

American Scene

Rio Grande Valley, Texas

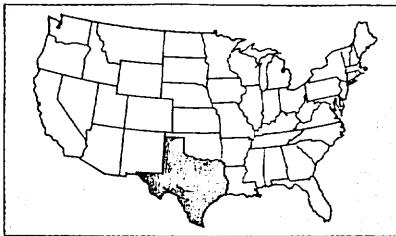
Oh, Give Me a Home Where Wild Rhinos Roam

And the deer and the antelope play with ostriches and zebras

BY MARYANNE VOLLERS

At least twice a week, Calvin Bentsen sets out at daybreak to visit his rhinos.

Armed with a bag of apples, he aims his Chevy Suburban through the gates of



with Calvin Bentsen will change your mind.

Four years ago, Bentsen turned 80 acres of his 2,200-acre spread into an experimental breeding ground for a pair of endangered black rhinos. Zoos are cramped. Bentsen's expansive pastures



Rancher Calvin Bentsen serves a snack to a favored pachyderm: "How 'bout an apple?"

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his huge Spanish-style home in McAllen, Texas, and heads north for his ranch in the rangeland. McAllen lies in the Rio Grande valley, just above the Mexican border, but its architectural boot print owes more to Los Angeles than Lonesome Dove. The city is a sprawling network of commercial strips, trailer parks and low-slung shingle-and-stucco developments ringed by citrus groves and cotton fields. If you think this erworked stretch of real estate is an unlikely habitat for Africa's black rhinoceros, spending a morning

offer the South African-born animals most of the comforts of home. "This is fine rhino country," says Bentsen, as he pulls off the highway onto a sandy dirt road. Suddenly you are in south Texas as it was before the developers paved it over. In a soft morning fog, a visitor might mistake the silvery mesquite thickets and rough grass clearings for Africa's Zambezi valley.

So it seems almost natural when a 2,500-lb. bull rhinoceros crashes out of the undergrowth in a full thundering charge.

"Here. Macho," Bentsen calls. "How 'bout an apple for breakfast?" The massive beast puts on the brakes just short of a six-bar iron fence that separates man and animal. With a deft twist of his heavy, pointed lips, Macho plucks a slice of apple from Bentsen's hand. Bentsen reaches through the bars to scratch the leathery muzzle. Rhinos are slow-witted, almost childlike creatures that when startled tend to charge first and ask questions later. But once it knows your voice, a captive rhino can be called like a pet dog.

The beasts appreciate space and solitude and a simple routine: they doze in the mornings, wallow in mudholes in the heat of the afternoon, and feed in the evening. It turns out that south Texas not only looks like Africa, it apparently tastes like it too. The rhinos have been thriving on a local bush called huisache (pronounced *wee-satch* this side of the border), a relative of the African acacia. Macho and his mate Chula chomp down about 40 lbs. of it a day. The two now live in separate pastures because on Feb. 28 Chula gave birth to their first offspring: a healthy female calf.

Bentsen, 63, is a tall man made taller by a Stetson hat and black ostrich-skin boots. His face is covered with a thin wash of freckles, and his steady brown eyes size up his conversation partners from behind thick, black-framed glasses. On most days Bentsen, who is a first cousin of Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen, can be found in an air-conditioned office managing his real estate investments. He used to raise steers on his ranch until he realized that "cattle bore me to death."

What interests Calvin Bentsen is wild animals, the stranger the better. About 15 years ago, he joined the growing number of Texas ranchers who are devoting some of their pastures to exotic wildlife. Now Indian axis deer, African eland, wildebeests, Grévy's zebras and sable antelope roam Bentsen's range. To help support his wildlife habit, Bentsen sells surplus animals. His ostrich chicks fetch \$7,500 a pair. Several times a year he lets hunters take trophies from the surplus animals on the ranch. Bentsen is a lifelong hunter and also a dedicated conservationist.

To non-hunters, shooting animals and saving them may seem like opposing ideals. Serious hunters say that is a misunderstanding. "True hunters have a love of the animal," says Bentsen. "And they're also interested in coming back and doing it again next year." When Bentsen was a younger man, he killed a black rhino bull with a single bullet from his Holland & Holland. It was a neck shot, and the huge

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animal dropped where it stood in the hot Kenya dust.

That was back in 1960, and it seemed then that the world would never run out of rhinos. "They were everywhere," Bentsen recalls of his first African safari. "They would charge the vehicles. One even walked through camp." These days, a rhino is a rare sight in the African wilderness. In the past 20 years, the black rhino population has plummeted from 65,000 to fewer than 4,000. Rhinos are headed down the trail to extinction because poachers hunt them for their horns. Most rhino horn is smuggled to the Middle East and Asia, where it is carved into dagger handles or ground into folk medicines. Conservationists hope that if African governments lose the battle to protect their rhinos, a stockpile of rhinos in America may someday be used to repopulate African game parks.

To that end, the Zimbabwe government is sending ten of its threatened rhinos to south Texas ranches this summer. The program is supervised by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, but the bill is being footed by Game Coin, a group of hunters. Rescuing rhinos costs big money: Game Coin has already invested \$300,000 in the rhinos at Bentsen's ranch, and will spend more than that to capture and transport the Zimbabwe rhinos.

Bentsen's ranch is closed to the public. But every week or so, Calvin and his wife Marge throw a little picnic for a few of their friends near the rhino pastures. On a balmy spring evening, lightweight tables and chairs are set out under a mesquite tree, just as they would be in an African hunting camp in the shadow of Kilimanjaro. Marge, a silver-haired Texas beauty dressed for the bush in denim and turquoise, lays on a simple feast of guacamole and chicken-salad sandwiches. Calvin uncorks bottles of fine South African grand cru.

The guests toast the newborn rhino. The calf, who according to Bentsen arrived looking more like a wrinkly little moose than a rhino, is now a 70-lb. miniature of its mother with a tiny stump of a horn sprouting from its nose. The curious youngster, who is just learning rhino etiquette, leaves its mother's side to approach the visitors on the other side of the bars. It paws the ground, huffing and snorting like a grownup pachyderm.

"Isn't she the sweetest little thing?" Calvin whispers. "I'd like to make a pet of her." Suddenly the mother rhino wheels and storms at the guests, who jump away from the fence. As Chula nudges the baby back to the safety of the tall grass, the raspy warning grunt of a wild rhinoceros saws through the quiet of the south Texas twilight.