

Saving the white rhino from near-extinction

Writer, farmer, explorer, Laurens van der Post has been involved with the cause of the endangered white rhino for the past 50 years. In the following essay, the author of 'The Heart of the Hunter' and 'Night of the New Moon' describes the rescue of the white rhino from 'the horror of human greed and indifference.'

By Laurens van der Post

Written for The Christian Science Monitor

When my ancestors landed on the Cape of Good Hope nearly three centuries ago, there were deputations of hippopotamuses like Dickensian aldermen of a great animal municipality, wading out into the surf to give the newcomers a civic welcome. There were lions growling nightly in the undergrowth at the foot of Table Mountain. And one of the first governors to venture far beyond the walls of his fort had his coach overturned by a rhinoceros.

Yet when I came on the scene, only some 250 years later, and became passionately involved in these things, this vast inheritance, long and patiently held in trust by Africa, had been so squandered by unthinking men that only a few scattered pockets of it were left in the more inaccessible, forbidding areas, some 1,500 miles from the Cape.

Among these remnants of antique abundance, none spoke more eloquently of the horror of human greed and indifference than the white rhino.

Primitive wonder

Like the lion, antelope, and hippo, he was once to be found everywhere from the cape to the Mediterranean, from the Indian Ocean in the East to the Atlantic in the West.

He had even penetrated deep into the Kalahari Desert, for I, myself, have discovered there on slabs of rock pockmarked by time and heat and corrosive sand the faint, ghostly outlines of his form.

without inhibition at the windows of Fords, Studebakers, and Hupmobiles, massed on the unlikely soil of an open zoo in Texas.

And Mr. Player has a description of his first encounter with a white rhino that is illumined with wonder and poetry. He saw it first early in 1952 on a dull, overcast day in Zululand. A small huddle of white rhinos loomed suddenly out of a phantom mist emanating from the scarlet earth. Their mouths were wide open and square, just as the Bushmen painted them, and the hump between the head and ample withers bulged hugely. Gilded flies hung on to their flanks, and steam like a breath of their own strange and remote being emerged from their bodies. They went by him grazing, with their heads swinging in a scythe-like motion across the shrill, green Amazulu grass.

Suddenly the mist lowered, heavy drops of rain spattered down. For a moment the shapes flickered and then grew vague among the tall candle aloes, and a soft wind blowing toward him gave him a whiff of their antique smell. Briefly the hem of mist was flicked aside, and the white rhinos stood out clear-cut on the crest of the hill, heraldic as unicorns from the 'Tres Riches Heures of the Duc de Berry,' their heads held high and their tails curled characteristically.

Trembling leaves

As Mr. Player pitched his camp among the thornbush trees, the brilliant doves scatter-



procession of animal pilgrims to worship nearly a mile away at what the desert men who took me there still hold to be a source of sacred and everlasting water.

But the white rhino had disappeared from many of the areas where it had once been abundant.

The battle to preserve it, described so eloquently in *The White Rhino Saga* (Stein and Day, \$6.95) by Ian Player (both recorder and one of the principals of the battle), has been a long one. Game wardens and rangers figure in it — some of the happy few who, like Mr. Player, stand out because they do what they do not for any material reward but purely for the love of it.

Moving story

It is no coincidence that both Mr. Player and the moving story he tells had their origin in the most English of the four provinces of the original Union of South Africa because, however ardently my own Afrikaner countrymen pursue the same cause today, all this in Africa really began with the English.

As a result of the efforts of the early English conservationists Africa is still the richest keep of natural life in the world. For instance, if I remember rightly, it continues to hold more than 130 species of antelope alone. And neither the matted Matto Grosso, the tangled marches of the upper Amazon, the steaming mansions of emerald marshes in the Darien Gap, the midnight forests of Siberia, nor the intense jungles of India and Assam, can equal its variety and richness of animal, bird, and insect life.

Indeed, one has to go back to the beginnings to realize why the apparent wealth of today is only a ragged assembly of highly vulnerable, embattled, and imperiled fragments in a continent that once burst at its seams with vivid animal life.

Solemn warning

Already in 1893, Frederick Courteney Selous who, allowing for the brutal context of his day, was a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche* among the great white hunters of Africa, was warning solemnly, "I cannot think that the species of white rhino will survive very far into the coming century."

And survive it would not have done if it had not been for the lonely men who persuaded the British Government at the end of the last century to make game reserves of certain selected areas in the country between the Black and White Umfolozi Rivers of Zululand. At that precarious moment the numbers of white rhino sheltering there could be counted on the fingers of two hands, and they were the last of their kind.

Although a great battle was over, the war had barely started. Ian Player covers the saga from its precarious beginning up to this moment, when the white rhino is as safe as anything natural can be. It has been helped to multiply in such numbers that a surplus has transplanted to Mozambique, the Transvaal and the Rhodesias, where it had been absent for some 75 years or more. Even a legal export trade to the zoos and game parks of the rest of the world has begun.

Among the expressive illustrations in Mr. Player's book there is one that makes the rhino's character more than any words of mine can. It is a number of white rhino, full of the curiosity of their breed, sniffing

ing and the haddan this squawking, he heard the bulls rumbling and saw the cows lay back their ears in order to catch their meaning. Never had he been so impressed and involved with any animal, for all his experience with the rich fauna of his country. In one of those lucid moments between sleeping and waking, the white rhino was transformed into a thing of beauty, and he had found a cause at last to which he could give his life.

Men have always been too ready to make use of the rhinoceros. It has been the least loved and most maligned and misunderstood animal in the history of Africa. Certainly it is not without some responsibility of its own in the matter.

For instance, what am I, well-disposed to it as I always have been, to make of a lovely golden evening in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya, beyond Archer's Post and Kitternamasters Camp hard by the Huri Hills? After a long, tiring march on which I had not harmed an insect, let alone an animal, I was sitting peacefully in the long, level light of an evening suspended within a vast witchbowl of space, when suddenly there was a sound like a whirlwind in the bush beyond my camp.

Unabated fury

The leaves there trembled violently, the trees shook, and the outskirts of the bush burst apart. Out came an infuriated rhino.

Head lowered and horn fixed like a bayonet, he charged through my camp, turning over tents, camp beds, scattering kitchenware, sending pots rattling like kettle-drums into the tasseled elephant grass and, with a large, white mosquito net flying like a flag of victory over his embattled prow, he vanished with unabated fury into the bush beyond.

The rhino's behavior is so out of the norm of animal Africa, its actions so enigmatic, that one understands how men were tempted to doubt whether it was wise, useful, or necessary to let it be.

Enigmatic behavior

Moreover, the rhino possesses little of what passes for beauty or elegance in a world so full of stylish and graceful animals as Africa. It seems to attract to itself most unpleasant parasites in vast numbers so that almost its only companions are ox-peckers and birds who love such unsavory company and travel on its back for that purpose.

In fact, it has a form and style of life that goes back unchanged to a prehistoric world. Often I have seen it stretched out at rest with its vast chin on mud, dreaming, no doubt with nostalgia, of the slime that was paradise to it in the beginning.

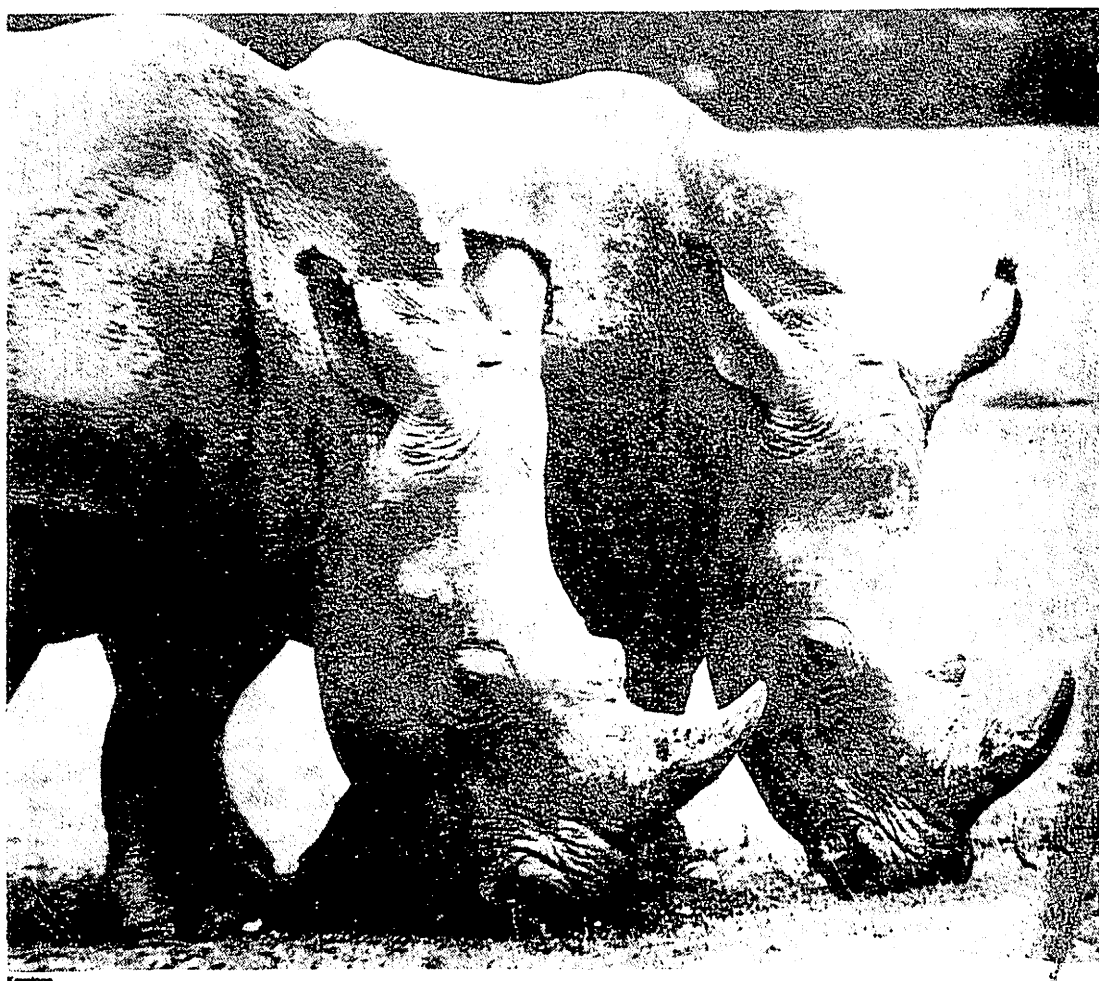
Eyes shut tight in the sun, it has looked to me more like some giant lizard left as the last plenipotentiary of a primordial age. I would not be surprised at such moments to see a pterodactyl rise out of the mud and begin in the inexorable blue to drop a clatter of sound in its praise.

And yet, once one has studied the rhino long enough to master its own strange idiom of being and broken the code of its enigmatic behavior, one is amazed how the vision in one's imagination takes wing, to be illumined as one of life's first essays into beauty.



AP photo

The white rhino—a way of life unchanged since prehistoric times



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