Namibia:

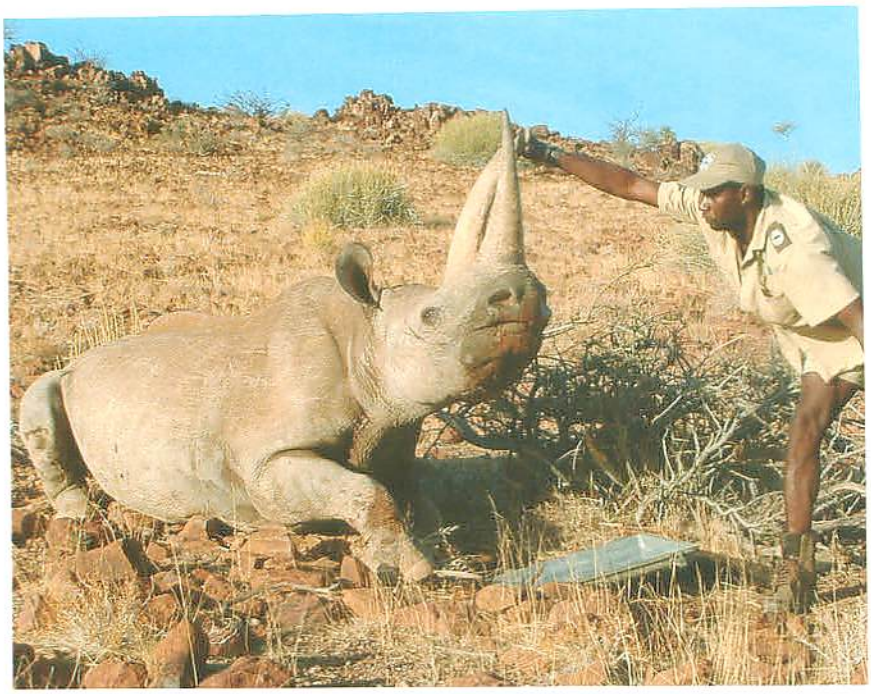
Rita's last day

It looks like a giant cat-litter tray. Small, green bushes dot the dry, brown landscape and cone shaped mountains fill the horizon. This is the semi-arid Kunene region of North Western Namibia.
The cat litter is, in fact, the basalt desert floor and the green bushes are Euphorbia Damarana which, though highly toxic, are the favourite food of the desert-adapted black rhino (diceros bicornis bicornis) which live in this vast emptiness.
Returning after four years' absence, I am intoxicated by the size and beauty of this landscape. It feeds the soul and it's not hard to understand why a young English man called Mike Hearn should give up everything to come here to study these prehistoric animals.

Mike's fascination for rhinos began while growing up next door to Port Lympne Wild Animal Park in Kent. At 18, with a single-minded determination he got in touch with Save the Rhino International to ask if he could work in conservation. Johnny Roberts and I had just started SRI. Any help in the office was welcome. But Mike wasn't interested in raising funds for rhinos. His passion lay in working in the field, in Africa.

Johnny and I had recently returned from Namibia where we had met a hands-on NGO called Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), which was working with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) and local communities to look after this unique population of desert-adapted black rhinos in, what was then, the Damaraland. We knew they needed administrative support in their Windhoek office and so we arranged for Mike to work there. He wasted no time. 18 months later he was working with the community game guards. Two years ago, with an MSc under his belt, he became Director of Research for SRT. He has lived in Namibia now for nine years.

I am sitting on the roof of the Landrover between Philimone, Human and Ernst - our trackers and one of the five monitoring teams that patrol this 25,000 km2 area. Mike passes us some fresh oranges, a rare treat from Swakopmund. We eat them in contented silence, scanning the horizon for signs of life.
A tracking team consists of at least two local trackers and a driver/photographer. Water points are visited at first light to locate sets of footprints, which are tracked until the animal is located. Positional data is obtained using a Global Positioning



System (GPS). These patrols obtain long-term data on individual rhinos, their movement patterns and population performance, as well as detecting and deterring poaching.

There will be no tracking today though. Half an hour into the cat litter we made out the familiar shape of a rhino on the skyline, but lying down. We immediately suspected something was wrong. Philimone, the senior tracker identified Rita immediately, an old female first sighted in 1982. She has calved four times since then and was probably in her mid 30s – a grand old age for a rhino!

It's unnatural to walk up to any wild animal on their own turf, but to walk straight up to a one tonne rhino, when the only escape lies in leaping into the nearest, highly toxic Euphorbia bush, made me uneasy. We approached her cautiously but it was quickly apparent that this animal had no strength left. The one sense that remained was her smell. When she finally caught wind of us her head spun round as she attempted to get up. She couldn't get off her knees. It was a pitiful sight to see her struggle so, not wanting to distress her further, we backed off.

Mike radioed the country rhino co-ordinator in Windhoek: "Can you send a vet from Etosha National Park to diagnose her?" Within minutes it was arranged. The vet would arrive the following morning.

We all sensed that this was Rita's last day and decided to remain with her. If possible, we would try and get her to drink some water. After studying the surroundings and carefully analysing her faeces, Mike concluded that she was dying naturally of old age. Mike and I, in different ways, have invested years in the rhino and the few rhino deaths that I've encountered have been a result of poaching. Although it is distressing to see Rita so broken, it is satisfying to know that some reach this natural end.

Our task is to get her to drink. At the first attempt her prehensile lip comes crashing down on the tray, tipping it and the water over her face. We refill it, leave it close by and back off to set up our camp nearby. A trackers' camp consists of the parked vehicle and bedrolls around a fire.

As the sun goes behind the hills filling the sky with a myriad of rich pastel colours, I wonder if Rita too has sensed this may be her last day. In melancholic mood Mike and I take a beer and walk to a high rock. We keep an eye on Rita from our vantage point. As the night draws in the fearsome desert heat abates.

In the morning, after a rusk and a cup of tea, Mike and I leave for Windhoek and a meeting with the MET. We can't wait for the vet so I go one last time to see Rita. She has not moved in the night. The water in front of her is untouched and apart from the slight lift of her rib cage from her shallow breathing, she lies still.

I creep to within 20 feet and sit on my haunches in front of her. She fixes an eye on me. I reflect, thinking about how lucky I have been to work with these animals and of the happy times I had with Johnny Roberts in this country. Desert rhinos cover huge distances at night and I mused over the desert challenge I was to embark on in just two months' time. Save the Rhino had entered a team to attempt the first completion of the 230 km Marathon des Sables race in a rhino costume!

Staring at Rita I shake my head in bewilderment – desert-adapted humans we are not! I make to get up and at once Rita snorts loudly, trying to raise herself off her knees. Is she trying to tell me something? Best of luck on your Sahara desert run I hope! She falls back to the ground and as I turn away, I feel happy that she is still in control. Without looking back I walk to the vehicle, whispering my farewell to a wonderful animal.

David Stirling