

BLACK RHINO VERSUS TRAILISTS



The black rhino, its numbers now down to about 890 in South Africa, is one of the most dangerous, aggressive animals one can meet on foot. Its Zulu name means "Cross One".

When it comes to walking trails in "Big Five" country, are our rangers sufficiently qualified to deal with the safety of both people and an animal that could be facing extinction? It is bad enough that the world's last black rhinos continue to be the target of poachers, so how can we condone losing more of these animals in "mishaps" in the bush? Also, with a record 800 000 tourists expected to visit South Africa, we can ill afford any human casualties in our parks.

*Article and photographs by
Carrie Curzon*

To adventure is to live, to break free from the shackles of habit and custom, to shake off the ordinary and the mundane, is to make life a never-ending journey of discovery and reward.

Clive Walker.

It is now presumed that a black rhino cow escaped serious injury during a shooting incident on a walking trail early in 1995 in the Pilanesberg National Park, but even so, this popular two-hour tourist excursion ended in tragedy.

One of the party of four – a doctor from overseas – suffered a head injury requiring hospital treatment after being knocked

down by the cow, while the young game ranger in charge of the trail was suspended from duties for six months for fatally shooting at point-blank range the cow's two-year-old male calf.

While it was thought the rhino cow was also wounded, efforts to scrutinise her since – both by Land Rover and helicopter – never detected any major injury. The incident, however, still caused a furore in conservation circles, provoking a debate on whether trails should be held at all in black rhino territory and, if they are, whether the field guides employed are sufficiently qualified for such responsibility.

This particular mishap occurred when trailists from the Bakubung resort emerged from the trees to be surprised by the two rhinos. According to an inquiry conducted by the senior warden for the then

Bophuthatswana Parks Eastern Regions, Koos Herbst, the ranger tried to act as a decoy for his guests before firing warning shots at the charging cow to scare her off. When her calf charged him, he tripped and had little option but to shoot the hefty baby as it bore down upon him.

Says Herbst, who originally took disciplinary action against the ranger, "In my opinion the ranger acted wrongly because he was a bit inexperienced. He should have shown a bit more restraint."

The ranger, Rupert Hechter (22), was privately employed by the Bakubung resort, which has an agreement with the Bophuthatswana Parks Board when it comes to walking trails. His experience of the bush, according to Herbst, was limited to guiding about 30 such trails in Pilanesberg.

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Clive Walker whose name has become synonymous with "Walking" trails in this country, was a pioneer of the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa. One of his many roles now is as chairman of the African Rhino Owner's Association.

"At Bakubung guests can go on birding trails, game drives or walking trails," says Herbst. "And all these trails involve the possibility of encountering any of the Big Five.

"We have to accept the fact that sometimes these things happen, and I don't think the death of one rhino should deprive thousands of people of a wilderness experience. Walking trails have taken place in Pilanesberg for 10 years and this is the first incident we have had. Black rhino here cover vast distances and, although they are well monitored, they occur all over the park."

According to Hechter's boss at the time, Gert Brumme, managing director of the three Stocks Leisure resorts in Pilanesberg (Kwa Maritane, Bakubung and Tshukudu), Hechter was employed by Bakubung on the strength of his qualifications and this incident was "just one of those things".

"Unfortunately somewhere along the line the unexpected happens. But Rupert was well qualified in the field and had undergone the training course provided by our Lodge.

"What people don't appreciate is that this particular incident could have had a far more serious outcome. Rupert had to re-load his rifle four times to ward off the rhino cow and calf and to protect the lives of his party."

With currently more than 40 black rhino in Pilanesberg, the question really is:

"Should the ranger have been walking through that thicket and, at the end of the day, should he have let the rhino 'stomp' him rather than shoot it?"

Anyone who has been on a walking trail in Big Five country will understand the unique thrill of such an experience, and Clive Walker (whose appropriate name has become synonymous with trails in this country), is one of its greatest proponents.

As a pioneer of the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA), and now as Chairman of the African Rhino Owners' Association (AROA), Walker's particular concern is with standards of training and the critical need for experienced, well-qualified people working in the bush.

"We cannot stress enough, on the trailing side, the importance of responsible behaviour, particularly when dealing with potentially dangerous animals. The bottom line is that a guide must no longer be seen as someone who wants to do something exciting in wildlife for a few years and then return to commerce and industry. It is important that guiding becomes recognised as a profession for both men and women demanding high standards."

Believing that the level of expertise is not as high as it should be – particularly in South Africa's private sector – Walker has set up his own training school, through the Wilderness Trust, under the guidance of highly experienced field ranger, John Locke. This six-week training course includes two weeks of weapons handling and is intended not only to promote the physical fitness of the trainee but, most importantly, a sense of pride and discipline.

"I don't believe the private sector is fully aware of the seriousness where rhinos are concerned, and we are not nearly well enough prepared," he says.

Rupert Hechter says apart from growing up on game farms, he had considerable hunting experience and underwent at least two (one- to two-week) training courses in Natal before going to Bakubung. He feels he was adequately qualified for taking out trails.

"This was my first full-time employment as a field guide, but during my year at Pilanesberg I walked into white rhino about 50 times without incident. I also came across black rhino about eight times and, on each occasion, it made me feel quite 'twitchy'. On this occasion things went wrong because we walked out of thick bush and surprised them."

Rupert has left Bakubung since the incident, to join the family estate agency business and make some money. He says he plans to return to tourism in the future – although in a different capacity:

"I would like to help my family start their own game lodge."

Rupert is adamant that these walking trails should continue: "We need to do them for the sake of the black rhino. They bring in money and people learn more about them."

And while he describes this particular

trail as "terrible!", he believes it was purely an accident and that he was not to blame.

"People can say what they like. But I was there, I did my job and got my people out alive. At the end of the day the big thing is that none of my party was killed and, as a conservationist, I am very glad the cow is still alive for breeding purposes. I don't believe I had any option but to shoot the calf – for the sake of my trailists and to save my own life."

He adds that although he has been criticised for taking trailists through a thicket with poor visibility, he was in an allocated walking area. "While there can never be a one hundred per cent safe area, I do think the Parks authorities must be very careful when designating these areas and make sure there is always good visibility."

Rupert also believes it is essential that field guides get a very good training.

"South Africa simply cannot afford either rhino or tourist casualties. Probably the good thing that came out of all this is that Stocks Leisure is now upgrading its training at all three lodges."

Hechter was reinstated at Bakubung only a week after his six-month suspension, and he is adamant that the incident did not put him off working in the Bush. "Bop Parks reinstated me solely because we agreed if I was inexperienced, then so was every other guide in the Park. The hope is that now Bop Parks will help all field guides working in Pilanesberg to gain practical experience so they can pass the FGASA exams."

Mr. Brumme has confirmed that in future all field guides working at his lodges will have to pass FGASA exams before qualifying.

The Natal Parks Board (custodians of the majority of South Africa's black rhino), boast that in 40 years of trailing there has never been an incident involving black rhino. Their comment is: "Rangers here would never shoot a rhino unless it was a life or death situation," and that their field guides only carry rifles to keep their trailists in check!

Head of the NPB capture team, Keith Meiklejohn, re-iterates with further tongue-in-cheek remarks that: "In this part of the world rangers would sooner shoot a trailist than a rhino, and that, while the odd trails officer has been 'dented', we have never had to flatten a rhino!"

Chairman of FGASA, Laurie Wright, says that animals living in game reserves are living in "a position of trust" and that it is this concept that field guides should respect.

"When we go into that animal's environment we are encroaching on its territory, and for us to go in and take out an animal that is only protecting its own territory, is unethical. The Wilderness Leadership School teaches you how to go in and observe the animal and then draw back without the animal ever being aware of your presence. But there are many guys out there who are taking guests out specif-

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ically to give them a cheap thrill by 'tracking a black,' by provoking charges or simply by putting them in a dangerous position just to give them an adrenalin kick. I think this type of attitude is a violation of trust."

FGASA currently has 250 members, of which only about 20 are fully qualified field guides. The Association started in 1989 with the aim of encouraging everyone involved in environmental trails to study the necessary courses and then sit a FGASA exam.

"Only in this way can we set a standard," says Wright. "Once they have passed the exam they are taken into Big Five areas of the veld by their peers and given a practical test. If they pass they are awarded field guide status. When a guide joins our Association he gets a log book and a copy of the syllabus that he is expected to cover before writing our exam. There are numerous courses out there - from two-day wonders that leave a lot to be desired, to some that are a couple of weeks long."

Paddy Hagelthorn, an ex-Londolozi employee who has been dubbed South Africa's very own Crocodile Dundee when it comes to fearlessly venturing into dangerous territory on bush trails and hunting expeditions, believes it is an unnecessary risk to take trailists into black rhino territory.

"Accidents can happen to anyone. But when the guide is inexperienced you are probably going to get the wrong reaction. Someone who knows what he is doing, simply won't risk getting his trailists into a dangerous situation.

"Today, with so few black rhino in the country and all the monitoring systems we have in operation, the rangers should know exactly where they are. And I suggest they keep the trailists out of their way. Everyone knows black rhino are aggressive, and I believe it is much better to watch them from a vehicle so you don't put the animal under too much stress. Like that you can get out of its way as quickly as possible without having to shoot. On foot you only need the scent of one, and that animal can put both your and its own life in danger."

After clocking up approximately 20 000 hours of "trouble-free" game ranging in the last 20 years, Hagelthorn now works for a new company, Ecologics, that provides a unique month-long training course offering South Africa's first, fully accredited National Diploma in Game Ranging. Included in the curriculum are subjects such as tracking, animal behaviour, species identification, rifle handling and guest communication.

The course consists of one week's theory at the Allenby Campus followed by three weeks' practical experience at Sabi Sands - one of the country's best-known Big Five game reserves.

Hagelthorn believes up to 90 per cent of guys handling tourists in the bush in this country are inexperienced: "It is quite pos-

sible for them to land a job with a private lodge and to be driving guests around after only a few days' experience," he says. And for this reason Ecologics is already considering lengthening the training course it offers:

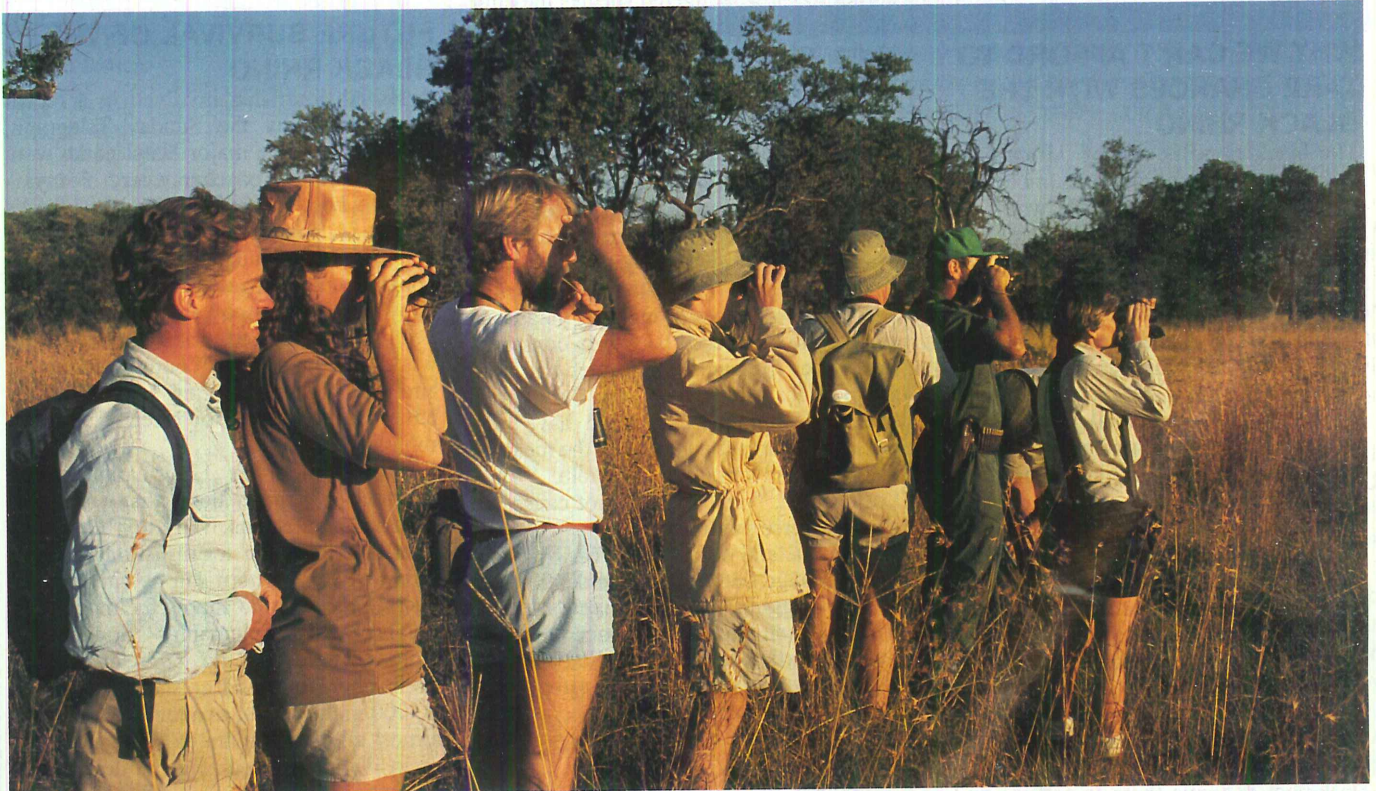
"In addition to our four-week course, we want to recommend trainees work a further nine months gaining practical experience, after which we would reassess them."

So far about 30 trainees have undergone the Eco-Training course, but not all are passing. "This is a proper diploma course that has to be worked, not paid for," says Hagelthorn. "We want to work closely with the Wilderness Leadership School, and the Technikon is interested in incorporating our course into its 'Certificate in Tourism' course."

And while FGASA offers one of the most recognised qualifications, according to Hagelthorn, it has not kept up with the times, or the needs of the New South Africa.

"FGASA has adopted a very high standard, but I think 99 per cent of today's game rangers would never pass their exam. And while there are up to 10 000 guys out there working in the bush, FGASA currently has a membership of only 250."

Former acting Chief Director of Bop Parks, Steve Johnson, believes that, if experienced, guides can interpret situations in the bush and be able to take the right action when a dangerous situation arises: "I have been with people when we were charged, and there are certain things



A walking trail in the bush is one of the finest experiences South Africa has to offer but, certainly in Big Five country, it has to be professionally handled. In charge of a group of tourists for several days in the wild, these rangers have to be jacks of all trades. Not only do they have to be adept with a firearm and highly knowledgeable when it comes to the bushveld, they also need to be expert mechanics, cooks, organisers and hosts, with above-average people skills.

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you can do without killing the animal," he says. "You can just scare it off. And you don't take people into thick bush where you might find black rhino."

Johnson adds that since South Africa is now experiencing a 25 per cent increase in tourists to the country he questions whether our guides are sufficiently qualified to handle this massive influx. To take people out on a foot safari in Zimbabwe, a guide must have more qualifications than a professional hunter. If you are going to do this in South Africa, and in black rhino territory, you *must* be well qualified.

"Although we haven't had an accident in 15 years in Bop Parks, there have been a few mock charges, and we are already tightening up all our requirements. We can never get away from the fact that there will be mortalities, but we must make sure they are minimised. We need to make sure our guides are qualified and that they shouldn't have to kill an animal, but just scare it away."

At present tourists pay about R40 for a two-hour trail in Pilanesberg. One can only wonder whether the benefits of taking tourists on walking trails in black rhino territory really outweigh the serious risks of putting at peril both the endangered animal, and the tourists' lives.

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WHY WE CAN'T AFFORD TO TAKE CHANCES WITH THE BLACK RHINO

The black rhino is one of Africa's most priceless assets, and yet its numbers have been allowed to dwindle to a world-wide population (in the wild) of 2 550, of which more than 70 per cent (about 890) are in South Africa. Only 30 years ago their numbers stood at around 120 000.

Historically prized for its horn that has been known to fetch as much as a staggering US \$ 40 000 a kilogram in China and Korea for use in medicinal preparations, it is not hard to understand the motive behind the ruthless poaching of this animal in Africa.

In southern Africa, custodians of the last remaining black rhino have spent fortunes protecting them against the deadly and daily threat of poachers but, despite projects to de-horn them and other species at risk and a special undercover police force – the Endangered Species Protection Unit (ESPU) – being set up to protect them and other species at risk, the massacre of these ungainly, primitive beasts continues unabated. It seems there is nothing to be done to prevent this wholesale slaughter.

There are many that fear the black rhino will never survive into the twenty-first century. Even if the appalling rate of

poaching can be controlled, there will still be deaths from accidental or natural causes, and it is debatable whether the black rhino's breeding rate will outweigh these losses.

However the Rhino Management Group (RMG) has initiated the "2000 Project", whereby it hopes that by the year 2000 South Africa will boast its very own total of 2 000 black rhino. This is an ambitious plan since the guidelines for potential rhino owners have become daunting – by the RMG's very own making.

In the last remaining black rhino strongholds, it is now normal practice for game guards to monitor them and patrol their territory 24 hours a day. To meet the required standards of the RMG game farmers buying a black rhino must follow strict criteria and must have their farms inspected with regard to appropriate fencing and security.

TODAY'S VALUE

Keith Meiklejohn's capture team in Natal has been auctioning off up to half a dozen surplus black rhino to South African buyers for the last five years. But while Lapalala's purchase four years ago of five black rhino brought in a record half a million rands each, last year their value had dropped drastically to R196 000 a head.

"Today," says Meiklejohn "finding suitable homes for them (for previously related reasons) has become a bit of a headache."

TO HUNT A BLACK RHINO?

According to conservationists, when it comes to any endangered species the ethic is, "Use it or lose it". And this applies even to the beleaguered black rhino – to the extent of hunting it if necessary.

There was a recent rumour that an old black rhino bull was to be set up for an expensive "hunt" in Pilanesberg, after which the carcass would be stuck on a spit at the Carnivore restaurant in Muldersdrift and fed to scores of hungry tourists. Theoretically no true conservationist would have a problem with this, since such a death would have brought in thousands of rands to be poured back into conservation. After the eager US hunter had paid the price for his "victory", the Carnivore's director, Jeremy Lock, would have purchased the carcass and cooked the meat for his more adventurous clientele. "But," Lock added, "only if it did not cause too much adverse publicity."

What he and others truly fear by doing this is a huge outcry from the sentimental "bunny-hugging" layman unable to cope with such an unsavoury concept. In the end this particular rhino bull died of natural causes and his remains provided a hearty feast for the vultures.

"It was such a waste that the community did not benefit," says Lock.

Perhaps the bull's demise could have been better "utilised" but, as Clive Walker wearing his "Rhino and Elephant Foundation" hat, pointed out, "To hunt and braai a black rhino would not have been



picture taken by family

Rupert Hechter, Bakubung's field guide who had to shoot a black rhino calf to protect his trailists. He hasn't let the incident put him off working in the tourist industry.

appropriate at this point in time. But it is inevitable it will be done in the future."

Bop Park's Assistant Director Steve Johnson added that the rhino hunting dilemma was "a hot potato". "Rhino meat is very good, and logic rules that we should use it. But we are very sensitive at the moment to public feeling."

FUTURE SURVIVAL OF THE BLACK RHINO

A British journalist involved in a recent investigation by the Sunday Telegraph, claimed the three major Natal parks were losing a rhino to poachers every 17 days – a claim hotly denied by the Natal Parks Board.

Fred Bridgeland believes the rhino is doomed unless legal trade in its horn is allowed. "Horn is too valuable, and human beings are too greedy for a trading ban to work," he says. "It is counter-productive and the 'bunny-hugging' organisations have a lot to answer for when it comes to rhino."

"Today there are 120 pharmaceutical factories in China alone that use rhino horn in medications. Why don't we provide this for them legally through rhino farms where the horn can be chopped off every three years to supply the market?"

The Sunday Telegraph's same investigation stated that the Zimbabwe black rhino population had crashed from about 10 000 in the 1970s, to a mere 120 today – almost all of which are closely guarded in intensively protected zones in the heart of the national parks.

Bearing all this in mind – can we really afford to lose any more of Africa's precious few remaining black rhino to "road accidents" in the bush? □