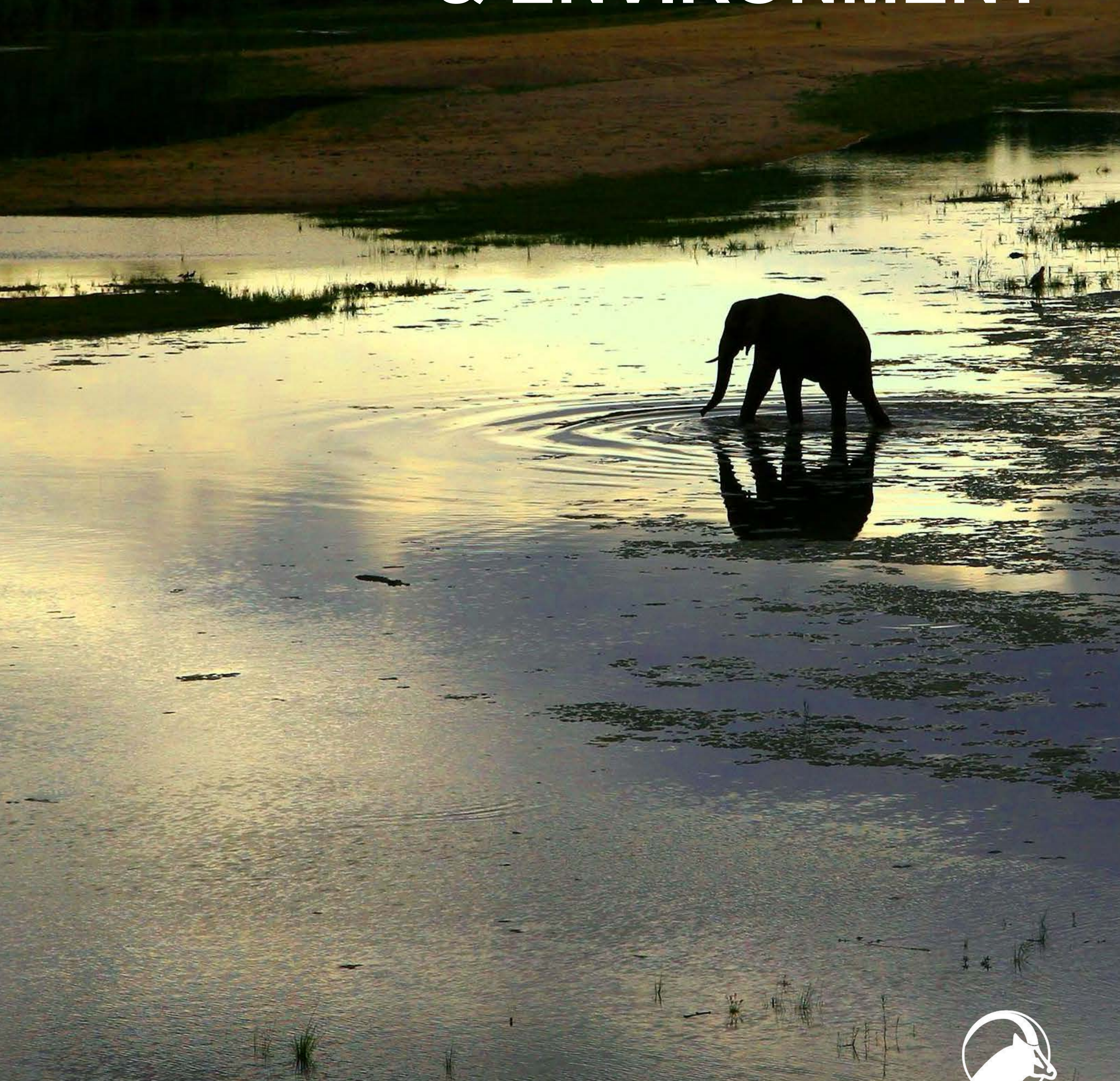


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WESSA

PEOPLE CARING FOR THE EARTH

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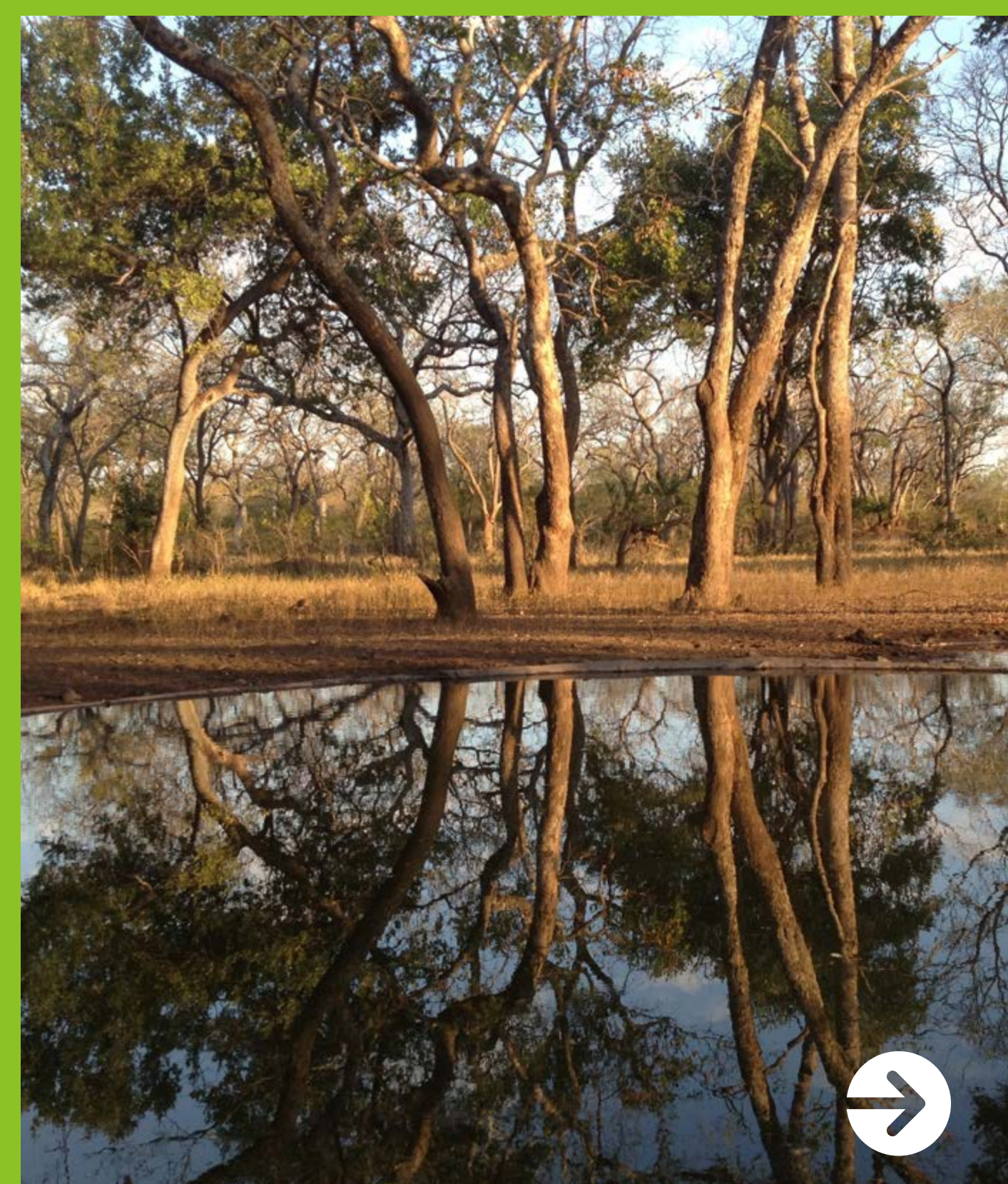
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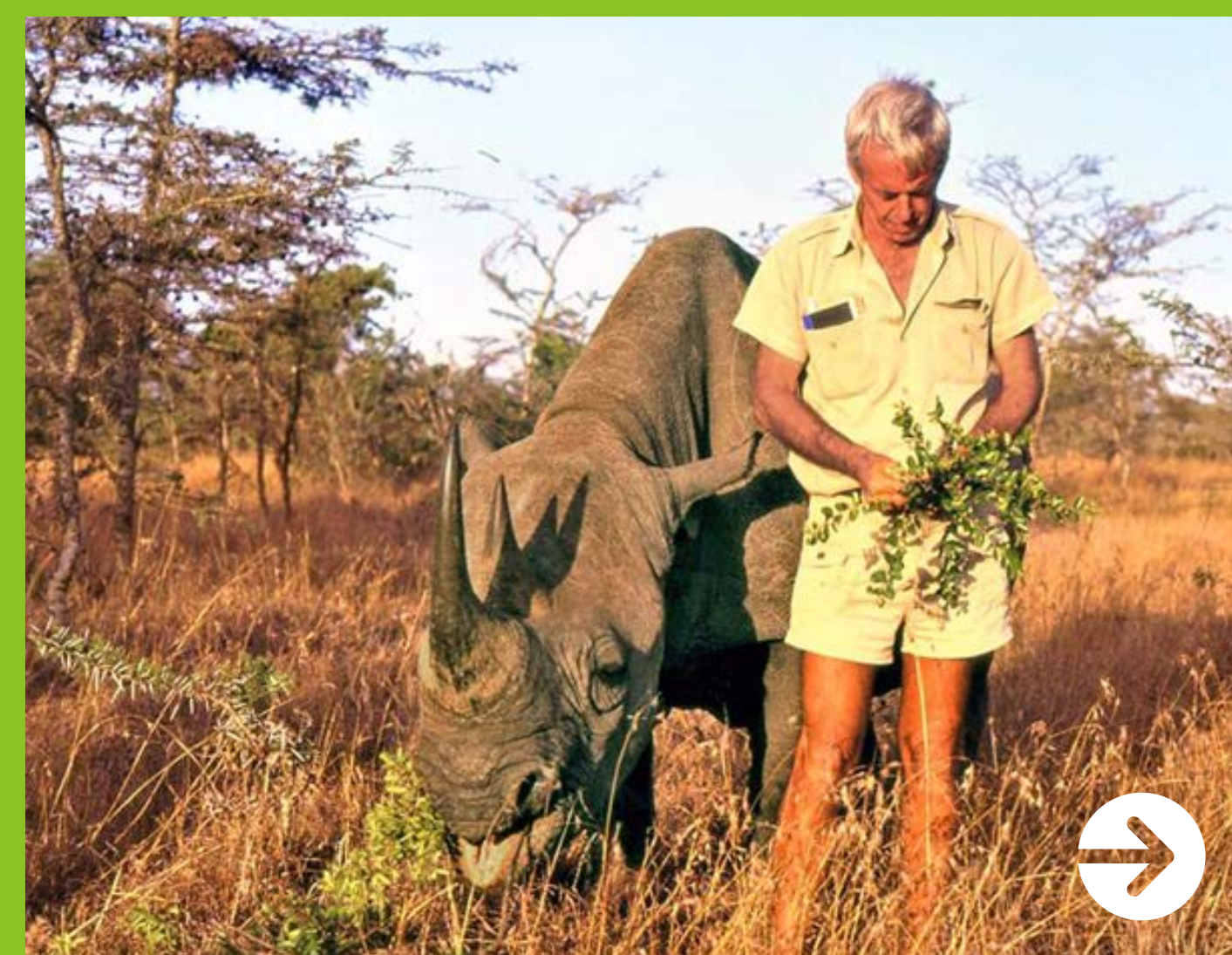
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**A picture is worth more than
a thousand words**



The Majete story



Eco-Hero Peter Hitchins

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Memories of a hero

PETER HITCHINS

Peter Michael Hitchins (20 June 1940 – 1 November 2019) was one of the heroes of rhino conservation from the 1960s to the 1990s. Although rightly remembered for his passionate commitment to Black Rhino conservation, Hitchins was much more than this – working tirelessly in the broad conservation field to within a few short months of his death.

EDITED BY LYNN HURRY



Peter Hitchins with the tame black rhino 'Morani' at Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. Pete and Clive Walker spent two weeks in Kenya studying the private rhino sanctuaries there.

Photograph: Clive Walker

If two words could be used to describe Hitchins' conservation contributions, it would be '*lasting legacy*'. In a dry dictionary definition, a lasting legacy is all about the actions someone takes during their lifetime and the way those actions affect how people remember them. As I stitched the contributions of his peers together in this Eco-Hero article, it became obvious that Hitchins' legacy was very much a lasting one. The common element of memory that each contributor had of him was of his way of 'getting things done', and that his example has lingered on in the workings of a whole host of conservation icons – each of whom made, or is continuing to make significant conservation contributions in today's world.

Tribute from Dr Jeremy Anderson (International Conservation Services)

Peter Hitchins, the man who lit the fuse that started the Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) and a widely respected conservationist died after a protracted battle with motor neuron disease with his wife Stella at his bedside.

In his working career he had been many things, research technician, ranger, farmer, park warden and island restorer – and in all of these positions he was outstanding. While he was working on Black Rhino in Hluhluwe Game Reserve, and during a discussion with John Forrest, the idea to form the GRAA was first proposed by Peter. The rest became part of Africa's conservation history.

After matriculating at Potchefstroom Boys High School in 1958, Peter became the diver at the newly opened Oceanarium in Durban. A particularly hairy part of his job was resuscitating newly captured sharks that were groggy from the capture ordeal. This resulted in him once speedily exiting the water, with chomping jaws just missing his buttocks. He went on to repeat this manoeuvre a couple of years later while catching newly hatched baby crocs in the Hluhluwe river while the irate mother's jaws clanged shut behind him.

After a year at Natal University studying Zoology and Botany - then a very boring time for anyone who wanted to be in the bush - he joined the Natal Parks Board, first as a research technician under that great ecologist Roddy Ward. He then moved to being a ranger under Norman Deane, where he excelled.

It was my privilege to have him as a mentor in my first year as a ranger. The fearlessness in his character came through in his passion with catching venomous snakes and especially when working on foot with Black Rhino in dense thicket. It was always



Peter Hitchins in his Natal Parks Board days, fitting a radio transmitter into the rear horn of a black Rhino. Photograph: Rodney Borland

After serving as the section ranger in charge of the Corridor he was then assigned to work on Black Rhino full-time, as the population had started to decline. He was one of the first to use radio-telemetry in South Africa and confirmed that Black Rhino are territorial. Those who worked with him will tell you that he knew Black Rhino better than anyone, before or since - he darn well thought like a Black Rhino!

The Nomageja valley again featured when two people studying Black Rhino in East Africa came down to see what Peter was up to. They regaled the Zululand audience with some 'big talk', which impressed most of the onlookers. Hitchins, quietly smiling in the corner, invited them to go for a walk and see some Black Rhino and they accepted. John Forrest dropped them all off, and collected them a few hours later; Hitchins innocently smiling as two ashen-faced, thorn-scratched East Africans told John Forrest that he had tried to get them killed! He had a wonderful sense of humour and his escapades were

legendary, not least breathtakingly dangerous.

For financial reasons he left the bush to manage a sugar farm on the iMfolozi flats. He kept close contact with the staff in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi and was appointed to the Zululand Reserves Advisory Board. The farm was one of those that was destroyed by flood-deposited silt as a consequence of cyclone Demoina, and he then became the first warden on the newly created Songimvelo Game Reserve in KaNgwane, where he led its development and management. His next step was to manage Sable Ranch in the then Transvaal, and then to Cousine Island in the Seychelles, where he worked for several years on restoring the island to a more natural state. The data he collected there gave much of the background to the book on the ecology and rehabilitation of Cousine island that he co-authored with Mike Samways and Orty Bourquin.

Although he wrote a number of peer-reviewed scientific

a fun day when, on a patrol with field rangers, we got the opportunity to provoke a Black Rhino charge and then seek refuge behind or up a tree. Extracting oneself from thorn trees was always accompanied by much laughing and teasing of the ones who were the most tattered. In the early 1960s, the scrub-choked Nomageja valley held the highest density of Black Rhino in Africa and in one day we collected six charges!

I recall one incident when we were doing a foot count and walking down parallel *Dicrostachys*-covered ridges south of eziNcageni. In the cool winter months, the Black Rhinos were fond of warming up by lying in sandbaths, side-on to the sun. Peter walked onto a rhino at very close range, and without warning it came for him - all he could do was hit its front horn with his binoculars! The rhino immediately turned and fled, and thereafter Peter always carried a knobkerrie - he twice used it under similar circumstances. The binoculars that Pete used to discourage the charging rhino are a treasured possession in safe-keeping with Stella.



Pete Hitchins was the originator and project leader under the REF banner of a two-week aerial survey of the 15,000 sq. km. Chobe National Park in September 1992 working with Botswana National Parks, Natal Parks Board (NPB), National Parks Board of SA and the Ministry of Conservation, Namibia. A total of seven White Rhino were found of which two were poached before final rescue by the NPB and re-location to the Khama Rhino Sanctuary near Serowe. Pete Hitchins is in the centre of the group. Others include Dr Michael Knight, SANP, Dr Peter Morkel, wildlife vet, John Forrest, Gordon Smith, NPB, Alison Forrest also NPB (who kept the team fed for two weeks!), pilot Andre Pelsler, team navigator, Peter Erb, Jo Tagg and Jay Killen (all three from Namibia). Anton Walker is on the wing, Clive Walker on the right, next to the Mazda Wildlife Fund 4x4 vehicle. Photo: REF Archives (Clive's camera).

papers on Black Rhino, he never did finish that book on them that he had started writing. His illness caught up with him too soon. He was a loving father, and the staunchest of friends, and there were few equals as a companion in the bush that he knew so well. And now our rhino man has left and gone away. Hamba Kahle Mbobo! (From Jeremy's eulogy delivered at Peter's funeral).

Tribute from Clive Walker (Environmental activist, educator, author and artist)

I first met Peter Hitchins in 1973 after the founding of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, when he became one of the Trust's very first members. He did so because he believed the EWT was going to take the situation of the Black Rhino seriously, after I had dropped him a handwritten note. I kept that promise to him by inviting him to be a keynote speaker at our very first symposium in 1976 at the University of Pretoria, thus providing him with a platform to wake the conservation world up. And wake the conservation world up he did. The EWT funded the translocation costs of the Black Rhino to boost the species numbers in the Kruger National Park, and conducted a major aerial survey of the desert elephant and Black Rhino of Namibia's 'Kaokoveld' where both

species were fast disappearing from unbridled poaching.

If ever one could select one human being out for dedication to a species, then Peter was that person. He literally thought like a Black Rhino and had a sixth sense when in their presence. Colleagues would testify to his uncanny ability to size up a situation on foot in dense bush and whilst having no view of the rhino would back off or move around. I personally had a number of such experiences on foot with him at Lapalala Wilderness and I recall thinking - how is this possible?

I enjoyed a close friendship with the man affectionately known as simply 'Pete' by all who knew him and admired him for close on 47 working years until his passing. The conservation world has lost a true spirit who was literally 'one of a kind'. He was fearless, funny to the point of hysteria, and frustratingly stubborn in his belief that 'a spade is a spade'.

The late Anthony Hall-Martin and I were joint 'best men' at his wedding in Scotland to biologist, Stella Le Maitre whom he had met in the Seychelles and with whom he had worked on research projects in the late 1990s.

(Stella recalls: "I was a vet student when we got married on 1 September 2001 in Edinburgh, Scotland and I went on to finish my training at Onderstepoort, while Pete managed a nearby game ranch. We had met



Game Rangers Association of Africa meeting at Berg en Dal, Kruger National Park, circa mid-1990s. Mike Landman, Pete Hitchins, Clive Walker (Honorary member), Jim Feely (Founding member) and Barry Clements. Photo: GRAA Archives.

in 1995 on Cousine Island in the Seychelles where he was overseeing rehabilitation of the natural habitat. I was working for Birdlife International on a critically endangered endemic bird species and ended up joining Pete on his island, assisting him with all sorts of projects, mainly to do with turtles, seabirds and endemic land birds.“)

Memories from Prof Eugene Moll (Professor of Biodiversity and Conservation, Author and Environmental Consultant)

Eugene’s earliest recollection of Peter was in 1960 when they were both first-year students at the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal. Hitchins had just left his game ranging work at Hluhluwe where he had spent much of his time focusing on the ecology of his beloved Black Rhino and, saw a degree as a useful ‘ticket’ for continuing with his research.

“However, Pete did not enjoy his university courses ... so instead of buckling down to getting through the year, he spent much time sorting through all his rhino data (in a large, two-drawer tray of filing cards) – (where) I often saw him buck-naked on hot days frolicking about! Needless to say, he failed the year.”

(Stella recalls that Hitchins went back to varsity in 1964 but that he didn’t finish the degree. During this time, he worked part-time for the Parks Board in the iMfolosi and Hluhluwe reserves - doing various surveys - and that he rejoined the Board full-time from early in 196, becoming a section ranger for the Corridor shortly thereafter.)

During one of his early fieldtrips in the iMfolosi, Hitchins

invited Moll to assist him with some vegetation transects he was doing in the grasslands marginal to the Afromontane Forest patches around Hilltop rest camp. According to Eugene “this was at the time when bushbuck were taken off the open hunting-for-the-pot for rations list - as their numbers were declining alarmingly. It was also the time when nyala populations were exploding (in the early 1960s nyala were a rare sight). Pete was interested in measuring/assessing the impact of bushbuck, nyala and Black Rhino on the browse level of this interface environment and I was the tame botanists

that did all the field IDs (and

very happily too I might add).”

In the late 1960s, while Pete was working in Hluhluwe, the NPB appointed Jan Oelofse as Game Capture Officer and in a few short months game-management policy and practices went from open shooting to a system of quotas, together with live capture.

The effect on the hyena population was immediate – with, as Moll records, “dire consequences for the Black Rhinos”. He explains: “In the shooting era, animals were eviscerated in the veld and the carcasses were delivered to neighboring communities. This gave scavengers (hyenas in particular) ready access to food and when the new policies were introduced, almost overnight, there was suddenly a sharp decrease in available food for scavengers. This resulted in now-starving scavengers having to target the easiest prey – which were Black Rhino calves. So when Pete came back to Hluhluwe he immediately noticed that all his cows still occupied their original home-ranges instead of moving on. With Black Rhinos the mother usually leaves the home range to her offspring and goes and establishes a new one – so leaving the youngster in familiar territory. He questioned the Game Scouts as to why this was, and it was soon clear that it was because their calves had been killed by hyenas! Black Rhino calves run behind their mothers when their mothers are spooked, and this gave the hyenas the opportunity to harass and eventually bring down the calves: a big meal indeed, even if they had to wait a day or two for mom to leave.” White rhino did not suffer the same fate as their calves run in front, much better protected.

Moll concludes: “Back at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the alarming fall in Black Rhino numbers could be linked to the Parks Board policy of quota hunting and game capture. Pete’s determination of the real reason behind the decline in Black Rhinos was yet another example of his intuitive way of thinking, and of his bull-headed way of pursuing the truth - whether or not he was listened to.”

Moll also notes that when Hitchins left the Natal Parks Board in 1973 to go farming, he remained faithful to his NPB colleagues on the iMfolozi flats saying “that

such was his commitment to the reserves that he was asked to serve on the Zululand Reserves Advisory Board – a position he held until his death.”

(In sharing her memories of this time Stella writes: “By the early 1970s he had three children (Sue, Mark and Robert) and he and his first wife Margaret took the decision to make their education a priority. Accordingly, in 1973 Pete became a manager of a sugar cane farm on the iMfolozi flats. He ended up running four farms and stayed there for about ten years until he joined Jeremy Anderson in setting up the newly proclaimed Songimvelo Game Reserve.”)

The Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA)

It was due entirely to Hitchins’ initiative, foresight, vision, energy and leadership that the GRAA, the first of its kind, was established on 26 June 1970. Ten rangers attended the meeting that launched the GRAA. In addition to Hitchins they were Nick Steele, Boy Hancock, John Forest, Gordon Baily, Ken Rochat, Jan Oelefse, Paul Dutton, John Tinley and Graham Root. In its memorial tribute to Hitchins the GRAA wrote: “He led the Association as Chairman for the first two years and was elected Chair for another six terms at various times until 1994. It was a very difficult time during the 1970s and 1980s as South Africa was being isolated due to the international political and economic pressures.”



Peter Hitchins, Anthony Hall-Martin and Clive Walker on a survey to look at habitats in the Cape for the Black Rhino subspecies *bicornis bicornis* for their return to National Parks which was later supported by translocations from Namibia to the Addo, Mountain Zebra and Karoo National Parks. Anthony and Clive were Peter’s ‘best men’ at his wedding to Stella in 2001. The three were the founders of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation in 1987, with Anthony as Chairman. They also shared a very special friendship over more than 40 years. Photo: REF Archives.

The GRAA tribute to Hitchins includes an interesting memory of Hitchins’ early life as a school-boy: “Peter was an ardent wildlife conservationist at heart and loved being in the field from early in life. He caught snakes and collected birds’ eggs – a not unusual pastime for young lads of the day. He tells of a hiking trip he and a friend did in 1959, when they spent ten days camping in bush along the river in the iMfolozi Game Reserve until they ran out of food. Ian Player, who was the Warden at the time, discovered them and was surprised that the Field Rangers had not

discovered them earlier. He took them in and put them up for the night.”

“Such was Hitchins’ belief in the importance of the work of the GRAA, particularly as an open line of communication between game rangers, that he tirelessly supported and promoted its work to the end of his life.

Paul Dutton (Founding member of the GRAA)

One characteristic of all the tributes to Peter Hitchins is the memory of his personal strength and commitment to truth and justice.

Paul Dutton, one of the last two surviving members of the launch meeting of the GRAA, writes movingly that “Peter’s passing has shown that people of his character and conservation professionalism has disrupted a fragile chain linking the saving of our emblematic wildlife and their natal habitats in Zululand. Peter was a one of a number of conservationists whose commitment was a reflection of our dedication in the early days with the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board onwards from about the 1960s.”

Dutton goes on to say: “Bob Dylan and Joan Baez warned us of impending environmental disasters. It was a bit late in life for me to emulate their crusade or charge my spirit with a puff of weed but, having had the immense pleasure of working closely with Pete Mbobo Hitchins (in my start-up years) was sufficient for me to follow a cathartic journey caring for wilderness and wildlife for at least 60 years thereafter.”

Dutton recalls that he and Hitchins “had the pleasure and privilege of working with so many conservation luminaries starting with being foundation members of the GRAA” and that when he had first met Hitchins in about 1962 when he and Orty Bourquin, as university students, visited him when he was lake ranger at St Lucia, remarking “they came not as tourists but young men wishing to find a niche in nature conservation that would feed their needs in becoming involved in applying their scientific inclinations to actually getting involved in field studies, Peter into rhinos and Orty into all manner of fauna. Like many other young people who came to visit me at the Lake, like Brian Huntley and others, it was the sowing of a seed that eventually germinated into their long and illustrious careers in nature conservation.”

Dutton goes on to recall how Hitchins and Bourquin had assisted him in opening up a trail in St Lucia Lake’s wilderness area, remembering that “Personal comfort was not one of Pete’s traits, abandoning his parks board vellies to pursue his rhino field studies bare-footed in iMfolozi and Hluhluwe’s thorniest habitats.”

A previous Eco-Hero article celebrated the life and times of Jim Feely (*African Wildlife & Environment* 72), who was remembered as a man who had a strong influence on the careers of a number of budding conservationists. At the same time Feely’s contributions were honed by the contacts that he had with other like-minded people. Dutton writes about one such time of the meeting of the minds when Feely and Hitchins were camped at Thumbu camp on the banks of the Black iMfolosi river. He recalls that the two of them ‘spent the entire night next to a tamboti fire leaving a laager of numerous empty beer cans around the fire, attesting to Jim and Pete’s profound intellectual discourse, until only ashes remained in the fire pit.”

In closing his memories on the life and times of Pete Hitchins Dutton wrote “Sadly Pete, although a prolific author of numerous scientific papers, did not put pen to a memoir with some of his wonderfully crafted and pertinent cartoons. We who worked with Peter and shared the creation of the GRAA will miss him immensely for his very special *joie de vie*.”

Epilogue

Those who knew Peter Hitchins well all recalled his fierce defence of his colleagues and friends. However, his devotion to his family superseded all else and it was in support of Stella that Hitchins agreed to move to the United Kingdom. As she recalls: “We moved to the UK in 2010 because Pete wanted me to be closer to my family. This must have been very hard for him, leaving Africa behind, but whenever I asked, he always said he was happy over here. Our house, needless to say, is full of Africana, including a large number of animal skulls. He kept himself busy by establishing a lovely little garden; a haven for himself and our two dogs, Nunu and Thanda and spending hours going through his diaries and photographs.”

At the end, a time of peace at last for this remarkable rhino warrior.

Acknowledgements

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Suggestions for future articles welcome

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