



The Rhino Man and Other Uncommon Environmentalists

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and
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Population Reference Bureau

Cover photo: Amazon forest in the vicinity of Rio Branco, Brazil. The forest is frequently burned to create grazing lands for cattle. The land remains fertile for only a few years, at which time more forest is cleared. In the past decade, ten percent of the Amazon forest has been destroyed. (Photograph © by Mark Edwards/Still Pictures. All rights reserved.)

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The Rhino Man

The huge and hostile rhinoceros has become an icon of the world's vanishing wildlife. On one hand, the behemoth symbolizes the plight of an animal whose life-sustaining habitat is being taken over by man. Some rhinos grow to two meters tall and weigh as much as 2,200 kilograms. Like elephants, they need extensive grazing territory. Human populations in Africa and Asia are rapidly growing, forcing land-hungry farmers to invade the rhino's traditional terrain, where humans and beast cannot hope to coexist.

On the other hand, the so-called "mobile pharmacy" is vulnerable to man's ignorant pursuit of its horn and other body parts for folk medicine. Africans, Arabs, Chinese, Europeans, and Indians have pursued the rhino's horn for more than 1,000 years, believing it will provide them with a cure-all medicine, a good-luck charm, a handsome adornment, a status-giving knife handle, or an aphrodisiac. The horn can weigh as much as five-and-a-half kilograms and sell for as much as \$28,000 a kilogram in Yemen and in East Asian nations.

The rhino, however, is not without defenders. Kenyan Global 500 laureate Michael Werikhe, for instance, has become known as the "Rhino Man" for his advocacy of one of the animal kingdom's ugliest beasts, at least to human eyes.

There were an estimated 70,000 rhinos worldwide at the start of the 1970s; at the end of the 1980s there were about 11,500. All five species—two African and three Asian—are endangered. In Kenya alone, an estimated 98 percent of all the nation's rhinos have been killed off in less than twenty years.

The two African species—the black and the white rhino—have misleading names. In fact, both are grey in color and are differentiated by the shape of their lips. What they share is possible extinction. "Three tons of muscle, two inches of armor, one hundred pounds of weaponry," proclaims a conservationist slogan, "and it's completely defenseless" against habitat destruction and poachers with modern arms.

Since he was a small boy, Michael Werikhe loved animals, especially snakes. He first became aware of the rhino's plight when he took a menial post in his country's wildlife service. His first job was in the Ivory Room, sorting rhino horns and elephant tusks for

government auction. There he became "very disturbed" by the constant inflow of horns and tusks caused by the poacher's gun.

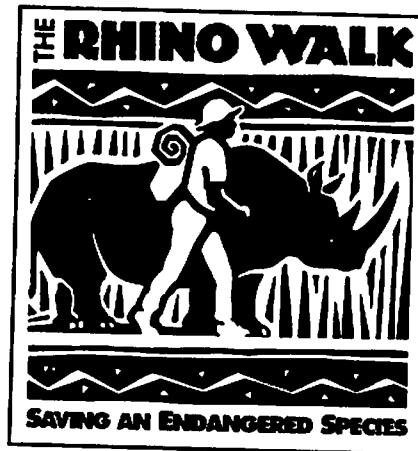
"The animals, I knew, didn't die of natural causes," he recounted. "Poaching was out of control. Very disillusioned, I left." In 1977, it should be noted, the Kenyan government finally outlawed tusk and horn auctions.

Werikhe, a poor, minimally educated young man with limited career prospects,

would hardly have seemed to be in a position to quit the economic security of a government job. Working for the wildlife service could have been the first step toward his lifelong dream of becoming a game warden.

The serious-minded young man next found work in his home town of Mombasa, a vibrant seaport on the Indian Ocean, as a security guard at the Associated Vehicle Assemblers Limited (AVA) plant. He was still greatly disturbed, however, about the plight of the rhino. He learned that various activists around the world had brought attention to their particular concern by the simple act of walking. If they could do it, he thought, so could he.

Other environmentalists who walk to publicize and raise funds for a given environmental issue are found on the Global 500 Roll of



Conservationist Michael Werikhe is pictured with an orphaned baby black rhino. Werikhe visited some 30 cities during his five-month North American tour called the Rhino Walk. Although he was not accompanied by a rhino, Werikhe was joined by supporters at zoos and aquariums on the tour. (Photograph © by Duncan Willets, Camerapix)

Honor. Robert Swan, a young energetic British environmentalist, for example, walked to both the North and the South poles to plant a United Nations flag. Finally, he marched down the main aisle of the United Nations General Assembly to present the flag to then Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar. After making his point about defending polar environments, he went on to a career of preaching environmentalism to young people and organizing youth groups, winning the Global 500 in 1989.

Riel Huaorani, a Canadian Indian medical student and a 1990 laureate, walks to rally young people for regional reforestation projects. Dressed in full tribal regalia, with braided hair, the Iridamant-Micmac Indian has taken a "re-greening the planet" message by foot to the youth of Africa, the Mediterranean, and North America. In 1989, Huaorani was elected International President of Young People's Planet, a pluralistic youth movement, and moved to Italy.

Werikhe, who had neither Huaorani's exotic regalia nor Swan's dramatic destinations, planned his first walk carefully. On applications he designed himself, he solicited sponsors for a trek from Mombasa to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Married, with two daughters, he worked extra hours to earn complimentary time off from AVA for the trip.

He made the 480-kilometer trip in 1982 to publicize the killing of the black rhino, an animal he had never seen. As a conversation piece he draped two snakes over his shoulders. Along the way, he solicited the roadside views of his countrymen on the importance of Kenya's endangered rhinos. The walk was a success, raising consciousness and money on behalf of the endangered megaherbivore, whose closest living relatives, surprisingly, are the horse and the tapir.

In 1985, he walked across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, again carrying on a dialogue with his fellow Africans. He asked: "Is the rhino worth saving? If so, how do we do it?" At first the people seemed apathetic. But once he explained the animal's predicament, he found widespread concern and willingness to help. He came away with this philosophy: "Give Africans good information, then they will do something."

During the trans-African tour, Werikhe also discovered that he really did not like walking, especially in the rain. The trek demanded that he carry on his back everything he might need—a weighty pile that put severe stress on his back and legs. But he

carried on. In 1988, he walked 2,800 kilometers from Italy to England by way of Switzerland, Germany, and Holland, and in 1991 he spent five months walking across North America.

By the end of 1991, the thirty-five-year-old African had walked thousands of kilometers, a painful challenge at times, on behalf of an animal he certainly does not anthropomorphize. Although he had raised more than \$2 million for rhino-protection projects, he did not profit personally.

Why does he do it? As his employer, P.J.C. Hughes put it, "He is no romantic nut case. In his life, as in his walking, his feet are always planted firmly upon the ground." Obviously Werikhe's rhino walks bring him recognition. He has met presidents and princes and has heard the applause of the crowd. But he seems largely untouched by his celebrity.

When a walk is over, he goes back to his job at AVA. Hughes points out, "The company has granted him some sabbatical time for his rhino projects, but not much and not often. For most of his walks and tours, he has used his own earned leave days."

We caught up with Werikhe in 1991 in Washington, D.C., during his North American "Rhino Walk" sponsored by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA). Werikhe had a full schedule. A series of events—celebrity appearances, speaking engagements, dinners, and walks—had been arranged by AAZPA and The Discovery Channel, which updated his progress across the country on cable television. At these and other events, he sought funds for rhino survival projects. Three-quarters of the money he raised was earmarked for African rhino programs and the rest for AAZPA's species survival project.

Concluding his thirty-city trip in Washington, the soft-spoken, bespectacled African said, "Walking has allowed me to learn about the environment, especially at the people's level. You don't need to be a trained conservationist, you don't need a degree to improve the world. I got my degrees in the bush. Just open the door of your house—look at the animals, birds, trees and ask yourself, 'What can I do to protect the environment?'"

Clearly a very intelligent and observant man, he is far more than a pitchman to publicize the plight of the rhino. He has a message both for Westerners and Africans. For his own people, he says, "The rhino is a living symbol of our environment. It is a big animal, easy

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to watch. If something is happening to this big animal, just imagine the problems of small animals and our total environment."

As for Western environmentalists, he notes, "No matter how much money you put into a rhino-protection program, if it doesn't have the support of the people, it is doomed to fail."

Werikhe hopes to walk across Taiwan and other heavy horn-consuming nations to deliver a third message: The purchase of "magic medicine" has no scientific basis and is leading to the extinction of an animal that has walked the earth largely unvexed for thirty million years.

In addition to a walker like Michael Werikhe, it will take informed and convincing African environmentalists in leadership positions to save vulnerable animals. Increasingly throughout the Third World, effective individuals and institutions are emerging to defend the local environment. A 1988 Global 500 winner from Kenya, Perez Malande Olindo, epitomizes the new breed of trained Third World environmentalists.

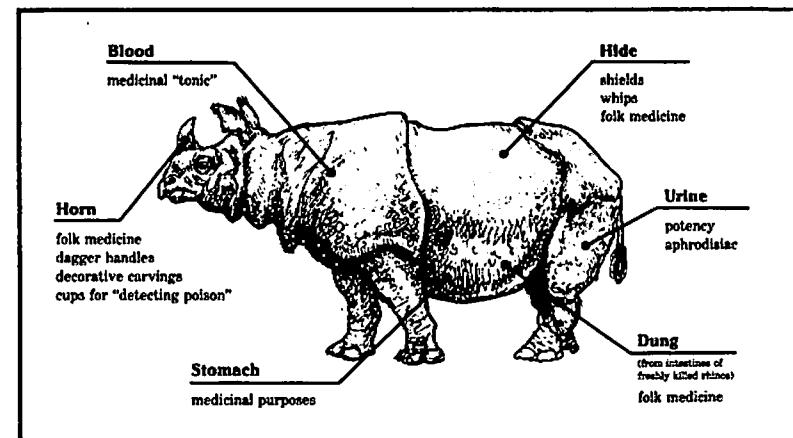
We met Olindo, an unpretentious and friendly man, at the offices of an international wildlife organization in downtown Nairobi. After studying wildlife management in the United States, he said he "made wildlife his profession, his religion, his way of life." He pointed out that traditionally, Africans "revered certain trees, birds, and animals as holding a spiritual value. Scientific explanations of their value came long after the religious significance was perceived."

Olindo, a former director of Kenya's Wildlife Conservation and Management Department, is convinced, like most African environmentalists, that the average citizen is the key to the country's ecological future. "Elephants don't vote, people do," he said, "and the concerns of the elephant are not heard. But in a land where tourism is based on wildlife, if the wildlife disappears, so will the income from tourism. Animals are the best workers in the country and they don't get paid. They don't go on strike, they don't go on leave, and they live on marginal land that can't be properly used for agriculture."

Olindo took his message to areas where people competed with wildlife for land. "We worked toward harmony," he said. "Now many more people see the animals as a national asset, not a liability."

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Can Myths Kill?



Yes, myths can kill. In some parts of the world, people think that products made from a rhino's body have special properties. They associate the rhino's strength with an ability to cure disease and to give strength or sexual potency.

Rhino products, especially those made from horn, bring high prices—more than \$60,000 for one rhino horn.

As a result we are destroying the world's rhinos. In 1970, about 70,000 rhinos were alive; in 1989, only about 11,500 rhinos lived in the wild. (Illustration and caption information courtesy of the National Zoo, Washington, DC)

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But in a country where the per capita annual income is less than \$400 and rhino and elephant tusks can fetch thousands of dollars, Olindo well understood that Kenya had to get tough with poachers. At the beginning of a ten-year stint as the director of the park service in 1966, he estimated that Kenya had a black rhino population of nearly 20,000. When he returned to the park service in 1987, there were fewer than 600 left.

During his absence, illegal hunting had gone unchecked. The activities of dangerous gunmen roaming the game parks so threatened the tourist business that President Daniel arap Moi's regime could no longer ignore the issue. Olindo was brought back to solve the embarrassing problem.

In addition to traditional Kenyan poachers, Somalians displaced by civil war and drought were drifting across the border and beginning to participate in the illicit trade in large numbers. The foreign poachers, often trained soldiers, had arms and knew how to use them. Park officials were outgunned. Kenya instituted a shoot-to-kill policy, which Olindo defended, pointing out laconically, "They shoot to kill us."

The organized poachers were finally reined in. The presence of the Somalian poachers was politically helpful. Instead of seeming to battle on behalf of rich foreign tourists against poor Kenyans who were trying to make money as best they could, the government's anti-poacher campaign was said to repel the Somalian invaders. Olindo knows, however, that "in the long run the people must share and understand the benefits of wildlife preservation, or we will fail."

The difficulty and expense involved in trying to protect a huge wild animal fiercely pursued by poachers is stunning. To show what it took to maintain rhinos in Kenya, Olindo sent us to Nakuru National Park's rhino sanctuary. At the park, a cadre of eleven armed rhino guards, a twenty-three man maintenance crew, and three technicians were constantly on alert to oversee a handful of rhinos. The endangered animals were kept behind electrified fences in a setting that was halfway between the rhino's natural environment and a zoo.

With a system akin to a military operation, the headquarters has a wall with color-coded pins to show where their ear-tagged wards were last spotted. Each rhino has a name like Helen, Rhoda, Rodney, and Winnie, and a guard to verify its good health and where-

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Anna Merz, the "Rhino Woman," was selected in 1990 for the Global 500 Roll of Honor because of her efforts to save rhinos on her Kenyan ranch. (Copyright © by Camerapix, Nairobi, Kenya)

abouts daily. "We can take nothing for granted," said James Mulwa, the park's chief of rhino surveillance.

Anna Merz, a 1990 laureate, earned the nickname "Rhino Woman" for her personal effort to save the ponderous animal on her Kenyan ranch. Her award citation notes that she "invested her entire savings, time, and energy into the project. Despite many difficulties—including drought and poachers—there are now five white rhinos and thirteen black rhinos in the sanctuary."

It will take the combined talents of the walker Michael Werikhe, the wildlife manager Perez Olindo, the frontlines guardian Anna Merz, and many more like them to save the rhino from extinction. Otherwise, the once unchallenged wild animal will stay a rare and expensively kept relic.

4



Tree Huggers

Trees stand as palpable symbols of the environmental movement. They provide a crucial—and highly visible—link in the Earth's ecosystem. Deforestation has different results in different regions of the world, but there is one common feature: ecological disaster. From landslides careening down the mountain slopes of Nepal, to the silting of rivers in Thailand, from the destruction of wildlife habitat in Kenya, to the extinction of medicinally useful plants in Brazil, the results of deforestation—except for short-term economic development—are never positive.

*Come, arise, my brothers and sisters,
Save this mountain . . .
Come plant new trees, new forests
Decorate the earth.*

—*Chipko Andolan song*

Among people aware of these frightening consequences, there is an instinctual urge to protect the "grandes dames" of nature by encircling them with their arms, as a parent would a child. This notion has given rise to the pejorative term "tree huggers," used by many opponents of environmental conservation to denigrate activists.

However, a group in India cofounded by Global 500 laureate Chandi Prasad Bhatt is using this action to further its goals, with great success. The group calls itself the *Chipko Andolan*, or "movement to hug the trees."

In the Himalayan region of Gopeshwar, where the *Chipko* movement originated, the people depend heavily on the surrounding