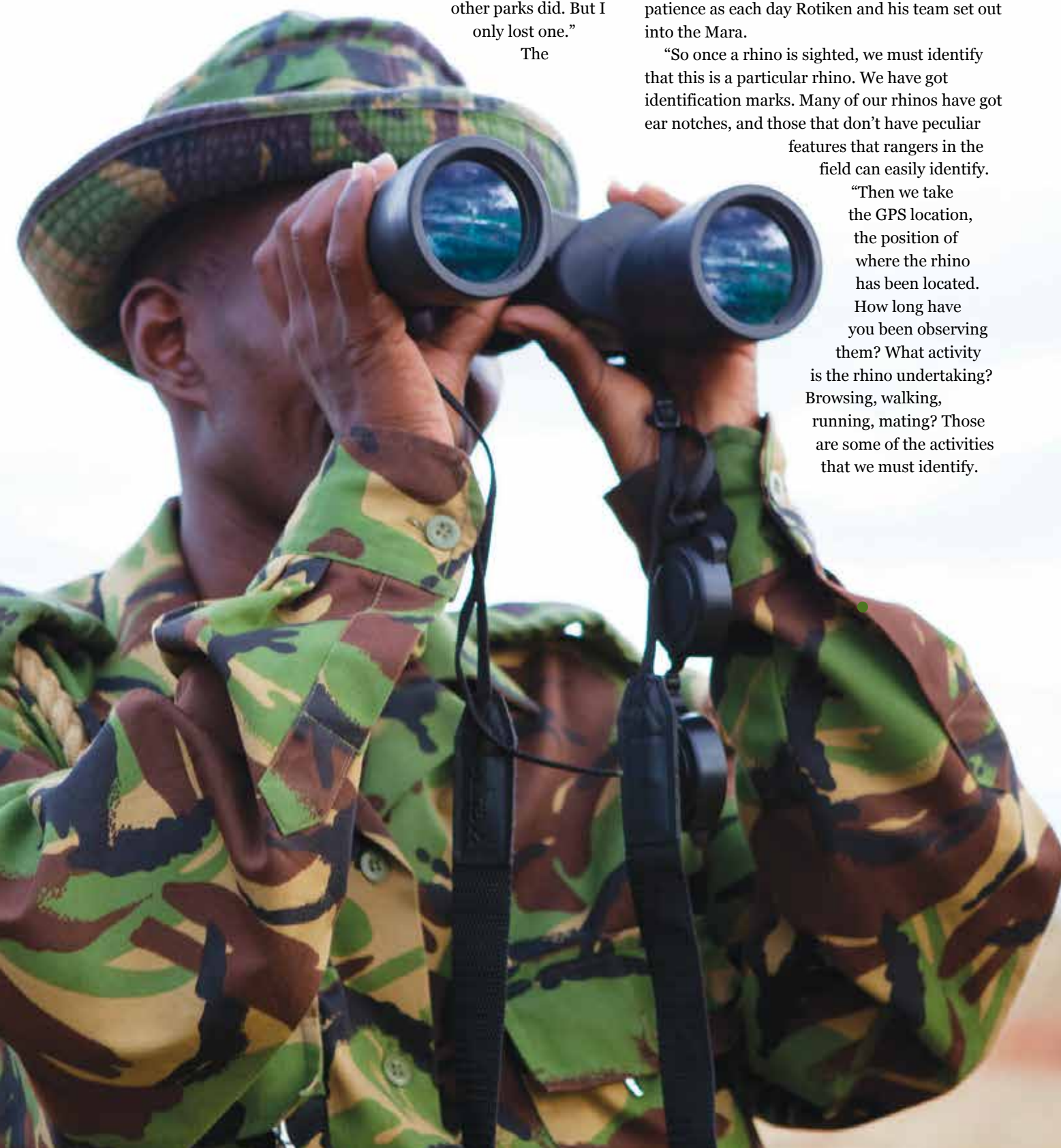
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programme demands incredible dedication and patience as each day Rotiken and his team set out into the Mara.

"So once a rhino is sighted, we must identify that this is a particular rhino. We have got identification marks. Many of our rhinos have got ear notches, and those that don't have peculiar features that rangers in the field can easily identify.

"Then we take the GPS location, the position of where the rhino has been located. How long have you been observing them? What activity is the rhino undertaking? Browsing, walking, running, mating? Those are some of the activities that we must identify.



RANGERS' DIARY

We must also take a photograph of the rhino. Then after that, the data that has been collected will be entered into the system.”

In doing this, the unit becomes very familiar with the rhinos and becomes able to predict their habits. You could argue that from this consistent interaction, a relationship is built. One such bond can be perfectly exemplified by Rotiken's relationship with Karanja, a very special Rhino in the Mara.

Karanja was gifted with an abnormally long horn, which shaped his celebrity in the Mara. At 43 years of age, the rhino had lost his teeth and much of its ability to move, remaining largely stationary for months. As rumors circulated about plans to poach the horn from the debilitated rhino, Rotiken jumped into action, “then, it was my responsibility to ensure that this rhino will die a natural death.”

“I sat next to Karanja for almost a whole month. My rangers were getting me lunch at the site, getting me supper at the site, and I pitched a tent. When he moved, I moved the tent. I could not go for off days, day and night, even if it was raining heavily. Karanja died while I was sitting very close to him,” he recalls.

“After Karanja's death, the Kenya Wildlife Service's vets came, to take the horn. And I stayed with Karanja until I did the handing over of the trophy [horn]. So it's a moment that I will hardly forget.”

PHOTOS BY: NAROK COUNTY GOVERNMENT/WWF



Rotiken and his team occasionally come face to face with poachers and here he displays poisoned arrows that were confiscated.

Rotiken's work and dedication to the Mara's rhinos is not only praiseworthy but also all the more relevant to global conservation today. Today, Kenya's Ol Pejeta Conservancy is home to the last three Northern White rhinos. While scientists work tirelessly to encourage their reproduction, a lack of genetic diversity amongst them makes conservation efforts all the more difficult. In the next few years, the Northern White Rhino may be completely extinct.

However, maybe because of Rotiken and his rhino unit in the Mara, the black rhino will boast a different fate. Perhaps through continued support of philanthropic organizations and passionate individuals, Rotiken and his Rhino Unit can better conserve the remaining noble Black rhinos of Maasai Mara. ●

