A life with rhinos

Former zoo-keeper, now boma trainer, marathon runner, desert cyclist and long-time supporter of Save the Rhino, Berry White tell us about her obsession with rhinos and how she has run more marathons than anyone else in rhino costume.

y passion for rhinos came about from working as a keeper at Port Lympne Wild Animal Park in Kent. I had no idea that I was going to end up working with rhinos, it just happened by chance that the busiest section most in need of a hand was the hoofstock section, which back then included six black rhino. Once I started working with them, I fell in love with them. It was such a surprise to find that these animals with a reputation for being bad tempered and bit stupid were. In fact, incredibly sensitive and full of personality. What began as a voluntary stint turned into an 18-year career at the Park.

Much as I loved working at Port Lympne, of course I wanted to get out to Africa and see rhinos in their natural habitat. So I went stay with the legendary Anna Merz at her Lewa Downs rhino sanctuary in Kenya, where I got to see not only my first black rhinos in Africa, but also met Samia. Samia had been handreared by Anna and successfully integrated with the wild population of rhinos at Lewa. I shall never forget watching Anna jumping out of the Land Rover to go over to Samia, at the time an adult and pregnant, and carefully checking her over and removing ticks as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Samia lapped it up, totally contented, let out the odd gentle sigh, and then eventually wandered back off into the bush. The bond between Anna and Samia was amazing: I knew how the rhinos behaved at Port Lympne, but here was a now-wild black rhino displaying intelligence, trust in and affection for Anna. It was the best introduction to Africa I could have had.

I was actually on my way to Addo Elephant Park in South Africa, where I helped to crate-train a bull rhino called Gareth (later renamed Addo), as part of a breeding exchange between the zoos and National Parks Board. (He was the most prolific breeding bull at Port Lympne.) In Addo, I met legendary rhino vet Pete Morkel, who is as enthusiastic about rhinos as a person can be, and again the following year when we sent one of our Port Lympne-bred rhinos, a three-year-old male called Bwana Kidogo. Bwana was the first captive-born black rhino ever to be returned to Africa and Bwana also went on to sire many calves.

I'd had an invitation from Mike Hearn, who grew up near to Port Lympne, was a frequent visitor to the Park, and who'd fallen in love with rhinos, to go visit him in Namibia while I was in southern Africa. I cadged a lift with a BBC flight, and although I hadn't managed to make radio contact with Mike, he wasn't in the least surprised to see me step off the plane

at the tiny Palmwag airstrip.

The next four days were mindblowing: we encountered desert elephants walking in procession up the dry Huanib river bed and had magical sightings of rhinos in that incredible, harsh yet delicate and beautiful desert landscape. I also met Blythe Loutit, founder of Save the Rhino Trust. Originally a botanical painter, she was appailed by the sight of poached rhino carcasses, and



established Save the Rhino Trust.
The evening before i left, we watched a mother rhino and calf walking through long silvery grass as the sun slipped away; I remember her childlike excitement at the scene we were witnessing and her gritty determination that these rhino must be protected at all costs.

In 2006 and again in 2008, I had the opportunity to help boma train the rhinos being re-introduced to North Luangwa National Park in Zambia. Once again, I worked alongside Pete Morkel, and also with Alison Kennedy Benson, "rhino whisperer", it was amazing to see how much care, effort and expertise is needed for such a big move. It is crucial that the rhinos are settled and comfortable eating local browse before their release.

Most recently I visited the Cat Loc part of the beautiful Cat Tien National Park in Vietnam. There are thought to be approximately 3-5 Javan rhinos there, the only ones on mainland South East Asia. How many people even know of their existence?

I have met some amazing rhino conservationists, who have dedicated their lives to rhinos living in remote places. They need our support. Rhinos are in more danger of extinction than ever. The more people that can get involved in the fight to save the rhino, the better.



Events:



1-3-5

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Thile in Namibia. I met Neil Bridgland, the next time I saw Neil

he was working to: Save the Rhino. From Glastonbury in rhino
costume to parties in the old Clink Street office, it was Neil who
encouraged me to get into marathon running and overseas
challenges. A whole new world opened up...

My advice to anyon- thinking of doing a marathon? Just go for it!

When I started training for my first London marathon. I could honestly only run for half a mile before conking out. I think a lot of people are put off, as they think you need to be some super-fit athlete in the first place, but it's not so. You just have to be really determined and put in plenty of training.

The costume is a beastly rascal, there's no two ways about it. Weighing 32 pounds, it gets as hot as hell. You can't see properly. The head wobbles up and down. It's crazily noisy in there (and stinky too). It's a nightmare if you need a weet you're not very discreet nipping into the bushes dressed as a rhino. Your back gets bruised arms chafed, and some of your toenails drop off. But don't be put off! It's so worth it the crowds love the rhino. The London marathon would not be the same without them.

Since my first rhino marathon in 1997. I ve run 10 full marathons in costume and 6 half-marathons. The ones you remember are the most ridiculous: running knee-deep in water in an unseasonal monsoon-like downpour in New York running against gale force winds in Edinburgh in 2008 (the costumes are not aerodynamic at the best of times), the time someone roller bladed over my tail in Dublin; getting lost in the mist during the Loch Ness Marathon.

So far, I've clocked up nearly 340 miles in rhino costume, bonkers when you think about it but I've had a lot of fun and it's taken me to some great places. I think shall aim for 500 miles as a rhino. I may well regret saying that but honestly if I can do it, then anybody can. There is so much we can do to help. Conservation in whatever shape or form should be a lifelong commitment, not just a box to be ticked one year. The more you are able to involve yourself, the richer your life experiences will be and the greater the rewards. So go and do something todal.

