

## RHINO WATCH

### THE RHINO MAN

MICHAEL WERIKHE IS TAKING STEPS TO SAVE THE black rhino from extinction. Hundreds of thousands of steps. Through the savannas of East Africa. Across the undulating hills of Italy. Through knee-deep snows on the Swiss Alps. Through the Black Forest of Germany, the diked lowlands of the Netherlands, the green fields of England. In three walks through Africa and Europe,



Michael Werikhe

he has logged 3,350 miles—and in so doing has raised more than \$1 million since 1982 for rhino sanctuaries and conservation projects.

On April 11, Michael Werikhe began a 1,500–2,000-mile walk in North America that, in the next five months, will take him to 40 cities and other places across the U.S. and Canada. His goal is to heighten awareness of the plight of the black rhino and raise \$2–\$3 million. Three-quarters of the money raised is to be spent on rhino projects in Africa; the rest is for North American Species Survival Plan rhino programs. SSP programs are a project of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, which, along with The Discovery Channel, is coordinating the walk.

Michael Werikhe (pronounced Where-ree-kee) is not a professional fund-raiser; he is not a professional zoologist; and he doesn't particularly like to walk. The 34-year-old native of Kenya works as a security officer at a Mombasa car plant. The roots of his crusade to save the rhino extend back to his childhood, when he played in Mombasa's mangrove forests and explored the



The Rhino Man walking with a friend

seashore, developing a passion for the living creatures he saw. After high school, he worked briefly in the Kenyan government's Ivory Room, where elephant tusks and rhino horns were sorted before being auctioned. To Werikhe, the place was a chamber of horrors, and he quit. Gradually, he came to regard the rhino as the symbol of all the threatened wildlife he loved, and he hit upon the idea of a "rhino march." During his first trek he covered 300 miles, passing through many small villages between Mombasa and Nairobi. "Too often, wildlife professionals assume that the average African cares little about preserving his natural heritage," Werikhe observes. "In my walks I've found that people *do* care, but feel left out."

For his efforts, Werikhe has received the U.N. Environment Programme's Global 500 Award and the Goldman Environmental Prize. When he reached the end of his marathon walk across Europe, Prince Philip of England sent him a personal letter of congratulations in which he wrote: "It is easy enough to analyze the threats to the future of the black rhino, and . . . to suggest what needs to be done to prevent it becoming extinct. The real problem is to generate the human will and commitment. Your magnificent walk is just the sort of gesture that provides the spark of inspiration which makes people respond to a crisis."

For information on Michael Werikhe's U.S. itinerary, call Lois Kampinsky at the AAZPA, 301/907-7777.

Sources: AAZPA; *The Rhino Conservation Newsletter*; *Swara*

### KENYA: BRIGHTER OUTLOOK FOR BLACK RHINOS

FACT A: KENYA'S PARK RANGERS AND THEIR FAMILIES are better housed, clothed, and fed than they were a few short years ago. Fact B: After falling from a high of about 20,000 in 1980 to a low of fewer than 400 within the next decade, Kenya's black rhino population is now on the increase.

Is there a connection between A and B?

Most definitely, according to Richard Leakey, who has directed the country's Wildlife Department since 1989. Leakey believes that before he became director, officials and other employees then in his department were directly involved in at least 80 percent of all those black rhino deaths. He explains that the reason these people looked aside, or even assisted, when poachers systematically picked off the rhinos for their horns was that for years, the salaries of government park rangers and other wildlife employees were far too low to adequately support their families. So, at a time when rhino horn was fetching more than \$480 per pound, offers of a percentage of poachers' profits were irresistible. One of Leakey's first moves in



**Park rangers' gains are benefiting Kenya's black rhinos.**  
his new job was to double salaries.

Leakey now hopes to raise enough funds through his "Adopt a Fencepost in Kenya" campaign to erect about 2,500 miles of fencing around sanctuaries wherever feasible—to protect rhinos from poachers and to protect farmers from depredations by rhinos. Money is also needed to build guard posts, roads, and bridges, and for translocation projects, census-taking, and other conservation measures.

Source: *Rhino Conservation Newsletter*

### INDIA AND NEPAL: SUCCESS IS IN THE GENES

IN THE EARLY 1960S, THE INDIAN RHINO POPULATION in what later became the Royal Chitwan National Park, in Nepal, had been reduced to a critically low 60–80. A 1988 census counted almost 400 there. The population in Kaziranga National Park, in India, had shrunk to less than 100 in 1912; now, Kaziranga harbors an estimated 1,500 individuals.

These flourishing populations provide evidence that a severe reduction in numbers may not inevitably result in a loss of genetic diversity. Eric Dinerstein, working at the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center, and Gary F. McCracken, of the University of Tennessee, report that analyses of blood and skin samples from 29 Chitwan rhinos showed a very high level of genetic variability—in striking contrast to the genetic similarities seen in many other species that have experienced near-extinction. This diversity most likely stems from the fact that until relatively recently, the species was widely distributed in dense, contiguous populations.

Source: *Conservation Biology*

### INDIA: CHANGING TIMES IN A WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

ONE DAY IN 1954, DR. D. K. LAHIRI CHOUDHURY climbed onto an elephant's back and slowly plowed

through a sea of elephant grass in a forest reserve that 17 years later would become the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. Glimpses of a wild pig's rump and a hog deer's tail were his only rewards during this full-day's plod.

When he next visited, in 1959, he found that, except for isolated patches, the site was almost entirely cleared of grass cover; people from nearby villages were grazing their livestock there, and no wildlife was to be seen. But when he returned late in 1990, in two hours he came upon 14 Indian rhinos within a mile or two of the forest rest house.

Pobitora lies in the floodplain of the Brahmaputra River in the state of Assam. With 60–70 Indian rhinos currently in its mere six square miles, the sanctuary has one of the highest densities of this species anywhere. Seven rhino babies were seen in 1987. During the 1960s, the rhino population numbered a half dozen at most.

Among other wildlife, Pobitora now also hosts leopard cats, fishing cats, and jungle cats; and many resident and migratory bird species, including pelicans, partridges, egrets, storks, and ducks. There are no large predators other than an occasional stray leopard.

"This shows what dedicated protection can achieve in an area almost lost to wildlife," says Dr. Choudhury, who is a member of several wildlife advisory and research groups.

Pobitora is not trouble-free, however. Poaching is a persistent problem, particularly because the rhinos tend to stray beyond the sanctuary's narrow confines. Last year, forest officials discovered that some poachers were



**Indian rhinos in Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary**

suspending high-voltage wires across rhino paths. At least seven rhinos were electrocuted at night when they touched the wires while on their way to reach grazing fields adjacent to the sanctuary. Expanding Pobitora will be difficult because it is surrounded by prime agricultural land.

Sources: D. K. Lahiri Choudhury; Esmond Bradley Martin

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