

Namibia:

Pedal power across the Desert

January 2006 marked the first anniversary of the death of Mike Hearn, Research Director of Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) in Namibia and much-loved friend.

Vanessa Buxton

Christina Franco (Trustee of Save the Rhino International), Allie Wharf (BBC Newsnight) and I joined Mike's Namibian friends, cycling 250 miles through Damaraland to his grave. Our objective was to raise money for an Education and Research Centre as a memorial to Mike and to Blythe Loutit, founder of SRT, who died last June.

We attempted to train in UK over Christmas but the snow and excess turkey consumed made it difficult. So it wasn't surprising that the first day was gruelling. We were thwarted by heat exhaustion, heat rash and the demise of the support vehicle's suspension. But Day Two was kind to us: it was blissfully overcast, hiding the sun. Rain had come to the Ugab valley for the first time in three years. Fire lilies carpeted the horizon as far as the eye could see. And, thanks to the skill of our guide, Bernd Brell from SRT, we stalked and spotted a rhino - extraordinary good fortune! - it can take days of tracking spoor to find one.

Day Three took us to near breaking point: A strong headwind was blowing us backwards from dawn. In the afternoon, we had to climb over the watershed at the top of a mountain range. At 4pm the sun was at its hottest, the wind still hard in our faces. It was up, up, UP, endlessly, on shingle such that the tyres had little traction,

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Above:
On the hottest morning, we all arrived at Mike and Blythe's graves

Left:
Mike Hearn combining his two passions

slipping and doubling the effort. 6pm, and we were running out of time and energy. Just as we hit exhaustion levels, suddenly, miraculously, the gradient changed to downhill. The mountains turned to terracotta gold, a glorious sunset in reward.

Downhill and through the Springbok river valley to Werelds End on Day Four, where we met with Mike's friends from the Namibian Kona Cycle Team, to cycle together from his house to his grave. (After he became hooked on cycling, Mike named one of the rhinos "Kona".) As Day Five dawned, we watched, hearts in our mouths, as the Kona Team oiled their slick, mean machines, looking terrifyingly professional. Their mad style was impossible to emulate: I received a life-long tattoo of a cycle sprocket imprinted in my calf, and Allie bit the dust/sand at the bottom of a riverbed.

But after four full days' cycling ahead of the others, our improved fitness was telling. So for our last day we and the Kona crew were one united team roaring up and down hill. It was the hottest morning of all, but we arrived at Mike and Blythe's graves, Palmwag, just as scheduled, at 1pm on 19 January. The evening's champagne ceremony was presided over by Chief Jeremiah of the Damara.

Our cycle trip included meetings with all those involved in plans for the Education

and Research Centre: Rudi Loutit, CEO of SRT; Dave van Smeerdijk of Wilderness Safaris; Danie Holloway, who will build it; and Dr Jennifer Lalley, an old friend of Mike's, who will be managing the project over the next two years. It will have huge potential for the rural people of Damaraland and be a fitting memorial to two wonderful people, Mike Hearn and Blythe Loutit.

Thank you to all of those who helped get us from start to finish - there are many of you! Most of all, we'd very much like to thank all those who sponsored us, helping us to raise approximately £13,000. A seed has been planted: there is a plan afoot to repeat the Desert Cycle annually on Mike's birthday, at the end of May (a cooler time of year) and to continue to raise funds for SRT.

David Stirling, Project Director of SRI, and Cathy Dean, Director, are visiting SRT in early March 2006, when they will review the priorities for the coming year, and help to decide what the proceeds of "Desert Rhino", the sell-out party we are holding on Friday 10 March, and the remaining money in the Mike Hearn Memorial Fund will support. We will report on this in the autumn 2006 issue of *The Horn*.

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Right:
Two riders, the wind still hard in their faces

Rain had come to the Ugab valley for the first time in three years.

Interested?

If you are interested in taking part in the 2007 Desert Cycle Namibia, please email events@savetherhino.org