

For Kees.  
Love  
Anna

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**WHERE WARRIORS MET**  
*The Story of Lewa Downs, Kenya*

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# The Rhinos of Lewa Downs

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LEWA DOWNS has always been a home for a great variety of mammals, large and small. The wildlife is part of the very fabric of this frontier ranch. They enjoy security, adequate fodder – provided that the rains fall – and in turn give enormous pleasure to the hundreds of visitors who venture up to the northern flanks of Mount Kenya to see them. Living amongst this complex web of animal species is however one that did not just arrive by accident. One which has been brought to the verge of extinction; one which without intervention would have been consigned only to zoos and museum cases. That species is the black rhinoceros – *diceros bicornis*, subspecies *michaeli*.

Lewa Downs is renowned for its conservation work with the black rhinoceros, aimed at stabilising the precipitous decline in numbers of this magnificent beast and, with luck and constant vigilance, its rehabilitation. Today the whole of the ranch and the Ngare Ndare forest on its southern border are gazetted as a sanctuary to pursue this goal, alongside the management of all other wildlife and livestock. The area totals 61,000 acres. The battle to set up and enhance the sanctuary has been long and hard, and is a story of the determination of a number of individuals in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

#### THE PLIGHT OF THE RHINOCEROS IN KENYA

The black rhinoceros has been on this planet considerably longer than our own species, *Homo sapiens*, and until the past few decades they still occurred in reasonable numbers. Even as recently as 1970 some 20,000 or more roamed in Kenya, part of a population in Africa as much as three times this number. In the early 1970s many Kenyan National Parks were able to offer a virtual certainty of seeing them. Within a decade this had changed dramatically, and by 1990 Kenya's black rhino population numbered less than 400 and was apparently doomed. Tsavo National Park, which was once home to the largest population of black rhino on the African continent had two tiny pockets remaining with a total of 20 animals.

What brought about this decimation of one of the most remarkable mammal species was money and arms. Rhino horn has long been prized in the Far East for its supposed medicinal properties (not, as is often thought as an aphrodisiac, although it is used as such in parts of India). In North Yemen it was sought for the ornate handles of the *djambia* daggers, a much-vaunted status symbol. The new-found oil wealth in the Middle East in the 1970s, combined with the ready availability of advanced automatic weaponry to provide both the money and the means for procuring large amounts of rhino horn for the financial gain of those involved. The price of rhino horn soared as demand continually outstripped the

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poachers' ability to supply. As the rewards escalated so the more unscrupulous in all ranks of society became involved. The network was extensive, ruthless and efficient.

The rhino's susceptibility to such an onslaught is self-evident: it is a large animal and, lacking many predators with the notable exception of *Homo sapiens*, it sleeps heavily. It is easily tracked, and not easy to conceal. As importantly, the horn is neither the size nor the weight of, for example, an elephant's tusk, making movement of the prize that much easier. Those trying to protect rhinos, when poaching started to escalate, found themselves too ill-equipped and too exposed to offer much opposition. This by no means deterred all from trying, but despite great determination and bravery their efforts were often undermined by colleagues and superiors. It was simply not feasible to fight an enemy within as well as without. The results were painfully obvious. Thousands of rhinos were being illegally shot and left in pools of blood, grotesquely scarred by the butchery which removed their horns.

Among those who did foresee the consequences of not responding immediately was Peter Jenkins, former Chief Warden of Meru National Park and subsequently with the Wildlife Department Headquarters in Nairobi. He was one of many who could see on the ground what was happening and repeatedly warned those responsible for Kenya's wildlife of the dangerous consequences of inactivity. Even in the late 1970s and early 1980s such warnings usually went unheeded. For the rhinos in his care in Meru it was soon to become too late: in 1977-78 the situation completely collapsed. From having a rhino population that was consistently estimated at over a hundred, none were sighted in 1979. This experience of the resources and insatiable demand of the poachers was one of the factors which led him, and others, to believe that sanctuaries were the only possible hope for saving the remnants of the rhino population. After retirement he played a crucial role in the creation of the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary at Lewa Downs.

## RHINO BEHAVIOUR

*Black rhinos are often thought of as aggressive, irritable and stupid animals. How much of this reputation is based on their understandable terror of Man is open to conjecture. Their image undoubtedly suffers from the fact that they express themselves differently from many other endangered animals, with whom they compete for the interest and generosity of donors and the general public. They lack appealing eyes (only having sight of some 6-7 metres); they have neither the human characteristics of a gorilla or chimpanzee, nor the expressive trunk of an elephant. They are also hampered by lack of support in mythology: there is no rhino equivalent of Babar the Elephant, or Baloo in "The Jungle Book," to reach the hearts of millions of children. But this is largely because the rhino's means of expression are so little understood; and if we lack the ability to understand an animal then the tendency is to label it as stupid. Rhinos use their nostrils, ears, posture, and above all a complex system of exhalations for communication and expression. It is fascinating to have this explained by one of the team at Ngare Sergoi who have lived constantly with these magnificent creatures for over a decade. Young rhinos spend over four years with their mothers, and to watch mother and calf together, whether at rest or play, immediately dispels any thoughts that they have little social interaction. Anna Merz, the founder of the sanctuary, has also a multitude of examples of their intelligence from the use of their pre-hensile upper lip for opening gates, to their unusual ability not to panic in a crisis, for example when trapped. Our dismissal of their capabilities and fears is more likely a poorer reflection on our own species than on theirs.*

The idea of using sanctuaries as a means of protecting the remaining rhino in Kenya was controversial. Many conservationists thought that they would be little more than zoos, with the animals losing their natural instincts and becoming the victims of static gene pools, with

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inherent dangers to the fitness and long-term viability of the species. Some also felt that enclosing them in areas, however large, would actually make them an easier target.

The point is there was no time for the luxury of such debate: it was quite clear to those who were familiar with what was happening in the field that without such radical action there would, quite simply, be no rhinos whose future to debate.

One of the factors that underpinned the arguments of those who were against sanctuaries was that WCMD (the Wildlife and Conservation Management Department, the predecessor of the Kenya Wildlife Service) still believed in the early 1980s that there were over 2,000 rhino in Kenya. Other authorities are on record as having believed at the time that the maximum number was 500. Even this turned out to be an overestimate: the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) census that subsequently took place counted just 350 in the entire country.

In the end those who were most concerned won the day. In 1983 a survey was carried out into the feasibility of establishing rhino sanctuaries, and a "Black Rhino Management Plan" was adopted by WCMD as policy. This led to vastly enhanced security arrangements being effected at Lake Nakuru, Nairobi, Meru, and Aberdares National Parks. The battle to save the rhino was on.

### RHINOS COME TO LEWA DOWNS

A coincidence brought together Anna Merz and the Craigs at Lewa Downs. Anna Merz, a woman of great courage and determination, had spent most of her adult life in West Africa where, amongst many things, she was actively involved in a number of conservation issues, and became an honorary game warden (in Ghana). She and her husband came to Kenya to retire but she was keen to continue her work with animals. The story of the Craigs' offer of the use of land for a rhino sanctuary which she would fund, and the first decade of its operation is told in her book "Rhino At The Brink Of Extinction".

Working closely with the Craigs and WCMD staff, she had the courage to take an enormous gamble. Five thousand acres of Lewa Downs, called Ngare Sergoi, was ring-fenced with 20kms of the latest technology fencing. It stood 2.5m high. Security staff were employed, trained and housed; an aeroplane, vehicles, radios and other equipment were bought. But there was no guarantee from WCMD that they would be allowed to take in black rhino,

which are the property of the State (although the Director of WCMD, Daniel Sindayo, had given them encouragement). In other words they had to prove first that they could provide outstanding security, at a considerable financial outlay, before there was any chance that their project would be given official blessing.

With the infrastructure virtually complete, the test came when WCMD captured a male rhino in the Kitengela, adjacent to Nairobi National Park. They needed to find a home for him. The proof of the care with which Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary had been set up was there for all to see, and the area was no zoo: it was large, wild and completely uncontrived. At 9am on 11 March 1984 the sanctuary thus received its first rhino, Godot. This was the moment that all involved in the preparations had been waiting for (hence the rhino's name). The gamble had paid off. Godot subsequently fathered three female and one male calf before being translocated to Meru, where he tragically fell victim to the poachers.



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### **SHABA'S CLASS**

Anna and her team have never lacked in determination to try anything to promote the welfare of their rhinos. This begins with the care and doggedness with which information about outlying rhinos is followed up and they are tracked, captured and released in their new environment; it extends to the sometimes innovative methods that have to be employed either to save a rhino's life or assist in its acclimatisation. Thus Anna would take the baby Samia to bed with her, much to her husband's horror, to help the fledgling rhino to survive in the absence of its own ability to regulate body temperature. This was despite the problem that the little foster-rhino had with an explosive digestive system. One new arrival, Shaba, seemed not to respond to any attempts to calm her down when she arrived at Ngare Sergoi in March 1984. She was livid, and made every attempt to break out of the pen in which she was held pending release into the sanctuary. Her violence actually jeopardized her own well-being. That is until Anna hit upon the idea of reading to her. Every day for a week she sat above the pen and read aloud to the rhino below, often for several hours a day. Gradually, Shaba calmed down. Indeed this therapy had such an effect that, when the time came, there was actually some difficulty in getting her out of the pen. She had come to enjoy her daily stories. A more natural environment beckoned though and soon after she was coaxed away from the pen she was seen to mate with the bull, Morani. Her new life had begun in earnest.



Although National Parks had protected rhino areas, and although Solio ranch to the west of Lewa Downs had also taken in rhino, Ngare Sergoi was arguably the first rhino sanctuary of its kind in the world: privately funded and established with the specific purpose of protecting rhino and providing them with the conditions in which they could breed. There are now 39 rhino (22 black and 17 white) on Lewa Downs. The current inventory of the black rhinos is as follows:

Name	Sex	Arrived/born	From
■ SHABA	Female	25/3/84	Captured near Shaba
■ SHIMBA	Male	7/2/92	Calf of Shaba
■ JULALI	Female	18/2/88	Calf of Rongai
■ KELELE	Male	7/5/84	Captured near Mweiga
■ JUNO	Female	9/9/84	Solio
■ JUNIPER	Female	28/6/88	Calf of Juno
■ STUMPY	Female	10/8/84	Solio
■ NYOTA	Female	1/12/91	Calf of Stumpy/Kelele
■ SOLIA	Female	1/10/84	Solio
■ SAMIA	Female	15/2/85	Calf of Solia
■ ZARIA	Female	9/3/88	Calf of Solia
■ SONIA	Female	23/8/91	Calf of Solia/Kelele
■ MWINGO	Female	16/2/89	Nakuru NP
■ KENU	Male	21/1/93	Captured between Laisamis and Marsabit
■ EKILI	Male	22/9/93	Ol Jogi
■ EPONG	Male	22/9/93	Ol Jogi
■ AMURI	Male	23/9/93	Ol Jogi
■ JAMES	Male	23/9/93	Ol Jogi
■ NDITO	Female	2/2/94	Solio
■ MELITA	Male	3/2/94	Solio
■ MTANE	Male	22/3/94	Solio
■ SAMUEL	Male	11/4/95	Calf of Samia

*Note: Solio, Ol Jogi and Ol Pejeta are, like Lewa Downs, private ranches/sanctuaries. Another private ranch, Ol Ari Nyiro, has an indigenous black rhino population.*

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The sanctuaries have given the rhino a chance. It is an important consideration when looking back over a decade of the day-to-day struggle to save them in various places in Kenya that it was not only their overall number but the distribution in former habitats which threatened their survival. The remaining outlying rhinos were so scattered that breeding at the rate now seen in the sanctuaries was simply inconceivable: some of the males that have lived at Ngare Sergoi during the last decade, such as Womba, Sabatchi, Kikwar and Kenu, and females such as Shaba were probably many tens of kilometres from the nearest other rhino, out of range even for an animal that can wander large distances.

But once brought to a haven, the natural problems that were common when rhinos roamed in greater concentrations do of course continue to manifest themselves. Although 20 calves have been born in the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary, there are still the disappointments caused by fighting, the rejection of calves, and poor health. It is ironic that those who originally argued against sanctuaries on the basis of their being artificial have been proved so wrong. In seeking to provide a truly natural environment for these animals, the instincts and characteristics of the rhinos themselves sometimes work against their well-being, despite the efforts of well-wishers to save the species.

But the golden rule remains one of stewardship. In Anna Merz's own words: "The object of creating Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary was simply to try to keep some rhinos safe so that they could breed.. Although the rhinos are treated as wild animals and are generally not interfered with in any way, the poaching outside has been so appalling that each of our rhinos is very precious. If there is anything we can do to prevent it, we will not let them die.." At enormous expense security against poachers has been the key priority and one that, with minute-by-minute attention and dedication, the staff of the sanctuary have managed thus far to provide.

## BREAKFAST WITH SAMIA

*This is not an auspicious start to the morning. Pinned inside the car in view of Anna's house by a two ton rhino, who is pregnant and therefore inclined towards the temperamental. She gives a little nudge to the rear of the vehicle as if sizing up the opposition that may be offered by this funny tin animal, and the foul-smelling human contents within. As Samia has shown before, tipping over a car is rhino's play. She hates the smell of the city and makes her disgust plain to Anna when the latter returns from a trip to Nairobi. Anna arrives to rescue me, but as she opens the passenger door the end of a large horn pops in (and an even larger jaw) as curiosity gets the better of Samia. I froze. It is not the sort of encounter that one is used to dealing with every day. Some "constructive" chat from Anna, however, gets Samia into reverse gear and we are ready for the off. Anna raised this nine year old rhino from birth, as she was abandoned by her mother. She, and the big white rhino bull, Makora, have a particularly special relationship with their guardian. For Samia this means occasional supplemental feeds of her favourite lucerne. As we drive off towards her feeding spot at the bottom of the beautiful river valley that is Anna's home, my concern increases again at the sight, filling the rear-view mirror, of this enormous lady rhino following on behind with that rolling, bouncy gait that is almost comical in an animal of her size. Reaching the dry riverbed Anna walks towards her chatting all the way in soothing tones. Samia responds with little squeaks, snorts and rumbles. This is clearly one couple who don't mind conversation at the breakfast table. I watch in amazement as Anna treats ticks in the great folds of skins where the rhino's legs meet the torso; as she lifts her tail; as she bends down to meet her foster-child nose to nose for a little exchange of snuffles. It is all the more remarkable because Samia is totally wild, wild enough to be mated and to defend herself in the big wide world. Nobody else would be advised to go within many yards of her. As Anna turns away she simply says: "isn't she just beautiful? I adore her." It is hard not to agree....*

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### LEWA DOWNS IN CONTEXT

But what of the success elsewhere? Lewa Downs provides one home for rhinos in Kenya, but the future of the species is being fought for on a broader front.

The official population figure is 430 black rhino in Kenya, an increase of 23% on the low point. This constitutes about 17% of the estimated worldwide population of 2550. The intensity of poaching in Zimbabwe in 1991/92, and again more recently, shows that there is hardly cause for complacency. Numbers there have dropped from about 2000 in 1987 to less than 300 now.

Of the 430 Kenyan black rhinos one third are on private land, although they remain the property of the State. In general, breeding rates are about 5% per annum, although in some cases this has been very much higher. About 110 rhinos are outside sanctuaries, 290 in ring-fenced or partially-fenced areas and there are reckoned to be 25-30 "outliers" (rhinos, mostly lone, that are neither in sanctuaries or national parks).

As detailed in the Conservation Strategy and Management Plan for the Black Rhino species in Kenya (KWS/Zoological Society of London, 1993) the immediate aim in the next decade is to enable the species to recover to number 2000, and an active programme of capture and translocation is designed to underpin this target. In addition to the case of Zimbabwe, Tanzania now has fewer than 150 black rhinos, and the species is extinct in Uganda and Somalia. A momentary lapse in vigilance would put Kenya's ambitions in jeopardy.

Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary, for its part in the strategy, has grown over the decade since its inception at considerable expense which has been privately funded. In 1987 a further 5,000 acres of Lewa Downs was made available to the sanctuary, and another 18.5kms of fence built. The extension opened in October 1988. Then, in 1991, a 52km fence was built to encompass the government-owned Ngare Ndare Forest Reserve to the south of Lewa Downs (which, as will be explained, had far greater implications than just making it safe for rhinos). Finally, a further 34kms of fence was erected in 1992 to give a total area (Lewa Downs plus Ngare Ndare) of 213 km<sup>2</sup>. The completion of this expansion is estimated to provide enough land and food for 100 black rhinos. There is a 30m gap in the northeastern corner of the fence to facilitate the natural migration of elephants and other species.

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### THE BOYS IN THE FOREST

*One of the immediate consequences of extending the fence to include the beautiful Ngare Ndare forest was that it opened up an ideal new habitat for the rhinos. Four males quickly took advantage of this and moved in. They all carry high-powered radio transmitters which are fitted quickly and with the minimum of discomfort. This is just one of the precautions taken to maintain their safety in an environment that is not conducive to round-the-clock visual contact. Tracking them here is an exhilarating experience, requiring total silence, a readiness to move through thick bush and forest stands – and a commensurate readiness to run extremely fast. For me, the exercise turned into one of tree-spotting as much as rhino spotting, constantly trying to keep within range of one that was easily scaled in a hurry, if James or one of his friends had their siesta rudely disturbed. The moments in scrub, where no trees presented themselves, made the heart beat noticeably faster and all the senses strained for the slightest crack of a twig; the scenery becomes an entirely secondary consideration.*

### THE WHITE RHINO

Lewa Downs is also playing a major part in the attempt to save one of the other four threatened species of rhinoceros, the white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*). There are estimated to be as few as 6800 surviving worldwide, of which some 100 are in Kenya, all brought from South Africa which has in many areas become saturated.

Some contend that Kenya is not a natural choice for such a rehabilitation to take place, partly on the basis that the species was not thought to have ever been indigenous. But recent research seems to indicate that the white rhino did once occur in Kenya, and that the differences between the northern white (subspecies *cottoni*) and the southern white species are not as great as previously asserted. The argument seems slightly fatuous: if Kenyan parks and

private ranches have the finance and the expertise there is little point in excluding them from trying to help this species as well. Solio Ranch has over 50 of these white rhinos, Masai Mara National Park some 20; Lewa Downs has the next largest population with 16 animals.

Apart from any other considerations the white rhino is a good "PR animal" for both species. They are also less accident-prone than the black rhino. If visitors and donors (understandably) wish to see the animals that they are either directly or indirectly helping to save, the white rhino is more likely to oblige. They tend to be less shy and to move in larger groups, and will often not be spooked even if you approach quite close (paradoxically it is also this that makes them more vulnerable to poaching). The white rhinos of Lewa Downs are:



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Name	Sex	Arrived/born	From
■ MAKORA	Male	1/5/84	Meru NP
■ GORORIKA	Female	7/12/88	Solio
■ RITA	Female	3/5/94	Calf of Gororika/Makora
■ MAREMBO	Female	8/12/88	Solio
■ NJUKU	Male	14/10/92	Calf of Marembo
■ BARAZA	Female	12/5/92	Calf of Marembo/Makora
■ SUNGARI	Female	11/12/88	Solio
■ LARI	Male	19/3/90	Calf of Sungari/Makora
■ MARI	Female	6/6/94	Calf of Sungari/Makora
■ JAGWAI	Male	23/11/90	Solio
■ MILIONDA	Male )		
■ UTHUMI	Male )		
■ THALUME	Male )	All from Natal Parks, South Africa, 18/8/92	
■ UPONDO	Female )		
■ NTOMBELE	Female )		
■ Unnamed as yet	Female	22/9/94	National Parks of South Africa
■ Unnamed as yet	Male	9/4/95	Calf of Marembo

Although the creation of the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary, which now encompasses all of Lewa Downs, was at its inception aimed at rhino protection it has had far wider consequences. The lessons learned about wildlife management and security have led directly to the creation of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy ("LWC"), a new concept in ranch management in Kenya.

