

# International WILDLIFE®

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## The Struggle Continues To Save Species in Peril

IT SEEMS farfetched. Wildlife rangers in Namibia anesthetize a black rhino, cut off its horn and release the endangered giant back to the wild. Minus any valuable protuberance on the end of its nose (ounce for ounce, rhino horn is four times the value of gold), the animal will no longer be a target of poachers—or so the rangers hope.

The jury is still out on whether this unlikely survival strategy will work (see page 22), but the fact that it is even being tried points out the precarious state of the black rhino, and indeed of wildlife around the world. As stories on China and Canada in this issue also illustrate, saving endangered species often becomes a last-ditch battle requiring extraordinary efforts.

In China, where 98 species are officially protected, the future for wildlife looks particularly bleak despite a push to establish reserves (page 30). But, as zoologist George Schaller reports after extensive travels throughout much of the country, there are still many new conservation opportunities, and still time for new action.

In Canada, unusual efforts to rescue the whooping crane—including moving crane eggs around in wool socks to ensure maximum production—have paid off. The whooper (page 12) has become a classic wildlife success story which shows what's possible when people make things happen.

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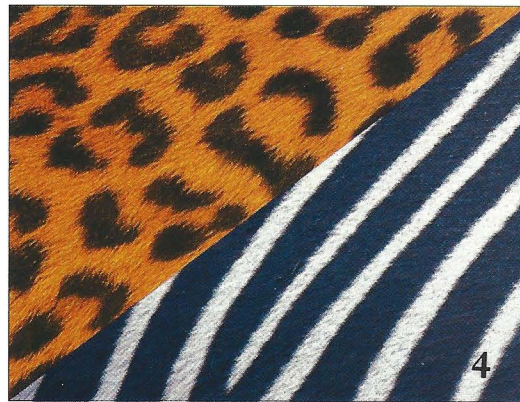
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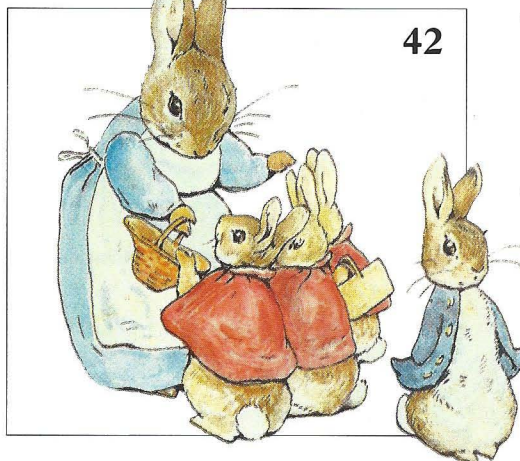
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In Mexico, innocent-looking ponds can be doorways to a labyrinthine world of enchantment and danger

### ABOUT OUR COVERS

**Front:** At home in the treetops, a young giant panda in China's Wolong Natural Reserve finds a skimpy perch, possibly to escape a larger breeding male. The unusual photo was taken by Xiào Yì-quán Shè. For a report on China's embattled wildlife, see page 30.

**Back:** A symphony in color, the iridescent nape feathers of a Himalayan monal pheasant shimmer in the camera's eye. Scott Nielsen used a Nikon F3 camera, 105mm Nikkor macro lens and Kodachrome 64 film for this close-up. The ground-dwelling pheasant is the national bird of Nepal.

By Sue Armstrong  
Photographs by  
Anthony Bannister

# Cutting the

*In a desperate scheme to save an imperiled species, game*

**A**TENSE CALM arrives with day-break at base camp deep in the Southwest African nation of Namibia. Blackened kettles steam over fires as about 20 men and women sit cradling mugs of tea and staring into the flames. Everyone is marking time, one ear to the crackling radio nearby. Suddenly, the static gives way to an urgent, breathless voice—the trackers have spotted Sam, a young bull rhino, in a rocky gully.

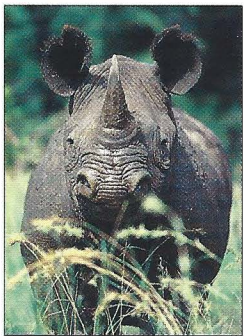
The camp erupts like a kicked-over ant-hill. Peter Morkel, a veterinarian with Namibia's Nature Conservation Department, grabs his bag and, along with several game rangers clutching a saw, file and pair of giant nail-clippers, clambers aboard a helicopter and roars off in a swirl of dust. Ground teams scramble into trucks and pound after them.

When the trucks arrive at the scene, Sam is in full gallop, the helicopter buzzing him like an angry hornet. Just as he reaches a rocky plain, the tran-

quilizer dart fired from above takes effect, and the animal staggers and slumps to the ground. Rangers swarm from their trucks with quiet efficiency. While Morkel monitors Sam's vital functions, assistants mark the animal's two horns just above the quick with a felt-tip pen. Others douse the anesthetized creature with water to keep him cool in the hot sun.

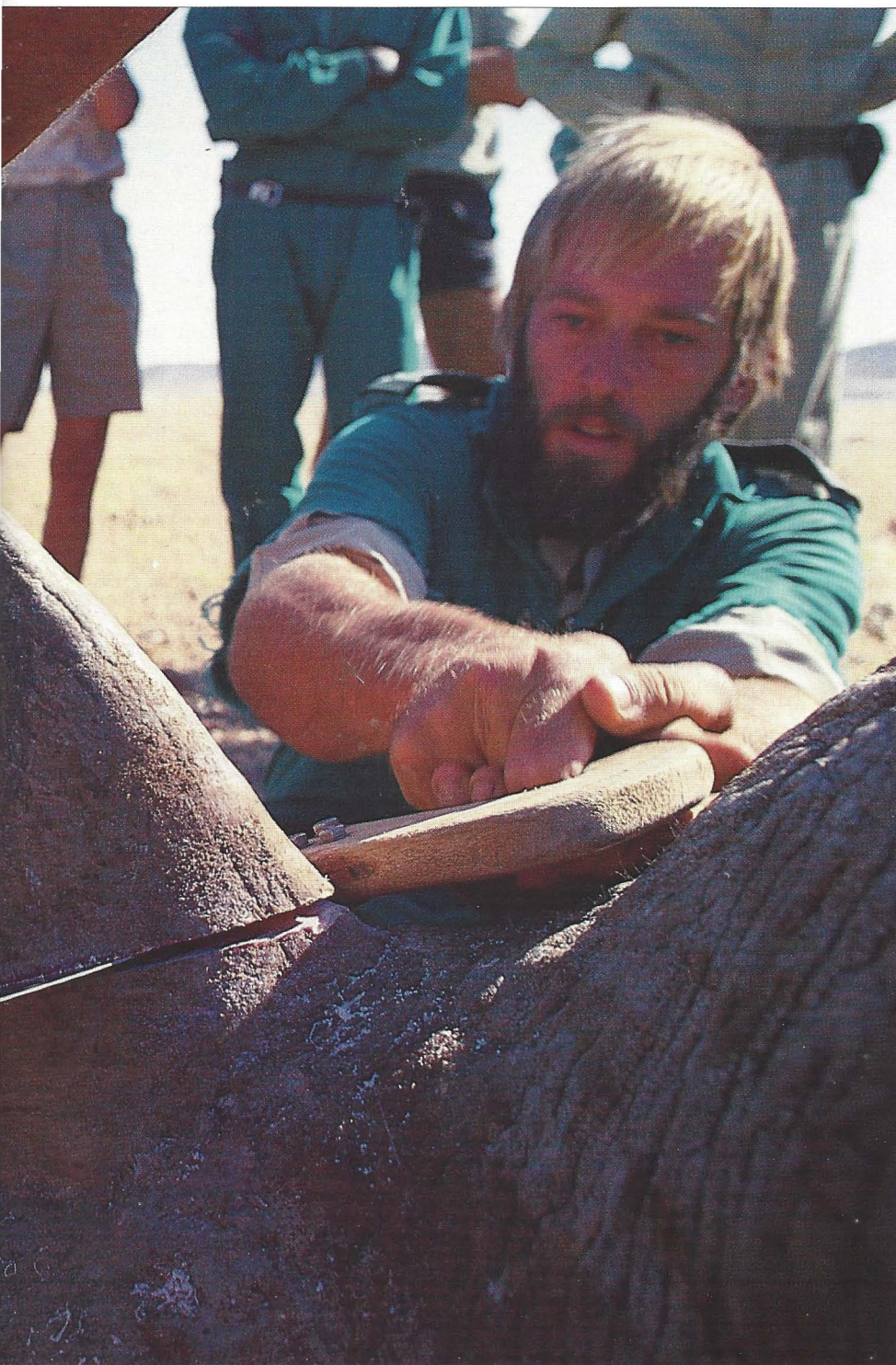
Two men grip the saw and, feet braced against the rhino's stonelike face, slice off its horns with quick, even strokes. Louis Geldenhuys, leader of Namibia's game capture team, neatens the stumps with the clippers and file, then Morkel smears on a sticky black substance with a paintbrush. "Stockholm tar," Morkel explains. "It's an antiseptic, but I like to think that if a poacher does get him, those buyers in the Far East will get a bitter mouthful."

At first glance, Sam's "nose job" looks like an extreme, even brutal, case of cos-



# Rhino's Losses

*angers in Namibia are hacking into poachers' profits*



**Martin Britz of Namibia's Nature Conservation Department slices off the horns of an anesthetized black rhino (left). The painless surgery is part of a bold and controversial plan to keep poachers from slaughtering the vanishing giant (far left) for its valuable horn.**

metic surgery. But the procedure (which is painless) might actually save his life. It is part of Operation Bicornis, a desperate ploy begun last April by the government and a host of conservation groups in Damaraland, a region in northwestern Namibia, to thwart poachers by removing the gold mine that adorns the rhino's snout. Theirs is the logic of last hopes: better to lose the horns, which will grow back, than to lose the species.

Damaraland, with its red earth, wide plains and flaming sunsets, is the stunning Africa of the imagination. This rock-strewn desert is also the last home of the desert rhino, a name given to the area's population of rare black rhinoceroses. The black rhino is fast disappearing from its range, which once spanned most of Africa. Yet a series of innovative game-management schemes in Damaraland in recent years has in fact helped boost the creature's numbers there. Perhaps it is natural, then, that Damaraland should be the setting for such a bizarre and contentious experiment.

The notion of dehorning—and thus devaluing—black rhinos is nothing new. But until the slaughter last February of 16 black rhinos, five of them in Damaraland, no one thought such drastic measures would be needed. Even now, there are those who oppose the plan, arguing the rhino cannot survive without its horns.

While debate rages, Africa's black rhinos are dying. In the late 1960s, about 65,000 of the creatures roamed the continent; today that figure has plunged to around 4,000. They have disappeared altogether from many of the countries they once inhabited. Just within the past ten years, the black rhino's numbers have dropped 67 percent in Kenya, 93 percent in

Tanzania and 96 percent in Zambia.

Human greed drives the slaughter: rhino horn can fetch \$18,000 (U.S.) per pound—nearly four times the price of gold. Although international trade is banned, huge demand in the Far East, where the substance is believed to have magic medicinal powers, and in North Yemen, where a rhino horn dagger handle is the ultimate status symbol, fuels a flourishing black market.

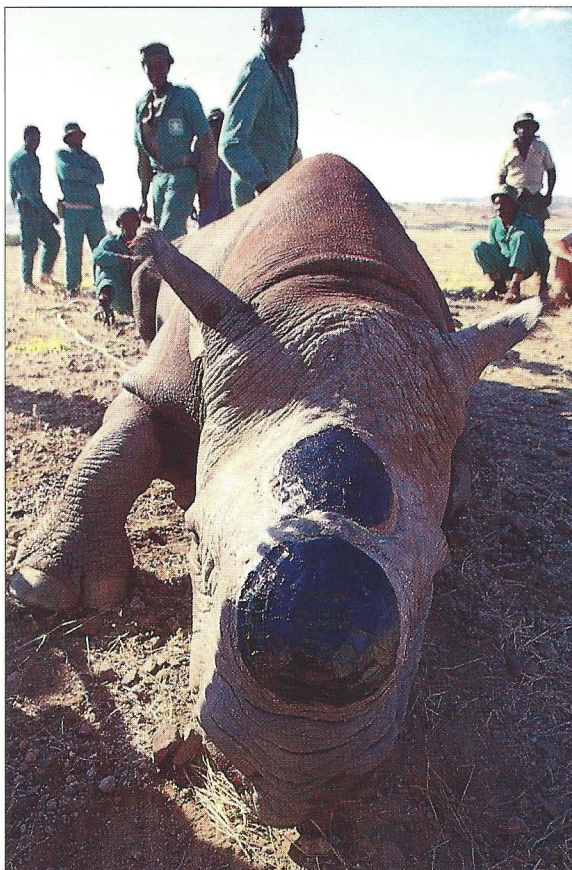
At one end of the smuggling chain are local men armed with semiautomatic weapons, chain saws, axes and razor-sharp *pangas*, which can lop off both horns with one swipe. They receive up to \$1,000 for a pair—or far less. And though that's only a fraction of the sums ultimately paid by foreign buyers, it represents riches to Africa's poor.

After last year's killing spree, some conservationists in Damaraland suggested the most vulnerable rhinos—those wandering nearest settlements—be moved to a safer place. But Blythe Loutit, director of Namibia's Save the Rhino Trust Fund, opposed the idea. While most black rhinos prefer thick bushveld, Damaraland's population survives on this nearly waterless fringe of the Namib desert. Moving them to unfamiliar territory with strange food sources would doom them just as surely as would the poachers' bullets, Loutit said.

In March, the soft-spoken rhino advocate and her husband Rudi, a government game officer, sold the Nature Conservation Department in Windhoek on the dehorning idea. Within weeks, as many as 100 government and independent rangers and trackers had set up camp for Operation Bicornis (from the rhino's Latin name).

**O**fficials are reluctant to disclose the number of animals involved in the project for fear of tipping off poachers. But in one 300-square-mile range, all the rhinos have either been dehorned or moved. So far, Operation Bicornis has suffered no casualties—although it has drawn heavy fire from opponents who foresee dangerous long-term consequences.

“Removing the horn in this controversial way attracts attention to the rarity value of the animal,” says Ian Player, a former senior parks warden in Natal, South Africa, who was responsible for saving the white rhinoceros from extinction 30 years ago. “Soon we will find it being hunted



**“Stockholm tar,” a sticky antiseptic, coats the stumps of a dehorned rhino. Better to lose the horns—which will grow back—than to lose the species, argue many African conservationists.**

for its hair or skin, not just for its horn.”

Others insist rhinos need their horns for self-defense and for foraging, and, in any case, that poachers shoot first and inspect for horn later. Loutit, however, says animals dehorned by accident get along fine until the horns grow back in a few years. “I never saw anything different in a rhino without a horn,” she says.

Operation Bicornis comes at a time when wildlife experts in Africa are grappling over another horn-related issue, this one involving morality and money. While conservationists face a constant shortage of cash, stashed away in their vaults are millions of dollars' worth of horn taken from poachers and animals that died naturally. This cache cannot be sold because the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), intended to protect species like the rhino, forbids trade in products from endangered animals.

Some maintain that the treaty is actually hastening the animals' demise,

tying conservationists' hands while leaving the market open to opportunists. “We should recognize that the product is valuable to some people and be prepared to supply the market ourselves to raise funds for conservation,” says Garth Owen-Smith, who works in Damaraland for the Johannesburg-based Endangered Wildlife Trust.

Others, such as Esmond Bradley Martin, a rhino expert in Nairobi and consultant for the World Wide Fund for Nature, warn that changing the rules would invite disaster. “If there were no ban on international trade in rhino horn,” says Martin, “the slaughter would have occurred at an even faster rate.” (The debate became particularly relevant last fall, as CITES officials considered banning the trade of ivory and other elephant products.)

**M**ost conservationists in Damaraland view the dehorning project as a last-ditch effort to protect remaining rhinos until more permanent measures can take hold. If recent success is any indication, that day may not be far away.

Over the past several years, Loutit and others have worked to introduce imaginative, long-term conservation schemes into communities all over Damaraland. The idea has been to make plans attractive—and profitable—to those who live in the area. But it has not been easy to convince the rhino's human neighbors to save an animal they consider a destructive, ill-tempered menace. In 1985, Garth Owen-Smith managed to win their support with a program in which tribesmen appointed by local leaders serve as game guards in exchange for rations and cash.

What may seem simple common sense actually represents an uncommon approach to dealing with Africa's vanishing wildlife and exploding human population. Before last year's slaughter, innovative strategies in Damaraland appeared to be paying off: the desert rhino's numbers had climbed from about 60 animals in 1982 to 100 or more. Perhaps, then, the solution—and the rhino's only realistic hope—lies in the pursuit of strategies just as fresh, bold and controversial as Operation Bicornis. ■

*Author Sue Armstrong and photographer Anthony Bannister spent a week with a rhino dehorning team in Namibia.*