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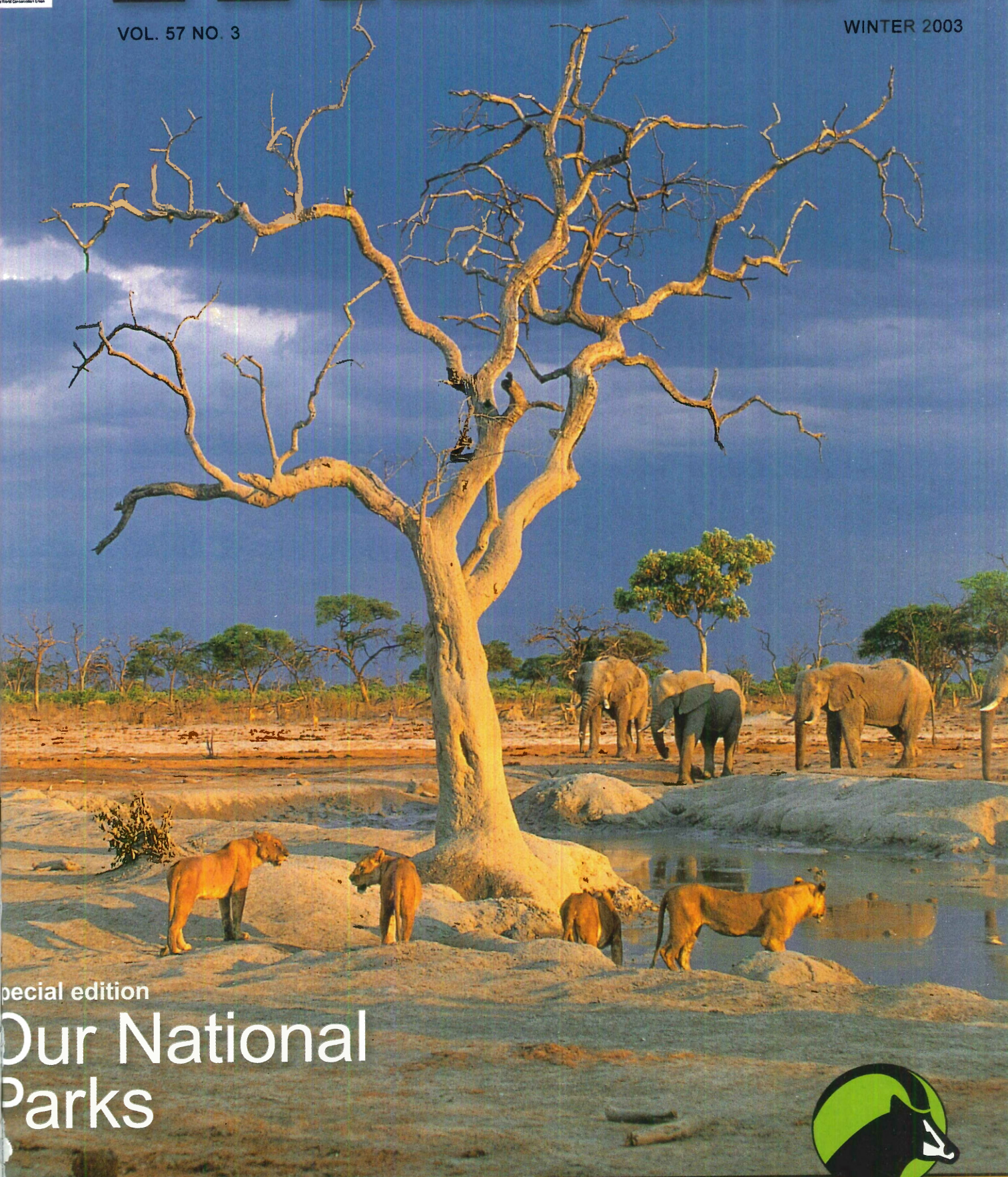
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# WILDLIFE

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## Our National Parks



*People caring for the Earth*

**WESSA**

# OPERATION RHINO

by Jill Gowans

**I**t 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 nuchal hump between the head and the withers bulged prominently. Flies clung to their flanks and steam rose from their backs. These were truly creatures from a bygone age. The two rhinos grazed as they moved, their heads swinging in a scythe-like motion as they fed on the grass. I watched them move through the grey *nthombothi* trees into a cluster of candelabra aloes and disappear into the mist.

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

To hear Player read from this book in the sitting room of his home in rural Karkloof in front of a roaring log fire is to be transported back to those uncertain days when the fate of the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) hung in the balance.

By 1894 the southern white rhino was thought to be extinct, largely through the terrible destruction of wildlife by white hunters. But that year a shooting party shot six of them at the junction of the Black and White Umfolozi rivers. This led to a public outcry and suggestions that a portion of the area be earmarked as sanctuary for the few animals that might remain.

In April 1897, Hluhluwe, Lake St Lucia and Umfolozi 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 safe from deproclamation was Hluhluwe. St Lucia 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

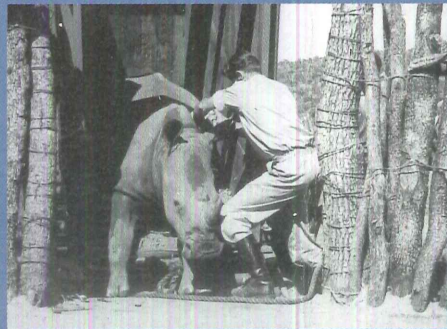




A rhino is persuaded to stand up after the drug antidote is given: (from left) Toni Harthorn (bending), Owen Letley, Ian Player, Maqubu Ntombela and Peter Potter.



Early days of rhino capture in Umfolozi Game Reserve.



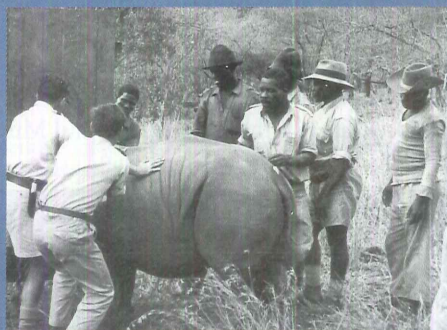
John Clark encourages a drugged white rhino into the holding boma below Mpila rest camp in Umfolozi Game Reserve



**Champion conservationist:** Dr Ian Player initiated a conservation recovery programme that snatched the white rhino from near-certain extinction. His strategy, initiated 50 years ago, of strict preservation, community co-operation and metapopulation management has been fully vindicated. Scarcely 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 in 1962 making a quick getaway as the M99 drug takes effect on the rhino.



The first capture with the team including Ian Player, Nick Steele, Maqubu Ntombela and Alpheus Zulu.

IAN PLAYER

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 reserves – which were not fenced in those days – and we were terrified that one beast diseased with anthrax would 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* (1972). The capture technique, as perfected by the original team, is one that is used today, with some modern equipment such as a helicopter from which to dart the animals and winches to pull it on to the truck.

While Player fired the dart loaded with a morphine derivative, M99, his Zulu friend and mentor, Maqubu Ntombela, did the tracking and ranger Nick Steele was on horseback. Their spills and adventures were legendary. "Doctors don't believe the x-ray of my neck," Player says ruefully.

After populating some other Zululand reserves, such as Ndumu and Mkhuze, in 1962 the first white rhino were sent to the Kruger National Park; the last one there had been shot in 1896. There are now 5 000, all from the original Umfolozi diaspora.

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 being eyed for other uses."

He then, in his inimitable way, enlisted the help of the media, and the world-wide publicity, including an MGM film called *Rhino*, focused such attention on the work that public consciousness was heightened. Vital buffer zones of new land were 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.

As 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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