

# 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.*

**M**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 mind-blowing: 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 appalled 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.



HOWLETT'S & PORT LYMPNE ANIMAL PARK

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## Berry in the Loch Ness Marathon 2002