

OPINION

Quest to Save the Northern White Rhino

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RICHARD VIGNE is the Managing Director of Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya.



James Mwenda, one of the Northern white rhino keepers on Ol Pejeta Conservancy, looks after Najin, the oldest of the two. These rhinos receive around the clock care and are under 24/7 protection from poachers.



The Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya is the largest sanctuary for the endangered Black rhino in East Africa. As well as holding a so-called "Key 1" (over 100) population of Black rhinos, we are also home to good numbers of all the other species that you would normally expect to find in an East African savannah system. This includes high predator

receive over 100,000 visitors per year.

We have also pioneered an integrated land management system that permits forms of land use not traditionally associated with conservation. In particular, we have developed systems that permit us to ranch cattle successfully in the same geographic space that is inhabited by our wildlife.

Consequently, we are also home to the largest herd of pure Boran cattle in the

TOP: Najin (front left) and Fatu (back right) are the last two Northern white rhinos left on the planet. They are both female and a mother-daughter duo.

remaining reproductively viable Northern whites were returned from a zoo in the Czech Republic to Africa, to a purpose built 600 acre enclosure on Ol Pejeta. However, whilst mating behavior was observed, no successful pregnancies were achieved and we have since established that the females have reproductive issues that prevent them conceiving. Furthermore, the two males have now died and we are therefore left with artificial reproductive methods, in particular in vitro fertilization, to try to recover this species.

To that end, this year we reached a momentous point in the global attempts to recover the Northern white rhinoceros from functional extinction. In a procedure pioneered by leading fertility scientists, ten oocytes (eggs) were removed from the last two remaining females, and two of these eggs were

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numbers, primarily lion, spotted hyena and cheetah, as well as big populations of prey species such as zebra and buffalo.

In order to pay for the incredibly high security costs of securing rhinos, which remain heavily threatened by poaching as a result of continued demand for their horn in the Far East, we rely primarily on safari tourism and now

world, numbering approximately 6,000 animals. Thus, we secure conservation space in a manner that is replicable, politically acceptable and productive, and many people are now copying our model across Africa.

In recent times we have become well known for our attempts to recover the Northern white rhinoceros from extinction. In 2009, the last four

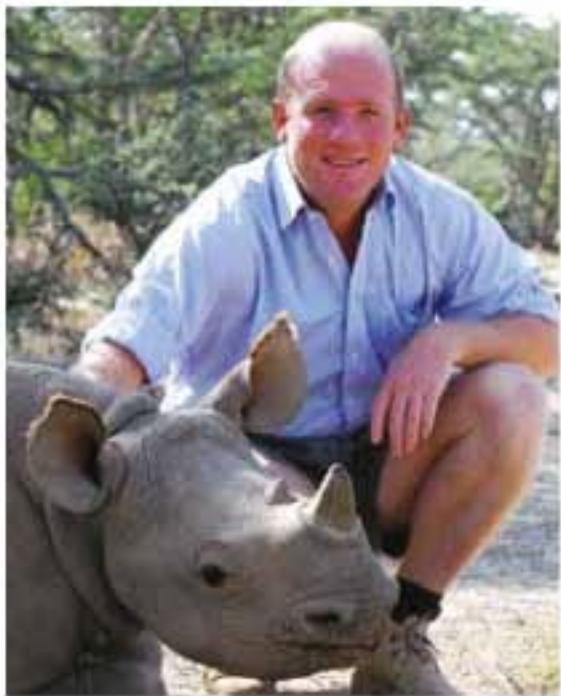


TOP: The BioRescue Team, comprising of Prof. Thomas Hildebrandt (middle), Susanne Holtze (right) and Adj. Robert Hermes (left), conduct the oocyte collection using a specially designed probe guided by ultrasound.

BELOW: Stephen Ngulu of Ol Pejeta Conservancy looks over Fatu before her procedure while she is starting to feel the effects of the anesthesia.

successfully fertilized and matured to create viable embryos. These have now been frozen for future use. This is only stage one in what will be a much longer process to create the multiple embryos that will, ultimately, be needed for eventual implantation into surrogate southern white females, to produce a viable population of Northern white calves that can be used as a platform for the eventual reintroduction of this species to the wild. However, we have taken another step along the long, exhausting and expensive journey that we started nearly 10 years ago to save the Northern whites.

As we marvel at the scientific advances that have made all this possible, I think it is worth reflecting on why it is we think this is a road worth travelling. There are many who argue that the resources that will be required to save this species could better be allocated for *in situ* conservation, to preserve many more species that have much better chance of survival; goodness knows, conservation needs all



Richard Vigne is the CEO of Ol Pejeta Conservancy. Under his leadership, Ol Pejeta has grown into one of the most successful rhino conservancies in Africa and the largest black rhino sanctuary in East Africa.

of the resources it can get, and saving the Northern white appears to some as an expensive vanity that we can ill afford.

We disagree. The story of the Northern whites is one that has captured the imagination of the global public. It has brought home to many, in the sturkst terms, the reality of extinction and, more importantly, the hand we humans are having in what is now the greatest extinction show the planet has ever witnessed. As far as we can tell, there has never been a time in the history of life on earth that species have disappeared faster than they are now, in the era of humanity. Dinosaurs roamed the planet for many millions of years, and their extinction probably took millions of years to occur. In contrast, humans have only been here for two hundred thousand years, but we

are laying waste to everything around us.

The truth is we can live on a planet without Northern white rhinos, or any rhinos for that matter. But increasingly we are beginning to realize that we cannot live without the closely interconnected web of diverse life that exists with us on this planet. The life that makes soils fertile, the seas abundant and the air fresh and clean. So, if our effort to save the Northern whites, just one charismatic species amongst millions of other threatened species, helps to galvanize a human movement to change the way we live and interact with the world around us, to live more sustainably and in harmony with nature, then it will be worthwhile. In fact, it would be worth every cent in every bank vault that exists on planet earth. Our only home. ●

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