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My Life in the Wild

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Androcles and the Rhino

THERE ARE ONLY about eleven hundred white rhinos left in Africa, and I must mention with a dash of pride that I have met at least five hundred fifty of them. Most of them live in Zululand, in Natal, where I spent a great deal of time.

In the summer of 1963, I directed a film for MGM titled *no*. Since there are no rhinos in Culver City, California, I had to travel eleven thousand miles to the place where rhinos

live. The rhinos could not find a nicer place to live than Zululand, with its rolling green hills, lovely mountains, the Umfolozi River, and Lake Santa Lucia, where millions of flamingos and thousands of hippos and crocodiles also make their home.

Our base of operation was at Mtubatuba. When I asked a Zulu why anyone would call a township Mtubatuba, he answered me with great clarity, "Mtubatuba in Zulu means 'The one who jumps and jumps.'" I still found it strange that a township should be named The-one-who-jumps-and-jumps, so I asked him further. Again, his answer was sensible. In this locality a Zulu chief was born and, since he was a giant of a baby, he could not come out easily from his mother's womb. The witch doctor, anxious to help the delivery, jumped up and down on the mother's belly. The jumping technique worked, and finally the mother delivered a healthy child who later became a big

chief. Our base was called Mtubatuba in memory of the witch doctor who knew when, where, and how to jump.

But, getting back to rhinos, the white rhinos are not really white. It seems their original popular name was lost in translation. The Afrikaans word *wijde* (meaning "wide") was mistakenly changed to *white* in English. The official name for this species is the "square-lipped rhino"; and it is because of these wide lips that it was given the Afrikaans nickname that has now become the English misnomer. Black rhinos, which are black only when they wallow in black mud, are much smaller. The white rhino is the heaviest land mammal next to the African elephant. He may weigh as much as seven thousand pounds. And I, who was chased by a big one, must testify that the awkward-looking primeval creature is as nimble on its feet as a ballerina and as fast as a locomotive. Luckily, white rhinos are good-natured creatures compared to black rhinos. This makes it easy for the tourist, for the situation is not unlike the old Westerns, where the villains are identified by their black hats, and the good guys by their white ones. It is wise to avoid

Zululand rhinos on the run



the villainous black rhino, but one need not have too much fear of the giant white rhino.

Rhinos have remained very much the same over the past ten million years. This could mean that they are perfectly evolved. But they were perfect only until men invented firearms and discovered Africa, and until some Chinese decided that powdered rhino horn was a powerful aphrodisiac. This is not true, but believing it must have given some psychological satisfaction to the Chinese. Many white settlers killed the rhinos out of cruelty, simply because the large beasts were an easy target. At the same time, poachers killed them to sell their horns to the Chinese. For these reasons, by the turn of this century, the number of majestic white rhinos had been reduced to about twenty. At this point, some conservationists decided to stop the slaughter and save the rhino. From then on, dedicated game guards fought ferocious battles with poachers. I witnessed some of these encounters, and, under the leadership of Ian Player (elder brother of the famous golfer Gary Player), the rhino's battle was won. The end result is that, at least for the present, white rhinos are not endangered.

I decided to make a film, in a dramatic but documentary style, about this heroic effort, and so I followed the activities of Ian Player and his game guards. The first time I was charged by a rhino was when Ian Player had tranquilized a huge female with his hypodermic rifle. This rhino had wandered off the reservation and was thus exposed to poachers. Player's objective was to catch her ladyship and transport her back to Umfolozi, where she would be safe. I tried to film the whole procedure. The rhino was darted and captured. She soon fell asleep under the influence of the anaesthetic. Then Player tried a new antidote, which he thought would take at least five minutes to put the giant creature on her feet again. He was wrong. The antidote took effect immediately and the rhino was on her feet in thirty seconds and I, standing in front of her, was her immediate target.

My photographer, whose camera was running, got on film the

Mack Sennett scene of the year: The drugged rhino running, the MGM crew running faster, and me running the fastest because I was the closest to the deadly horns. I could feel the breath of the monster on my neck when Ian Player ran up close to the rhino's ear and shouted in Zulu. I don't know what he said, as I don't speak Zulu, but the rhino stopped. When Ian yelled, she stopped in her tracks, and I took the opportunity to disappear into a ditch behind a thorn tree. Later I learned that rhinos have abominable eyesight, but very acute hearing, and a shout in the ear sounds to them like a fired shot. But from that frightful moment on, I formed a new habit. I avoided standing in front of sleeping rhinos, but if I did, I made sure that Player was present.

Soon after, a game guard reported that a black rhino was dying in a poacher's snare. I drove with Player and Harry Guardino, the American actor, to see whether we could ease the

The rhino that attacked Ivan Tors being tranquilized by Ian Player and Harry Guardino



pain of this dying rhino. It was a horrible sight. A poacher had placed a wire snare square on a bush. As the black rhino was browsing he stuck his giant head between the loop of the wire snare prepared in the shape of a lasso. As he tried to disentangle himself, he pulled the wire noose tighter and tighter until the wire cut into his flesh at least one inch deep around his neck. With each movement the cut deepened and in a few minutes the poor rhino could have severed all the arteries of his neck. It was a cruel sight. Player acted immediately. He shot a strong dose of painkiller into the suffering animal and as soon as the rhino stopped struggling, we cut off the wire. The damage to the neck was horrendous. It did not seem as if we could help this miserable monster. But Player was determined, and with the help of eighty strong Zulus and a winch, we loaded the sick animal onto a giant van and took him to our main compound, where we installed him in a fortified enclosure. There we filled him with antibiotics and treated the wound with sulfa powder.

The Zulus, who give names to everybody, named the rhino Guardino. For three weeks, we treated him with more shots and administered sulfa daily. It wasn't an easy task. The rhino fought us "horn and hoof," but after ten days, as the wound slowly healed, the black rhino realized that we were his friends. He stopped his fitful threatenings and began to take lucerne and hay out of our hands. In three weeks, the healing was complete. In six weeks Guardino (the rhino, not the actor) was allowed to return to the wild. I guess it was the first time in history the so-called vicious black rhino was used to prove that love conquers all. And even today in the Umkuzi Game Reserve, where we relocated the rhino, game guards can walk up to this feared beast and tickle him under the chin. A rhino named Guardino is still grateful to man.

Living in Zululand, I learned that all the Olympic high-jump records are underachievements. There is a tree in Umfolozi where one of the branches is marked at a height of twelve feet. This is how high a game guard jumped when chased by

a rhino. All Olympic athletes could shatter records if rhinos were to chase them around the track.

Rhinos are territorial, meaning that the strongest male with his selected harem will occupy the land with the tastiest vegetation and the best water supply. He will mark his boundaries with his urine and chase away every other rhino, unless it happens to be an attractive female. I had an excellent chance to study the meaning of rhino territoriality when two of my friends, John Seago and Tony Parkinson, received a government contract to relocate all the black rhinos from the Isiolo district to different game reserves. The reason was that the land-starved Turkana wished to settle in this wild area. The task of capturing hundreds of uncooperative black rhinos in a large, rocky, mountainous area seemed to me at that time a back-breaking impossibility. Strangely, I was wrong. The territoriality of the rhino made it much easier than anticipated. On the first day, Tony Parkinson, a skilled flier, spotted the first herd in the bottom land, where the bushes were the greenest and the water was fresh. A rhino family was captured that very day without much difficulty because Land-Rovers and pursuing trucks could operate in this flat area.

Next time when Tony took off to locate a second herd, he spotted another herd, to his great surprise, exactly where the first herd had been, in the bottom land. Animal nature is opportunistic, and the second strongest male had moved immediately into the vacated territory, where food was the best and the water the sweetest. After the second group was captured and translocated, the pattern repeated itself. Another rhino family moved down from the rocky area to occupy the best neighborhood. To catch all the rhinos they had to translocate, John and Tony could stay put in the same comfortable area without being forced to climb rugged mountains with their Land-Rovers and capture vehicles.

John Seago, who was a slight, elderly British gentleman, looked like anything but a trapper. He had the appearance of a

nister or a barrister. He told a most interesting life story. Having served in the British Navy in World War II and exposed to the winds of the North Sea, he developed a very serious case of tuberculosis. He was skin and bones, so seriously ill that he was told that he lived on borrowed time. In desperation, he fled to Kenya and tried his luck as a trapper. In the healthy highlands of the Kenyan highlands, he was completely cured. His constitution in nature made him strong and tough, although he never gained much weight. None of us who were younger could outwalk or outlast him in the bush. Still, he had never lost his impeccable British manners. He carried himself as a gentleman even in the most primitive conditions and among the most primitive people. When he served tea in an old tent, the china and silverware were the finest. His considerate, polite nature never faltered, even in the midst of the greatest dangers.

We were together again in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya, where I was filming a picture called *Cowboy in Africa*. For one of the scenes, we needed a vicious black rhino. I hired a hunter named Seago to make the capture. We spotted an angry bull with a daggerlike horn, and Tony shot him in the buttock with a hypodermic gun. But the needle did not penetrate the tough muscle and the rhino turned furiously and charged at us. The long horn hooked him under the crotch and threw him a good ten feet up in the air. As the little Englishman was catapulting over us, and as we watched in horror, he screamed down, "Don't worry, chappies. I'm all right." I couldn't help laughing. Even when thrown by a rhino and in deadly danger, he was more worried about *our* being worried than about himself.

This rhino kept giving us trouble. When we finally captured the bull and caged him, the crazy ill-tempered beast attacked his own cage viciously and broke off his horn. This was another blow. On film, a rhino without a horn would look, not like a rhino, but more like a five-thousand-pound pig. What to do? Again we tranquilized the rhino. Our ingenious makeup man

created a great-looking horn from hard rubber, and we attached this with rubber cement to the nose of our sleeping beauty. When he woke up, he had a mighty horn again, and I could finish the sequence. The legend of the rubber horn spread fast via bush telegraphy. In the frontier district, they are still talking about the rhino with a rubber horn.

Interestingly, a rhino's horn is not a horn at all. It is actually made of matted hair that is so hard that it can puncture a two-by-four or impale a human. Sawing off a rhino horn will cause only temporary damage, because the horn will eventually grow back. The growth rate is estimated at two inches per year.

Another distinctive characteristic is that white rhinos are the only mammals that cannot swim. For this reason, even experienced naturalists may misunderstand when they see a drowning rhino. They assume that a crocodile has dragged the rhino under the water. No crocodile has the strength to drown a rhino, but often a rhino will try to ford a river, and when he loses the land under his feet, he cannot recover.

Trevor Howard told me an unusual story that happened when he and his wife, Helen, spent a night at Treetops. Treetops is a small hotel built on high stilts opposite a water hole in the Aberdare Mountains of Kenya. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip spent their honeymoon there. It is an excellent observation point for studying wildlife at night. Most animals come to the water hole unperturbed by the strong reflectors that light up the area. The night when Trevor and Helen were there, a rhino came with her calf to the water hole to drink. The rhino baby suddenly got into deep trouble and started to sink into the soft mud. There was nothing the mother could do to save her child from drowning. Suddenly, a female elephant, who was nearby, intervened. Extending her six-foot trunk, she reached out to the little rhino and, using her great strength, pulled the baby back to safety. She did not expect gratitude, and she did not get any. The mother rhino charged the humanitarian elephant, nearly killing her. Maternal instinct told the rhino only

one thing: "Somebody is touching my baby." That shows why elephants are famous for their wisdom, while rhinos are renowned for their small brains.

It was interesting to observe how maternal instincts determine distinctive patterns of behavior. The white rhinos, who graze in the open savanna, have their young always in front of them, because predators in the savanna always attack from behind. In this way, the mother can serve as bulwark between the baby and an aggressive hungry lion. The black rhinos, on the other hand, browse in bush country. They, in turn, keep their young behind them. Thus, if they happen to flush a leaping predator out of the bushes, the mother, not the baby, would become the primary target.

So it won't seem that rhinos exist only to protect their own interests, I must point out that the presence of the rhino in Africa is important to the survival of smaller animals. When it rains, rhinos like to wallow in the mud, and by their sheer weight they form an indentation a few feet deep that will fill up with water. When the rain has stopped, a water hole will have been created for smaller creatures who cannot carve out their own water tank. Nothing is useless in nature. Each creature has its job cut out, and the rhino is no exception.

The rhinos' only living enemies are poachers. Elephants won't bother them, and other animals would not dare. I have heard of only one exception. One night in the Ngorongoro Crater, a rhino that had lived in peace with a neighborhood pride of lions was attacked by the whole pride and cruelly killed. No one knows what triggered the attack. There was plenty of food around for the lions. The crater was teeming with prey, and it is certainly easier to kill a zebra than a rhino. Perhaps the lions were simply testing their own strength, as they often do by attacking bull buffaloes (when they often get gored and come out second best).

The first rhino I ever encountered in Africa was a famous old lady. Her name was Gertie, and she lived at the Amboseli Game Reserve at the foot of Kilimanjaro. She was the most

photographed rhino in the area. Gertie had no earlobes — a genetic failure — and her horn looked like a seven-foot spear. Although she was protected, she was killed by a poacher one night, and her monumental horn was cut off to end up somewhere in Hong Kong.

The film *Rhino* was a turning point in my life because I fell in love with Africa and African wildlife as a result. Since then, I have visited Africa nearly every year and often three or four times a year. One person who taught me an invaluable amount about the animals and ecology of the area was Makubu, the guide assigned to me by Ian Player. He was a dignified Zulu elder, the sergeant of the Zulu game guards, and although he was in his sixties, I could hardly keep up with him as we walked the African bush together. Makubu was like a real Dr. Dolittle — he could talk to the animals. When we needed a female rhino, he imitated the call of the male rhino and a female would come. When we needed a male rhino, he imitated the mating call of a female rhino and a male would turn up. He could call zebras, wildebeests, or any other animal. It was sheer magic.

His greatest act was to imitate the song of the honey guide, which is a beautiful African bird that loves to eat the larvae of the wild honey bee. Since its beak is not strong enough to break open the honeycomb, the honey guide, in a miraculous scheme of nature's, forms a partnership with a ferocious little animal known as the honey badger, or ratel. When the honey guide locates a beehive, it sings a song that the honey badger recognizes. The honey badger hightails it to the place where the honey guide's song is coming from, climbs the tree, and with his strong claws, tears the beehive apart. Then, while the badger feeds on honey, the honey guide feeds on larvae. This is one of the best partnerships in nature. Makubu learned the song of the honey guide, and now he, too, could call the honey badger.

Once we were fording a river. Makubu stopped me and

pointed to a baboon that was drinking on the river bank. He explained that if a baboon puts its mouth to the water, there is no danger of crocodiles. But if a baboon rapidly scoops the water toward his mouth with his hand, then crocodiles are around. It was a good fact to know.

What Makubu taught me, I taught my sons. Their lessons in acting quickly and calmly started early. When they were old enough to go on a field trip, we made our first stop in Zululand. I chartered a small plane with a pilot to fly us from Kenya to Mtubatuba. On our way back, my youngest son sat next to the pilot, my other two sons sat in the next two seats, and I occupied the last seat, next to the small cargo space facing the cargo hatch. We took off from a grass strip, and when we were cruising at nine thousand feet, I fell asleep in my seat. In my sleep, I somehow kicked out the cargo hatch and I fell halfway out of the plane before I caught something I could hang onto for dear life. The balance of the Beechcraft was upset as I hung outside, but the open hatch acted as an air break. Luckily, with the help of my sons, I was pulled back into the plane. We could not, however, close the open hatch. The skilled pilot landed the plane on an open field and, after fixing the cargo hatch, we took off again. (Since then, when I am in a plane, even on the ground, I fasten my seat belt.) So you see, there are many reasons why I shall never forget Zululand.

My adventures with rhinos did not end in Zululand. After returning to California, I purchased two young rhinos from the Mfolozi Game Reserve, where they had a sudden surplus and not enough grazing ground. We transferred the two white rhinos to Soledad Canyon where our TV show *Daktari* was being produced. At that time I was the first private person in the United States in possession of such treasures.

The two young giants were tamed very fast. All animals are survival-oriented, and these rhinos soon realized that, far from being a threat, we were the benevolent suppliers of lucerne and water. Our presence no longer made them nervous. On

the contrary, when I began to play "oxpeckers" with them, our relationship even became affectionate. I had noticed in the wild that oxpeckers, attractive small African birds with red beaks, have a symbiotic relationship with elephants, buffaloes, rhinos, large antelopes, and even warthogs. These clever birds land on the wild creatures and feed on the ticks and other parasites that pester the animals. They even work on the earlobes and inside the nostrils. It creates a soothing feeling for the beasts to be liberated from the irritants, and they enjoy the attentions of the oxpeckers. As an experiment, I started to pick the skin of our rhinos, first with a long wooden stick, then later with my hand. The rhinos appreciated this activity, and soon we were more than good friends. My associates and I were allowed to sit on their backs and massage them. This was a part of the philosophy we called "affection training." And I became the first human oxpecker.

Unfortunately, the male rhino did not survive the first winter. Our female rhino became a young widow and very, very lonesome. As we could not obtain another male rhino on short notice, Ralph Helfer suggested that we try a zoological first and let our bull water buffalo, who was a widower, join the female rhino in her ample enclosure. I accepted the suggestion, and Ralph became the marriage broker between rhino and water buffalo. The relationship was very successful. The two large animals became inseparable, even though the marriage was not consummated.

It has been proved to me again and again that animals are just as needful of companionship as humans are, and the nearness of another creature is a psychological imperative. Later we tried to join other individuals of different species. At our ranch, a Rhodesian ridgeback dog and a young lion formed a most affectionate relationship. It was interesting to see that even when the female lion had grown to five times the size of the male dog, she still deferred to the male and ate only after the dog had finished his meal.

In Namibia, on our game farm, we have four friendly white rhinos grazing around the house. They are not tame. We do not want them to become tame, for they have to survive in the wild; but they are accustomed to us. They know by now that they are not threatened. The grass is greenest around the house, and that is where they like to graze. Their aggressive instincts have subsided completely. We are as used to them as to the cows that supply our milk, and in fact, the cows and the four rhinos often graze together.

When I visited Zululand some twenty years ago, there were no white rhinos anywhere except on the Umfolozi Game Reserve. It was Ian Player's wisdom to scatter the surplus all over Africa and thus to establish breeding herds on other reservations. His great fear at that time was that an epidemic of anthrax or a similar disease would wipe out all the white rhinos of Umfolozi, and such a disaster would spell the end for this most ancient and interesting beast. Now the future of the white rhino is assured. There are small herds now even in Texas and New York State. I am grateful to Ian Player. It would be a sad world if there were no rhinos, elephants, whales, or giraffes. I certainly would not like to live in such a world.

9 Yapee

ONE EASTER SUNDAY I called my son in Africa, and when I asked him how he was, his answer shocked me. "I had to shoot Yapee," he said, with sorrow in his voice. I did not want to believe what I just heard. Yapee was the pet baboon we were all crazy about. He liked to ride on motorcycles, sitting on the back, holding onto the rider. He was one smart baboon but his genetic characteristics sealed his fate. He was an alpha or dominant, baboon.

It is my belief that baboons are closest to man in behavior patterns. They are well organized and they live in a hierarchical society, in a way our ancestors lived at the time when they were hunter-gatherers.

Like men, baboons are excellent survivors. They can adapt easily to new conditions, but, of course, they are guided by certain genetic characteristics. They have a pecking order like that of hens and cocks in a barnyard. The boss is the alpha baboon. He is the emperor, and though he will have other aggressive males around him, all these will act subserviently toward him. They will behave aggressively toward each other only until the rank order is established, but after that there will be a number one baboon, number two, three, and so on.

Yapee was a tiny orphan when Jan Oelofse found him. He had probably fallen out of a tree and was injured. The baboon