



To save the animals, bans were imposed in 1987 and 1990

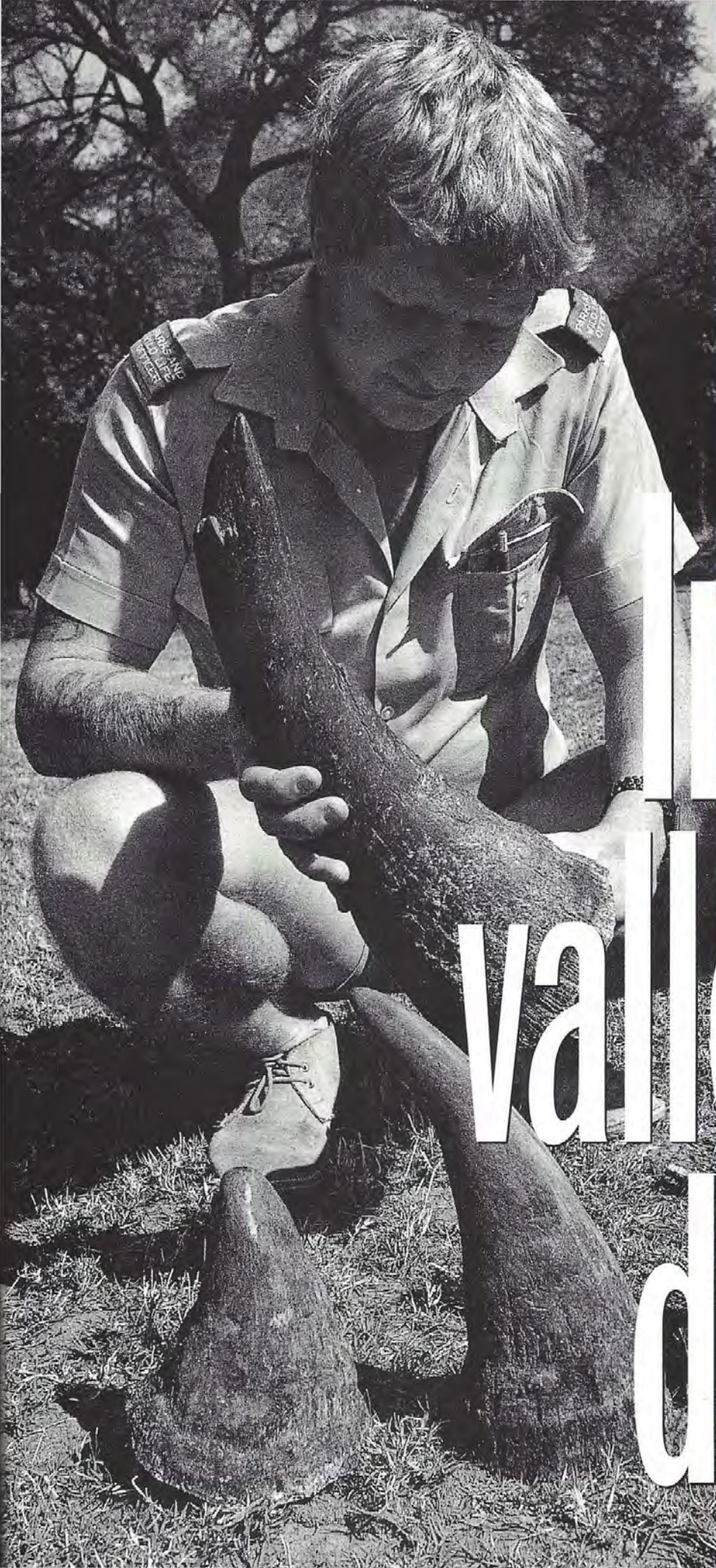
on the trade of rhino horn and ivory.

In 1995 GRAHAM BOYNTON travels 4,000 miles

through southern Africa to

discover the trail of blood unabated—and

what may be the greatest conservation
story to hit this troubled continent



Deadly do: It's just a clump of matted hair, but the rhino's horn—worth thousands on the black market—is its death warrant. A Zimbabwean park ranger examines a poacher's bitter fruit, and (*opposite*) a prehistoric-looking beauty grazes unperturbed in South Africa's Zululand, home of the world's largest number of white rhino—and the poachers' next target.

In the valley of death

A land with no wild animals is a dead land.
—Shangaan saying

IT IS A HOT, DRY TRANSVAAL summer's day, and I am sitting in this Wimpy hamburger bar in a one-street town called Magaliesburg with two undercover cops named Riaan and Ben. Riaan is a handsome young man with a mop of curly hair, a former Special Branch policeman, while Ben is blond, noticeably silent, and has only one leg, having lost the other to a rocket grenade in the Angolan war. They are detectives in South Africa's Endangered Species Protection Unit, and we are into the third day of an undercover sting operation that will hopefully crack open a rhinoceros-horn smuggling network.

Riaan and Ben's attention is focused on a red Ford parked across the street outside an antiques shop. The driver is an undercover cop posing as a prospective buyer, and his passenger is Vince, a career criminal who has turned police informer and is setting up this bust. Two more cars containing ESPU detectives are cruising the dirt roads outside the town, all connected by cellular phones. Vince is waiting for his contact to telephone the antiques shop and set the meeting place. For the past two days, we have been playing cellular phone tag with the woman Vince has chosen to betray, a farmer's wife he's known for years and with whom he has done many illegal deals. She kept switching times and locations as though she had that criminal's sixth sense that something was up, that perhaps Vince had new employers.

She said she was waiting for her contacts to bring horns from Kattlehong, one of the lawless black townships south of Johannesburg. At one point she told Vince she might be receiving forty horns, and this news put the cops on red alert. They already knew there were two heavily armed ex-soldiers guarding the farm and reckoned that a major delivery like this would mean many more armed men with automatic weapons. So they requested some of the heavies from the Murder and Robbery Unit and even more serious heavies from the Internal Stability Unit to be placed on standby. But nothing happened.

Now it is the third day, and there is only a single horn, weighing about three

and a half pounds and worth \$2,200, but she promises that the rest will be delivered in the next few weeks.

At 12:15 the call comes through. The contact's son is waiting on a dirt road some three miles away. The red Ford pulls away from the antiques shop, and we evacuate the Wimpy bar. The teenage boy is at the appointed place, and as he drives off after completing the transaction, the cops descend on him. Gert van der Merwe, the head of the operation, leaps from one of the vehicles and points an R3 automatic rifle at the kid. He is ordered out of his car, body-searched, and handcuffed. Riaan hands me a camera and asks me to be the police photograph-

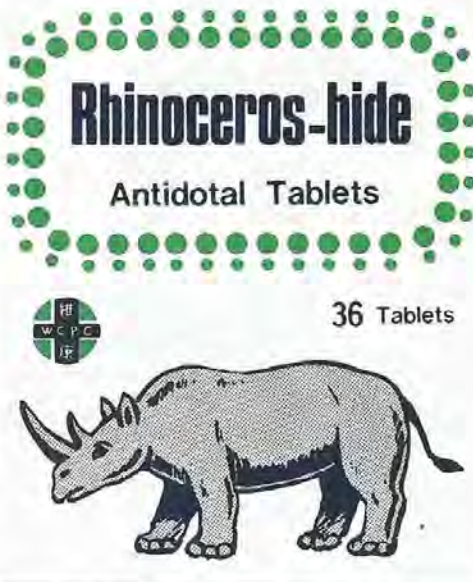
monetary value, and so for three days some fifteen policemen have been traipsing across the Transvaal trying to stop its illicit transfer from one dubious character to another. But even as the cops are shaking down the boy smuggler, rifle shots are echoing through southern Africa's last rhino sanctuaries, ensuring that more horns will be coming onto the market. However many busts these cops make, there will always be more horns coming. Until, that is, there are none left to poach.

The bat-eared boy leads the convoy of cops to the family farmhouse a few miles away, and we are greeted by his sobbing sister. The search reveals nothing more than the usual accessories of Young Hun lifestyle—9mm pistol, rifle, razor-sharp switchblades, kung fu fighting sticks, cartridges for automatic weapons. The boy's demeanor is cool until the cops begin describing prison life in the new South Africa. Black felons outnumber whites a hundred to one, and the whites are getting the shit beaten out of them, they tell him. He's looking at three years. He quickly offers to cooperate in exchange for some kind of amnesty. Any kind of amnesty. He says he can lead them to a network of Mozambicans who are bringing in a lot of horn.

The cops confer and then Gert steps up and unlocks the boy's handcuffs. He instructs him to report to the Rustenburg police station the following day. We leave him and repair to a bush bar, a ramshackle white shebeen located on another farm at the end of a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Since President Mandela's accession to power last year, bush bars have been springing up all over the northern Transvaal. This is the heartland of the Afrikaner right, the

die-hard apartheidists, and the bars serve as retreats for this endangered species to mourn the passing of the old order over the requisite brandy-and-Cokes.

Gert buys the first round, Riaan breaks out the smokes, and everyone agrees it was a good day's work. There is a major from the Rustenburg drug squad with us, and he buys a round and starts

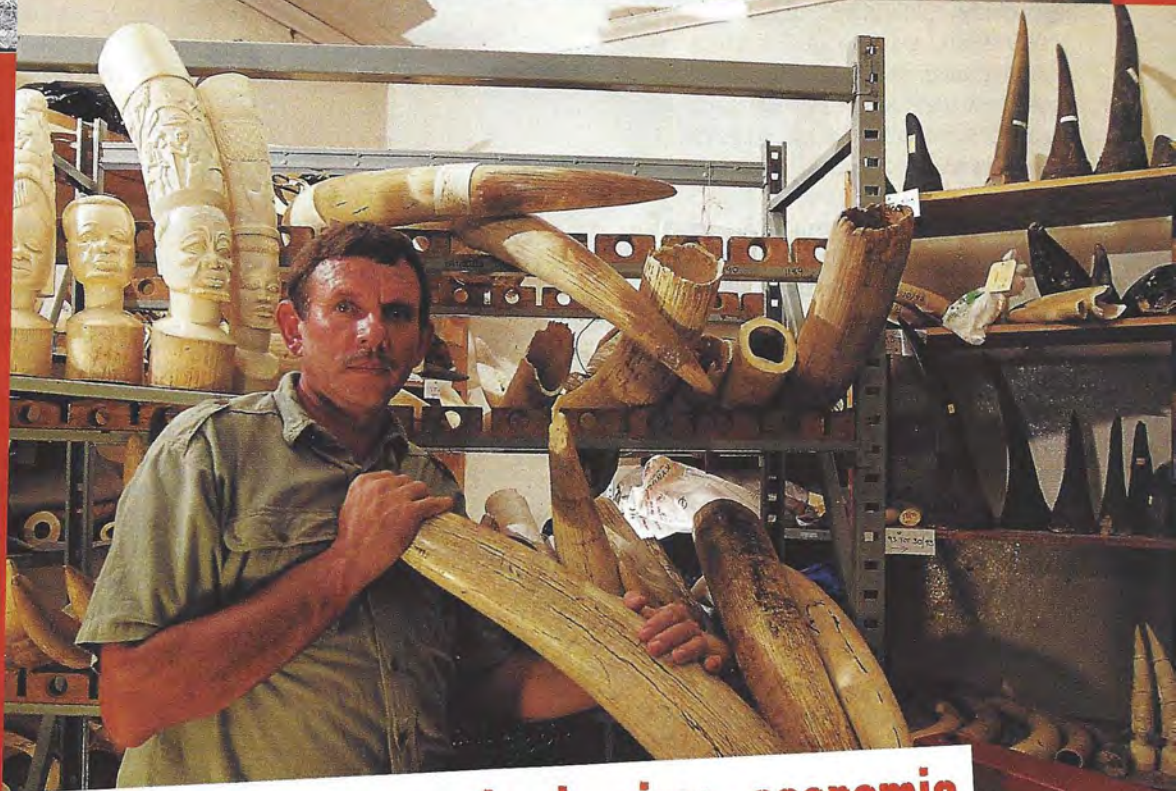


er. So I make the kid stand next to the trunk of the car and place the rhino horn beside him.

It is while I am point-and-shooting away at this unfortunate khaki-clad bat-eared farm boy that the towering absurdity of it all hits me. The small horn on the trunk, wrapped in a supermarket shopping bag and looking like a piece of wood, is nothing more than a clump of matted rhinoceros hair. For entirely spurious reasons it has achieved an outrageous



The parks' patrol arrived in time to save the horns—but not the lives—of these four white rhinos shot at a water hole near Umfolozi. (One poacher was killed, the others fled.) Colonel Piet Lategan (right), founder of South Africa's Endangered Species Protection Unit, with confiscated "commodities": "This is Africa. It's tough. People do what they can to survive."



Government corruption, organized crime, economic anarchy: "Most of us who have been watching the situation think it is out of control. That it's already too late"

"We have a big job to do. And the wildlife has to pay its own way. We must not be distracted by emotion"

telling stories of drug busts and how all the rock stars pouring into the country are arriving with bags of cocaine. A couple of rounds later the cops are telling each other dirty jokes in Afrikaans, and Vince the Informer is explaining to me in minute detail how to commit check fraud. He turns out to be a very bright customer indeed, who seems to have gotten away with most of it most of the time. He says he turned informer because he hit hard times and needed quick cash—the ESPU's informers usually receive ten percent of the value of the horn or tusk confiscated, plus expenses. Vince has probably taken in \$400 today.

The ESPU was formed in 1989 around a personable captain from the stock-theft unit named Piet Lategan. It was the brainchild of South Africa's then-minister of police, Adriaan Vlok, intended as an antidote to the wave of allegations from Western wildlife activists that South African officials, army officers, and government ministers were aiding and abetting the illicit wildlife trade. Clearly eager to wipe out the traces of the bad old days, Vlok moved Lategan's unit to a farm outside Pretoria called Vlakplaas ("flat place"). It is a name that will live forever in infamy in South African history, for it was the headquarters of C10, apartheid's notorious hit-squad unit, and Lategan's predecessor here was Colonel Eugene de Kock, a man known as Prime Evil, who is currently on trial for mass murder. An eco-cop for a licensed executioner. Welcome to the new South Africa.

In its six years of operation, Lategan's unit has grown to twenty-two policemen and -women and has developed a network of informers throughout southern Africa. They have been involved in operations as far north as Zambia and have been consulted by and run joint operations in several neighboring African countries. Their success at penetrating



and prosecuting the smuggling syndicates is graphically illustrated by the stockpiles of confiscated rhino horns and ivory sealed up in the storeroom at Vlakplaas. The current stocks are held as evidence in upcoming criminal cases, and I counted more than thirty rhino horns and about 120 tusks, and there were boxes containing thousands of carved ivory seals. The total value was anywhere between one and five million dollars.

So, as the celebrations at the bush bar wind down, we climb into our cars and head back to Vlakplaas. To nobody's sur-

prise, we walk straight into a huge party taking place at ESPU headquarters. A training course for regional conservationists has just broken up, and this is a demobilization party. Colonel Lategan is in an expansive mood behind the bar. "It was a small bust," he says, "but I think it will lead us to a bigger network."

As I slip out of the ESPU bar—with great haste so as to avoid Vince, who is now insisting on taking me to Joburg so he can introduce me to the best whores and the best-quality coke in Africa—I can't help feeling that the solution to Africa's poaching plague lies somewhere else.

IN THE WEEKS FOLLOWING the Magaliesburg bust, I traveled four thousand miles through southern Africa, a journey that

Translocation is a currently popular method of repopulating devastated areas. Elephants are drugged, bound, rolled onto trucks, and, upon arrival, released into holding pens before being set free.

took me through the various heavens and hells of African wildlife conservation and that offered me some insight into the crisis which continues to threaten the continent's animals and wilderness areas. It had been six years

since my last investigation into elephant poaching and the ivory trade appeared in *Condé Nast Traveler* (September 1989), and I wanted to know whether the world's collective outrage at the plight of these wonderful animals, the subsequent bans on the ivory trade, and all the fundraising and hand-wringing that followed had had any effect. Or whether wild Africa's demise seems as inevitable now as it did then.

I knew that some things had changed in half a decade, but from what I'd been told, none for the better. In Kenya, the



Southern sanctuaries

An instant guide to South Africa and Zimbabwe's wildlife parks. For details on where to stay, see page 200.



rhino and elephant poaching reaching the Western media. In Europe and America, increasingly grim newspaper and magazine reports of the carnage had galvanized public awareness and fattened the coffers of such organizations as the African Wildlife Foundation and the World Wildlife Fund (now renamed the World Wide Fund for Nature, except for its American chapter). They in turn had poured millions of dollars into conservation projects and lobbies for trade bans, and yet the killing continued apace. Where to start? Everyone knew who the bad guys were. And nobody seemed able to stop them.

At the bottom of the chain were the barefoot poachers, the African tribesmen who were paid fifty dollars to go out and shoot the rhino and elephants. They were just the pawns, desperately poor rural people driven to poaching by hunger. Their employers were middlemen with connections either to the organized-crime networks headquartered around Johannesburg and Pretoria, like the Pretoria-based Cheong Pong, or to the independent operators, like Hans Beck in Botswana. These were the men the police and conservationists knew they had to get. But nothing ever seemed to happen to them.

A promising undercover commando operation, code- (Continued on page 185)

controversial but effective head of the national wildlife department, Richard Leakey, had been ousted by his enemies in government. From Zimbabwe, which once boasted the finest national parks on the continent, reports continued to describe a park system in disarray and dysfunction, and in those six years its rhino population had been reduced from two thousand roaming wild and free to a scattering of two hundred living mainly on heavily guarded private reserves. In Mo-

ambique, the cessation of the fifteen-year civil war had allowed international conservators to examine and evaluate firsthand the damage done to the animals and ecosystems during the conflict. Some left in tears and others described it as "a basket case." In South Africa, while the political landscape had changed dramatically, the organized-crime networks had been conducting business as usual, feeding off the new democracy and flourishing just as they had under apartheid; the country remained Africa's clearinghouse for the traffic of rhino horns and elephant tusks.

My investigation six years earlier had coincided with news of a tidal wave of

(Continued from page 163) named Operation Lock, whose aim was to penetrate and bring down poaching and smuggling networks, fell apart in late 1989 when its cover was blown. It had been sponsored by high-ranking WWFN officials, run by Sir David Stirling, founder of the British SAS (Special Air Service), and led by Lieutenant Colonel Ian Crooke, a decorated SAS officer. Secret Operation Lock documents, recently obtained by this magazine, reveal that at the time of its demise, Operation Lock was not only gathering information on Pong and Beck, but monitoring the activities of one Basil Steyn in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, and Bill Taylor, an American-born dentist also said to be operating out of Bulawayo.

Steyn ran a curio-shop-cum-import-export business called Sondela Exports, and although he was licensed to trade legal, certified ivory within the country, Crooke, and later Lategan, were both looking into whether he was involved in moving poached ivory through the subcontinent. In November 1990, an undercover Washington investigator named Kathi Austin, who was working for several environmental and human rights organizations, arrived at Steyn's shop posing as a prospective buyer. Steyn was expansive, allowing Austin and her companion to photograph the shop and the carving factory, and told her he could provide her with seven tons of raw ivory, which he would transport across the border into Botswana for shipment to Texas, at Z\$400 a kilogram (about \$50 a pound). Later, Steyn's driver described in detail how the ivory was carried by truck into Botswana on back roads, then concealed in containers by Steyn's partner in Francistown and shipped to America.

Today, Basil Steyn continues running Sondela, and he even bought a wildlife conservancy in the lowveld. Cheong Pong and Hans Beck were indicted, but in Pong's case, for example, the fine he received was so insignificant that it had no effect on the family transport business, which is now run by his two sons. Bill Taylor stayed on in Zimbabwe and was made an honorary game warden. In Western capitals, non-government organizations (NGOs) continue to raise funds, run projects, and underwrite investigations, but these days they seem to be doing it more out of habit than belief. If you ask anyone who has worked on the Africa beat for any length of time whether there is hope for the continent's wildlife, you will be told it doesn't look good. Craig van Note, a former journalist who for eighteen years has run Monitor, a coalition of twenty-five conservation, envi-

ronmental, and animal-welfare organizations, and is famous for exposing the South African army's role in the eradication of Angola's elephant population, told me that "most of us who have been watching the situation think it is out of control. That it's already too late."

BY THE TIME I LEFT THE UNITED States on this safari, I was so loaded down with the grim prognostications of people like Van Note that I found myself predictably and instinctively taking the African Position—this a stubborn, arro-

gant belief that only Africans understand Africa, and that the outsiders who circulate these stories exaggerate wildly and misinterpret almost everything. While conceding that the continent is riven with civil wars, paralyzed by corruption, stricken with famines, and economically on the way to the scrapyard—all of this is documented—the African Position insists that when you are on the ground, feet planted firmly on the veld, you will realize that there is much to celebrate and much to be optimistic about in this contrary land.

African dreaming. It is, of course, as pre-

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posterior as it is irrational to believe any of this. The stories are true, but what really sticks in the craw of the white Africans is that most have been coming from environmental activists based in London and Washington.

In addition to this burning territorial enmity between southern African conservationists and the Western activists, there is a gap in conservation philosophies as wide as the Rift Valley. The African Position states that for wildlife to survive it must be managed and have a commercial value. Its adherents thereby advocate the reintroduction of the ivory and rhino-horn trade and the plowing of profits from such regulated trade back into conservation. The Western NGO position is that the bans must stay, because the white Africans cannot regulate the trade and with it the animals will be wiped out, and that control methods such as culling should be stopped. Even with these measures, they say, there is little hope. Van Note told me he thought things were so bad in African conservation that the international community "should walk away for fifty years and let the Africans get on with it."

But the rift is even deeper than philosophy alone. Western NGO officials I spoke to seemed to regard all the white conserva-

tionists operating in southern Africa with deep suspicion, as if this were some kind of regional pigment mafia whose blood oath is to rip black Africa off in every way possible.

The white Africans expressed similarly strong misgivings about the NGOs, accusing organizations like the EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency, founded in 1984 by two Greenpeace executives) of ignoring the needs of the African people in favor of grandstanding policies devised to raise funds to keep themselves in business. They also fear that the international trade bans are the thin end of the wedge and that the ultimate target of the Western lobbyists—the so-called bunny huggers—is the banning of sport hunting. Every two years at the international CITES (Convention on the Illegal Trade in Endangered Species) conference, these two forces collide over the cornerstone issue—the continued listing of the African elephant as an endangered species and the ban on trading ivory. And so it goes. Educated white conservationists bickering in convention halls in the world's capitals while Africa's besieged wilderness and wildlife heritage waits patiently for them to agree on a solution.

Are there any rays of hope in the gathering gloom, I wondered, or is conservation just cant, bickering, and ego wrestling? My

journey was to take me from South Africa through Zimbabwe's two major towns, Harare and Bulawayo, through its beleaguered wildlife preserves, and then back to South Africa's thriving Natal parks, home of the world's last major concentration of white rhinoceroses.

I had hardly set foot on the continent when the EPU's Colonel Lategan offered me some advice, a slice of bushveld sagacity that would prevent me from falling into the judgmental traps most Western visitors succumbed to. It was, he said, advice he had offered to others who had come from the West and attempted to understand African ways. Most notably, and with chilling prescience, he had offered it to Ian Crooke, the Operation Lock leader, before the operation fell apart, and before Crooke himself suffered a terrible parachuting accident that left him a paraplegic.

Lategan's words were: "Time is on Africa's side. You are in Africa now, and if you don't work the way Africa works, it will destroy you."

A FEW DAYS LATER, AS I SAT IN A Land Rover sipping a cold Castle lager and staring out over the luminous green patch of floodplain running alongside the Save (pronounced *SAH-vee*) River

Where heaven and earth meet.



on Zimbabwe's southeastern border with Mozambique, Colonel Lategan's words came back to me. Out here everything—time, space, and horizons—seemed infinite. The powerful tranquillity of this African landscape was something that natives like Lategan understood instinctively, and if it is to be saved from the destructive follies of late-twentieth-century *Homo sapiens*, it will have to be done within an African context. It struck me that it must be this intimacy with, and reverence for, the forces of nature that allowed the Africans their shards of optimism.

There were four of us in the Land Rover, and for fifteen minutes we sat in complete silence, watching the long grasses change from cream to yellow to gold as the sun went down. A herd of impala were grazing under the *Acacia albida* trees to our left, and some zebras and a couple of giraffes were feeding farther along. Two vultures circled on the currents high above, scanning the thick foliage for an abandoned kill. My companions were three key players in a development program aimed at reviving this wilderness area to its former glory and using wildlife tourism to fund it: Clive Stockil, a white Shona-speaking local, born and bred in the lowveld, who is the driving force behind the Mahenye

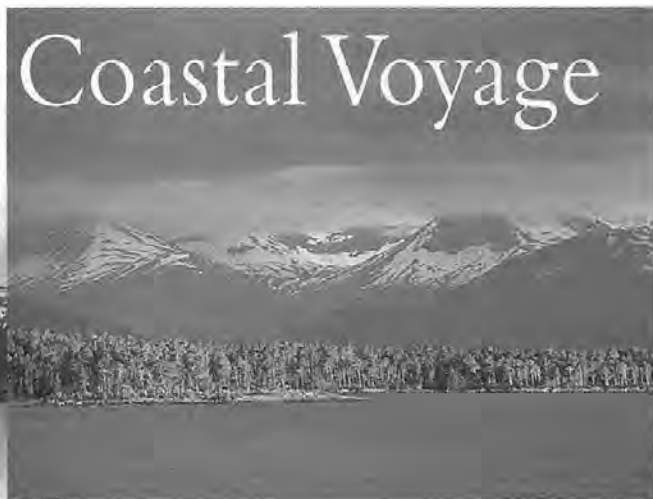
Campfire Project, one of Zimbabwe's sustainable-utilization programs; Mick Townsend, a prominent farmer and former chairman of the Wildlife Society, who is a member of the president's commission on land use; and Alistair Wright, a Harare hotel executive who persuaded his company, Zimbabwe Sun, to invest three million dollars in an upmarket tourist lodge here and then launched a share issue that is intended to fund the translocation of seventeen thousand wild animals into the the nearby Save Conservancy. As we sat watching this serene transition from day to dusk, they explained why their mission to restore and sustain this abundant sprawl of African bushveld had become necessary in the first place.

This was the northeastern corner of Zimbabwe's second-largest national park, Gonarezhou, a three-thousand-square-mile reserve that lies against Mozambique's border. Gonarezhou is an infamous name in wildlife circles worldwide, for it was here in the late 1980s that some of the most cynical and calamitous poaching campaigns in modern times took place, campaigns that wiped out almost all the rhino in the park and at least a thousand elephants, mostly young bulls upon which the herds depended for successful breeding.

The poaching operations were organized with military precision and brought together an unholy alliance of Mozambican Frelimo guerrillas, corrupt National Parks officials, Zimbabwean National Army soldiers, former Selous Scout commandos who had fought for the white minority in the Rhodesian bush war, military intelligence agents from the then-Afrikaner-ruled South Africa, and Zimbabwean government ministers. The Selous Scouts had perfected the technique in the late 1970s. They would cordon off an area in the park, declare it a military frozen zone, and move in on the elephant herds with automatic weapons. Trucks then moved the tusks across the border into South Africa, where the contact men were waiting to take them on to Johannesburg. The slaughter was common knowledge among local conservationists but consistently denied by government officials.

The park had been closed to tourists since 1986, because gangs of Renamo guerrillas were slipping over the border from neighboring Mozambique's civil war, armed to the teeth, and to the poaching syndicates a closed park was a frozen area. While officials turned a blind eye, the warden of the southern sector of Gonarezhou, a dedicated young man named Gordon

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Putterill, undertook an investigation of his own and came up with a list of people involved in the poaching, a syndicate that included senior Parks officers and government ministers. In 1991, he handed the list and his evidence to a Government Commission of Enquiry.

Far from welcoming Putterill's information and acting on it, the Zimbabwe government's officers, Putterill maintains, mounted a campaign of harassment against him that continues to this day. It began soon after he testified. He'd had to shoot an elephant early in 1991 in Gonarezhou after it had stepped on a land mine, and while his rangers were guarding the fallen animal, a group of poachers attacked, chased them off, and stole the tusks. An inquiry was conducted by the head of the Parks' investigation branch, Graham Nott, and an astonished Putterill found himself accused of stealing the ivory. Soon after, while Putterill was on leave, Graham Nott sent two of his men to interrogate Putterill's assistant, Salani Jack. Says Putterill, "They tortured him in my office, in government offices, during working hours, in broad daylight. That's how bold and blatant they are. They wanted him to make a statement that he'd seen me take the tusks... to change his evidence. Being a brave man, he refused to."

Putterill, who was eventually suspended without pay, is the latest in a long line of Zimbabwean conservationists who, since independence in 1980, have been harassed and hassled by Graham Nott's department. In 1988, after twenty-four years of service, the highly regarded Clem Coetsee quit as warden of Hwange National Park, the country's biggest game reserve, when his staff warned him that Nott's people were out to get him. "I was always being investigated and accused of stupid things," he told me. "Then I was warned that they would find something to put me in jail for, and I decided to pack it in. We all left because of harassment." Even today, Coetsee, who has now become southern Africa's most successful elephant translocator, is being pursued by people within Zimbabwe's Parks Department. Like Putterill, he is accused of illegally exporting elephants, and like Putterill, he has all the appropriate paperwork. At least he did have all the paperwork: When Nott's investigators raided his farmhouse in Zimbabwe's lowveld, they took all the documents away, promising to return them within days. That was eight months ago.

Nott is a much-hated man, and there is a great deal of speculation among conser-

vationists, both here and in the West, about his motives (he recently retired from the Parks service but has maintained his contacts and influences there, and his lieutenants are still in position). Many are convinced that he was a destabilizer in the employ of the old South African government. This theory holds that South Africans, in their last desperate attempts to shore up apartheid and discredit neighboring black governments, embarked on a deliberate campaign to ruin Zimbabwe's wildlife industry and hired Nott to do the dirty work, to encourage the poachers and to neutralize the protectors. If that sounds far-fetched, there is another theory—held by a number of respected conservationists who for obvious reasons do not wish to be named—that his paymasters were the Washington NGOs who were so strongly opposed to Zimbabwe's position on the ivory trade that they, too, wanted to bring the Parks Department to its knees and rid CITES conferences of these troublesome sustainable-utilization zealots. All wildly fanciful perhaps; then again, this is Africa, and intrigues and conspiracies have always been essential ingredients of the continent's human condition.

The removal of conservationists of the caliber of Putterill and Coetsee from Zimbabwe's national parks system has merely added to the growing calamity of what was once considered the finest wildlife department on the continent. Last year it was only dramatic intervention from private citizens that prevented the closure of Zimbabwe's flagship reserve, the 5,600-square-mile Hwange National Park. While on a game-count exercise in June 1994, a group of conservationists discovered that only four of the forty-six diesel pumps installed to keep the water holes filled were functioning. They watched in horror as thousands of animals died of thirst around them.

"We knew there were problems," says Colin Gillies, the local chairman of the privately funded Wildlife Society and leader of the group, "but we had no idea of their magnitude. It was terrible. The plains game—kudu, roan antelope, giraffes—would stand for hours in the queue and never get to what little water there was. We saw elephants stuck in the mud, too weak to get out, and then finally collapsing and suffocating to death."

Gillies and his colleagues immediately called up local businesses and asked for help in getting at least some of the pumps working again; in some cases they had simply run out of fuel, but so indifferent were the Parks staff to the problem that the

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provincial warden at the time, one Claudius Hove, did not even know that the famous Nyamandhlovu Pan, only a few miles from his offices, had dried up. At the same time, Gillies drafted a detailed report of the crisis and delivered it to Dr. Herbert Murerwa, the minister of environment and tourism. Stung into action by the attention Hwange's crisis was attracting in the international media, the government called an emergency meeting and conservationists drew up a rescue plan. At the meeting the government officials promised the conservationists the appropriate funds "within a fortnight." When I saw Gillies in Bulawayo, a full six weeks later, he had still heard nothing of the promised money.

The Zimbabwe government's commitment to nature conservation has, in the fifteen years since independence, been all but nonexistent. According to a recent CITES report, park operational budgets experienced an eighty-eight percent decline, in real terms, between 1988 and 1993. The private sector has been forced to make ever-larger contributions of money and expertise just to keep parks like Hwange functioning. Most of the \$95 million Zimbabwe earned from foreign tourism last year was consumed by the treasury, with only \$6 million allocated to the parks.

Add this indifference at the government level to the cynical exploitation by the white destabilizers, the slick modus operandi of the crime syndicates, and the seemingly insatiable appetite for ivory and rhino horn in the Far East (ivory for ornament and horn as analgesic) and you can hear the clock ticking very loudly for Zimbabwe's wildlife. And yet, in the midst of all this chaos and destruction, there are beacons of light, albeit scattered thinly across the sprawling bushveld and seemingly very vulnerable to the forces of evil and institutionalized neglect.

SUCH A BEACON IS CLIVE STOCKIL, a true son of the African soil whose family settled here after World War II and who grew up in this place, among these people. As the sun went down over the Save River that afternoon, Stockil began a dissertation that would continue almost uninterrupted for two days. It was an infinitely detailed explanation of a conservation philosophy he has put into practice here, in this ravaged corner of Zimbabwe's wilderness, and which he believes will lead the wild animals out of the valley of death. In the morning we would visit the Save Conservancy, Stockil said, the block of land not far from Mahenye that has been transformed from cattle farmlands

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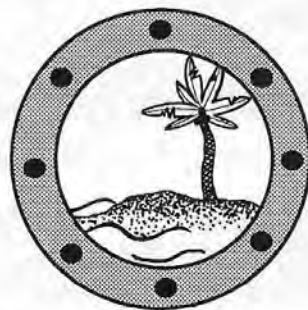
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to wildlife habitat. "Even if I say it myself, this is the greatest conservation story to hit Africa. It is the only project that is re-creating elephant habitat, the only area expanding its elephant habitat. That's elephant conservation. The bottom line: Survival in Africa has to be sustainable, and unless it's sustainable, we're on a shortcut to disaster."

On cue, as we were driving back to the camp, we passed through heavy thicket and suddenly smelled elephant. With an expert eye, Stockil spotted their dark outlines in the half-light some fifty yards away. We edged toward them gingerly, but they knew we were there. At twenty yards the matriarch stirred and, with a graceful turn, strode across our path without a sideways look and signaled for the others to follow. Ten elephants emerged from the thick, tangled bushveld, following her toward the river, and the last, a young bull, paused and gave us a half-hearted mock charge before trumpeting off into the bushes. It was an uneventful encounter, yet even so, it provoked the flutter of excitement and awe that one invariably feels in the presence of these magnificent creatures.

That night around the Mahenye campfire, Stockil continued his dissertation. He explained how the Shangaans, the original inhabitants of this area, had for centuries lived among the wild animals and incorporated basic conservation principles in their tribal culture. Only a highly trained few were allowed to hunt the animals, and the hunting campaigns were directed by the chief, who distributed the spoils to his subjects. Their survival depended on the wildlife's flourishing, and flourish it did.

Then, at the turn of the century, the white colonial rulers changed all that by ordaining that all wildlife belonged to the Crown. At the stroke of a pen, these people who were living in perfect harmony with the animals were transformed into poachers. As Stockil said: "It was like closing down all the supermarkets in Manhattan and telling the inhabitants to fend for themselves." And when the area was declared a national park in 1966, many of the Shangaans were forcibly removed from the area and their huts torched.

With the coming of independence and black majority rule in 1980, the Shangaans expected their land to be returned to them. The government, however, demurred, explaining that the young country needed the foreign exchange from tourism and that tourists wanted to visit the park. Applying faultless logic, the angry Shangaans concluded that if there were no animals, there would be no tourists, and if there were no

tourists, then the government might as well give them their land back. So the Shangaans went on a poaching campaign to rid their land of the animals they had once shared it with.

For a time in the early 1980s, this northern sector of Gonarezhou was a battle zone, with running shooting wars between park rangers and the fleet-footed Shangaan hunters, and a trail of rhino and elephant carcasses scattered in their wake. Then, in February 1982, with the anarchy at a high point, Stockil was called in to mediate between the Shangaans and National Parks. He called a meeting that was attended by seventy tribal elders, and sat patiently under a Natal mahogany tree as they complained bitterly of their treatment at the hands of white and black governments. For the three hours that followed, Stockil and the elders talked about their history, the way it had been before the white men closed down their supermarket, and agreed that the tribal community should be allowed to be involved in the management of the wildlife again. That the wildlife would be returned to the people with whom it shared the land.

The Shangaans gave Stockil a mandate to negotiate a deal with National Parks on their behalf, and he managed to wrestle an agreement out of some very skeptical government officials in Harare. This area had been among the most heavily poached in the country, and they found it hard to believe that the belligerent Shangaans would suddenly start protecting the game they'd been poaching. Stockil had no such doubts and immediately organized an exercise that would graphically illustrate the benefits of sustainable utilization to the local tribespeople. Two Americans were invited on an elephant-hunting safari and duly bagged their two bulls. The tribeswomen, who traditionally provide the food for the community, were invited to take part in the skinning and cutting up of the animals, and Stockil later arrived with a briefcase full of cash, the community's share of the trophy-hunting fees. Each villager was handed a small pile of notes, and then, one by one, they handed back a small percentage that would go into the fund for building the village school.

Although the conversion of the Shangaans would have little effect on the poaching wave that in the late 1980s wiped out Gonarezhou's bull elephants and rhino, the seeds of a constructive long-term community conservation policy were sown at the time of that elephant hunt. Now, thirteen years later, the school is flourishing, attended by some forty children from the sur-

rounding area; a grinding mill has been built and another is planned; construction has begun on a model village that will accommodate small groups of foreign visitors; and poaching is almost nonexistent. With the anticipated revenues from upmarket foreign tourists expected to fly into this smart new camp at Mahenye, the Shangaans are very optimistic about the future.

"This community has the potential over the next five years to start generating a million dollars annually," Stockil was saying as the last flames flickered in the campfire. He had been complaining about Western conservation organizations failing to understand the needs of the African people and refusing to accept the fact that projects like Mahenye Campfire depended on the management of wilderness resources, management that entailed shooting animals. "We have a big job to do," he was saying, "but we have no alternative. And the wildlife has to pay its way. We must not be distracted by emotion. We have to get into managing habitats. Let's look at the survival of the species, not the individual animals."

TO AN OUTSIDER, STOCKIL MAY at first have sounded somewhat unsentimental about the animals he professed to protect, but it soon became clear that his passion and his *raison d'être* lay with the animals rather than with his fellow humans. He told one story of an encounter with elephants, which, for all his years in the bush, still left him breathless as he described it. It happened at the end of a three-month elephant translocation operation that released four hundred animals into Stockil's Save Conservancy, some fifty miles northwest of our Mahenye camp. The last two trucks, containing eleven elephants, arrived at the release pens in mid-afternoon after a six-hour drive. Some American visitors had flown in to watch the release, and Stockil wanted to impress them with a smooth and efficient exercise—good PR, he thought.

The trucks backed up to the stockade and, slowly, nine of the animals disembarked, leaving a reluctant mother and calf in the truck. For two hours Stockil and his frustrated staff prodded and cajoled the pair, but they would not budge. "Suddenly, a big bull elephant emerged from the bushes," he said, "and began walking toward the truck. I recognized him as one we had translocated three months before. He stopped at the gate and began that low rumbling noise. Within five minutes the mother and calf had moved into the stock-

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ade with the other nine."

The bull moved off, but the disoriented, nervous elephants wouldn't make the final move from the stockade to freedom and followed each other around in circles like sheep. Stockil sent the vehicles and the workers away, hoping the bull would return, and as silence descended, he appeared again out of the bushes. This time he pushed almost his entire body through the stockade gate, leaving one massive foot firmly planted in the wild, then wrapped his trunk around the nearest female and pulled her to the exit. Once she was out, he led her away from the stockade and stood beside her for a while, patting her down reassuringly with his trunk.

"You could actually see her gradually relaxing. And when she was calm, he went back to the stockade, climbed right in, and went through a greeting ritual, starting with the matriarch. During all this time there was the low rumbling sound. He began pushing the elephants toward the exit, and one by one they came out and joined the waiting female. When they were all gathered, the matriarch led them away. The bull was the last to leave, and as he did he turned toward us, flapped his ears, bel-

lowed, and shook his trunk at us, as if to say, Well then, that's taken care of."

"We were dumbfounded," said Stockil, still dumbfounded.

We stared at the stars for a bit after he'd finished the story, listening to the barks and grunts and calls of the animals across the river in the park. The Southern Cross had come up, Orion's Belt glistened brightly against an inky backdrop, and a luminous moon threw a soft light over the canopy of Natal mahogany trees set back from the riverbank. Conversation seemed unnecessary. It was all so obvious. It was all here. Stockil was right when he'd said that this was the greatest conservation story to hit Africa. The problem, of course, was that hardly anybody had been listening.

EXACTLY ONE WEEK LATER, I found myself staring out at another of Africa's pristine wilderness areas on a calm and clear night. South Africa's Hluhluwe (pronounced *Shloo-shloo-we*)-Umfolozo Park is 750 miles south of Mahenye, at the tip of the continent, cradled between the foothills of the Drakensberg Range and the ragged Zululand coastline. This park, according to the conservationists, police investigators, and informants I had spoken to in the past weeks, is the next target of the rhino poachers—the final battleground.

Despite the moonlight, the rolling hills of Hluhluwe remained dark and threatening that night. Under the heavy cloak of acacia trees and thick grasses, I knew that some two thousand rhino were browsing and grazing, one of the last wild populations left. I peered into the darkness, looking for a flash of movement and listening for an echoed report confirming that poachers were in the park. I saw and heard nothing, but in my mind I knew that shadowy figures were out there, running crouched through the tangled thickets, closing in on their docile, bovine prey, raising their weapons to their shoulders, and leveling their sights at the spot just below and behind the huge animal's ears, the site of its tennis ball-size brain. Only last December, just fifteen miles south of here, a volley of rifle fire had echoed through the hills, and everyone who heard it knew what it meant. As fortune would have it, a park patrol was passing by the area, and they pounced on three poachers at a water hole as they were hacking off the horns of the four white rhino they'd shot. One of the poachers was killed in the gunfight that followed, but the other two fled into the deep bushveld.

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Since then, two black rhino have been shot in Natal, one at the Mkuze Reserve and the other in Hluhluwe, but the Natal Parks undercover investigators were already onto the whereabouts of at least one of the horns. This group is headed by a somewhat melodramatically secretive man named Simon Pillinger, whose skill in running a network of agents and informers has contributed greatly to Natal's enviably low poaching statistics—four rhino in 1992, four again in 1993, ten in 1994, including those four whites at the water hole. Pillinger knows who the main smugglers are—he repeated the five or six names I had been hearing throughout my trip, but would do so only off the record—and concedes that Natal's parks are without doubt the poachers' next target. "There are a lot of weapons in the area, there is widespread unemployment, rhino are very easy to kill, and we have a lot of them."

Unlike the national parks in Zimbabwe and most other African countries to the north, Hluhluwe-Umfolozi and the other Natal reserves are extremely well funded and extremely well run. The parks have an annual operating budget of almost thirty million dollars, one-third of which comes from revenues generated by tourism and the sale of game and curios. Dr. George Hughes, the internationally respected head of Natal Parks, told me that more money was spent here than in any other wildlife conservancy in the world. "Two hundred dollars per square kilometer is the accepted standard; we spend eight hundred dollars," he said triumphantly.

And it shows. The Natal Parks system is one of the few unqualified successes in Africa, a controlled, well-managed group of more than sixty proclaimed areas. The Hluhluwe and Umfolozi reserves were proclaimed in 1895, making them the oldest in Africa, and at the time there were no more than fifty white rhino in the area. Under the guidance of Parks officer F. Vaughn Kirby, and with careful management and committed protection, the population grew slowly until it numbered three hundred in 1962, after which it exploded. In the thirty years since, Natal has exported more than four thousand white rhino to game reserves, zoos, and private reserves throughout the world—some as gifts but most for hard cash—and still maintains a population of about eighteen hundred whites and three hundred blacks. Sales of live rhino bring in about a million dollars a year, and with the population growing at the rate of a hundred a year in good years, this steady income should roll

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The other—more controversial—source of potential revenue lies in a series of secret vaults scattered through the province. In those vaults are an estimated six hundred rhino horns, collected over the years from apprehended poachers and natural deaths and worth anything from five to eight million dollars. It is said that only one man, Dr. George Hughes, knows where all the horns are stored. (He refused to comment on the matter for this article.) Hughes and his Natal Parks colleagues quite naturally want to put these horns on the market, arguing that the revenue will help protect living animals, but the rhino's status as an Appendix I protected species forbids the trading of horn. Hughes did, however, manage to wring one concession out of CITES at the October 1994 Fort Lauderdale conference, and that was a special dispensation to export more live rhino. (White rhino were temporarily downgraded from Appendix I to Appendix II, thus allowing commercial trade in live animals for twelve months.)

On my last day at Hluhluwe, I visited the translocation pens on the southern edge of the wilderness area. It was too early in the year for the main capture operation, and there was only one rhino in the compound—a huge white female that was waiting to be tranquilized and moved to a zoo in Europe. I stood beside the stockade for a while and then gingerly extended my hand between the wooden poles and began scratching her behind her ear. She raised her massive, prehistoric head toward me, and I swear that if rhino could purr, she would have purred. My instinct to cuddle her was suppressed only by the sight of her outsize horn and the vivid memory of an ABC film clip that captured the Kenyan hunter-artist Terry Mathews being nearly killed by a charging rhino in Nairobi National Park. This beast had hit the retreating Mathews at about thirty miles an hour and, with a startlingly economic upward flick of its head, had thrown him into the air like a rag doll. The horn had sliced him open from his thigh to his chest.

So I stared at the horn on this mighty beast, that deadly scimitar just a foot from my throat, and backed off. It was enough just to gawk at this exquisitely designed animal, its formidable prehistoric appearance little changed in the million and a half years it has roamed the planet. In nature, design perfection is measured by the longevity of the species, and until *Homo sapiens* arrived with his shooting sticks in the last century, the species *Diceros bicornis* was about as successful as you can get.

Now I was looking into the eyes of an exquisite creature that my species has taken to the brink of extinction.

I turned away from the rhino's unwavering gaze, and felt ashamed.

DEPART THE CALM BEAUTY OF Hluhluwe on a clammy, overcast morning and drive off toward Johannesburg, the throbbing Gomorrah of the new South Africa, the spiritual antithesis of the place I am leaving behind. One succumbs to a noble and ancient order in the African bushveld, for it is a place where the rhythm of life has remained unchanged for millennia. By contrast, the cities of the new Africa are brash, ephemeral, torn unceremoniously from their cultural roots, and quite dangerous to be in.

Johannesburg is among the most dangerous, and these days seems to be the gathering place for all the hustlers, dealers, and smugglers operating on the African continent. Criminal activity is everywhere: Violent carjackings are commonplace, the murder rate is 110 per 100,000, the houses in the affluent, formerly white northern suburbs are ringed with razor wire and connected to armed emergency-response units. If there is a fast buck to be made, then this is the place to make it, and the ivory and rhino-horn operators are in here with the gem smugglers and drug traffickers and counterfeit-currency hoods.

Colonel Lategan has admitted publicly that he has no idea how big the trade is. His unit arrested 136 people last year and intercepted ninety-three tusks, three thousand carved-ivory blocks, and thirty-eight rhino horns, but he believes that a lot more found its way to the Far East. He says that to give me an idea of how widespread it is, he wants me to meet a recently recruited informer. Back at Vlakplaas again, he introduces me to Hendrik, a minister in the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the largest black church in South Africa.

Hendrik is a jovial, perspiring man in his early fifties, and he explains that he is at Vlakplaas because he was arrested in Johannesburg in January attempting to sell a rhino horn, and in exchange for the leniency of the court, he has turned informer. It turns out that this garrulous man of the cloth, who claims he has the gift for healing people, has been involved in the illegal wildlife trade since 1969.

He says he can introduce me to a woman in Messina, a small northern Transvaal town, who will take me straight to a rhino-horn dealer in Mutare, across the Zimbabwe border. And he admits, with a smile, that he has had contacts in most of the

game parks, in Zimbabwe, in Botswana—and even in Natal, “but he was shot in the political troubles.” It was a Damascene revelation, helped along, no doubt, by the threat of a jail sentence, that changed his mind about aiding and abetting the plunder of the game. He came to understand the value of wildlife, he explains, and then, wringing his hands and offering a sly sideways grin, he says: “For money’s sake you always fall into temptation, especially when you are a Christian.”

This certainly appears to be a common failing among African churchpeople, for soon after my meeting with the Zionist minister, I find myself leafing through a docket headed “Association pour l’unification du Christianisme mondial,” which details a smuggling operation that ran from Zaire through Zambia to South Africa. The docket reveals how in February 1994 Colonel Lategan’s men arrested six members of the AUCM with 250 pounds of ivory, and how four months later they swooped on a Johannesburg apartment and picked up an AUCM minister, Pastor Joseph Mbayi, in possession of five hundred ivory blocks.

A further raid on the same apartment a few weeks later netted another priest, Pastor Bosco Murayire from Zambia, and a pile of documents linking the AUCM Church in Zaire with the smuggling network. Pastor Mbayi escaped from prison and has not been seen since, but Pastor Murayire eventually appeared in court and admitted that the smuggling operation “was part of a fund-raising campaign for the Church.” Among his documents was a detailed ledger recording each transaction and a contact book listing a global network of connections from Nigeria and Zaire to Japan and Korea. The judge took pity on the contrite and ailing Pastor Murayire and fined him \$825, but stiff jail sentences were handed down to his accomplices, one man getting six years in prison.

Colonel Lategan laughs when I express dismay at discovering that even the church is partaking in the rape of the continent. The corrupt government ministers I understand, so too the old white security establishment, the ex-Selous Scouts, the crime syndicates but the church? I thought the church stood for the sanctity of all God’s creatures. “This is Africa,” Lategan says. “It’s tough. People do what they can to survive. This is about commodities. It has nothing to do with the aesthetics of conservation.”

Lategan insists that the trade will go on as long as there is demand for ivory and rhino horn in the Far East, which means

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forever. The bans on the trade and the listing of animals in international forums as endangered species have done little to stop it thus far. "In the last EIA report, they said there was no elephant poaching as a result of the ban. It's a lie; there is still a lot of poaching. They say the ivory price has collapsed, but how do they know the black market price? We don't even know. One guy wants a thousand rand a kilo, and another wants ten rand. There is a trade. There is demand. That is the story."

Like most southern Africans, Lategan favors a return to legal trade in wildlife products. "I don't think the elephant is endangered," he says. "If we could use the money from ivory to protect species that are really endangered—beetles, pythons, birds, cycads—then we would be getting somewhere."

THIS IS WHERE I CAME IN FOUR weeks ago: The Western conservationists believing their policies will save Africa from itself, and the southern Africans insisting that they have the answers and demanding that they be allowed to employ them. Caught in the middle of this ideological tug-of-war are the dwindling habitats and the threatened species, such oases of success as Mahenye and Hluhluwe-Umfolozi, and the harbingers of doom, like Hwange. At times it seems easy to forget that this is what it's all about, and as I sit talking to Lategan, I find my mind wandering back over the past month. That starlit night at Mahenye, the serenity and awesome splendor of the African bushveld, and the sincerity and commitment of the dwindling band of white conservationists, the thin khaki line that stands between species' survival and extinction.

Thus another African odyssey ends, not in the sepulchral beauty of wild Africa but in the sober confines of a policeman's office, just a few yards away from the vault containing the remains of hundreds of slaughtered elephants and rhino. The colonel has one more thing to say. "When you go back to America," he says with a broad grin, "ask Craig van Note and some of those EIA people, the ones who've been criticizing us, to come out on a small operation with us."

"Then, if they don't wet their pants, we'll take them on a big one."

POSTSCRIPT

IN THE MONTHS FOLLOWING MY safari, a flurry of activity in South Africa and Zimbabwe served to confirm the fears and misgivings this journey had raised about the future of Africa's wildlife. In Natal, rhino poaching gathered momentum

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to the point that Natal Parks officials admitted they were losing one rhino every seventeen days. Then Colonel Lategan's ESPU moved into Hluhluwe-Umfolozi and within weeks had made a number of arrests and closed down three poaching syndicates operating in the area. Lategan says that not one rhino has been lost since then. Conservationists say they are waiting for the next wave of poachers to make a move. In Zimbabwe in July the director of National Parks, Willie Nduku, and the respected assistant director, Dr. Rowan Martin, were suspended on charges of corruption, charges similar to those the aforementioned Graham Nott and his department had leveled at Dr. Martin on two previous occasions. Observers fear that these suspensions will cause further division and disruption within the country's beleaguered park system. There is also concern that the government is contemplating the removal of rhino placed on such privately owned conservancies as Clive Stockil's Save. The machinations behind these irrational and destructive moves are too complicated to explain here, but they provide additional evidence, as if it were needed, that Africa's dwindling wildlife remains in grave peril. □

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THE TWO WILDLIFE PARKS IN which I spent the most time were Gonarezhou in Zimbabwe and Hluhluwe-Umfolozi in South Africa. They are not their country's most famous parks—Hwange and Kruger are—but their relative anonymity works for them: They are less crowded, there are fewer day-trippers, and they seem to attract a more serious kind of wildlife enthusiast. Both are worth add-on side trips of three or four days. (Note: At Hluhluwe-Umfolozi, nighttime game drives are permitted, as are guided walks.)

ZIMBABWE

THERE IS AIR SERVICE FOUR DAYS A week from Harare to the landing strip at Mahenye. A short drive through the bushveld takes you to the Zimbabwe Sun company's **Mahenye Safari Lodge**, a collection of thatched-roof chalets that look out over the Save River. This group of eight two-bed chalets is an outstanding, full-service camp in a majestic setting, with meals, drinks, and anything else you might care to have, including guides and transient experts who are great company in the bush (\$252 per person per night). Next year Zimbabwe Sun will open **Chilo**, another full-ser-



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vice camp, composed of 14 chalets that stand on a hill next to Mahenye. The company has also built the **Senuko Safari Lodge** at Clive Stockil's Save Conservancy and expects to open it by the end of the year. Information and reservations for all of Zimbabwe Sun's properties can be made in the United States at 800-521-7242.

SOUTH AFRICA

HLUHLUWE-UMFOLOZI PARK IN Zululand, in the southeastern province of Natal, is one of 63 reserves in this lush corner of South Africa. Regular light-aircraft flights arrive at the landing strips, but hiring a car and driving either from Durban (three hours) or from Johannesburg (five hours) is highly recommended. **Hilltop Camp**, where I stayed, accommodates up to 162 people in a variety of two- and four-bed chalets with equipped kitchens. One can self-cater or eat in the restaurant in the main lodge. Two other main camps in the park, **Mpila** and **Masinda**, are purely self-catering, and there are several small lodges for groups of six to ten people located right out in the middle of the bush. Included in the daily price of these lodges are a cook and a specialist game guide. For the adventurous, tended bush camps are set along the walking trails. The various camps and lodges are outstandingly well run, as, indeed, are all of the wilderness areas under the aegis of Natal Parks (27-331-471961, fax -331-471037). Prices are surprisingly modest: Hilltop Camp costs \$15-\$30 per person per night; Mpila, \$22-\$25; and Masinda, \$15-\$39.

-G. B.

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