



Bentsen visits with Macho and Tombe. "I wouldn't get in the pen with them," he says. "They just might love me to death."

DREAMERS

TEXAS RANCHER CALVIN BENTSEN, A FORMER BIG-GAME HUNTER, TAKES HIS BEST SHOT AT SAVING THE RHINOS

Calvin Bentsen's 2,200-acre ranch, La Coma, shimmers in the noonday heat. Just 35 miles from the Mexican border, the landscape is typical south Texas—filled with sun-blasted cactus, mesquite, and thorny huisache. As for La Coma's wildlife, though, that's not so typical. Just check the corral. There's Calvin Bentsen himself, leaning over the fence, mouthing what seems to be some sort of Tex-Mex voodoo incantation. "Chula! Tombe! Macho! Toto!" The words must contain powerful magic for, within moments, the ground is atremble, the air filled with a series of demonic snorts and grunts.

Suddenly, four black rhinos heave into view. "My pets," grins the 64-year-old

rancher. Nearly extinct in the wild—there are only 3,500 remaining in Africa—each of Bentsen's "pets" has the approximate bulk of a Toyota. Bentsen, along with a handful of others like him, hopes to save enough rhinos to one day repopulate the African wilds. "If we don't do something," he says, "the entire species will disappear from the earth in our lifetime."

It may already be too late—and the rhino ranchers know it. Still, "their work is valuable," says Ed Maruska, director of the Cincinnati zoo and species survival plan coordinator for the black rhino. "We're delighted to have the additional space the ranchers give us."

Bentsen, a cousin of Texas Sen. Lloyd

Bentsen, introduces his thundering herd: Chula (Spanish for "cute"), Macho ("a male"), Tombe ("young lady") and Toto ("baby girl"). Chula's 9-month-old, 500-lb. daughter. In the sweltering heat, their collective rhino bouquet makes the eyes water. Bentsen's are brimming too—but with pride. "I love to be around them," he says, as he feeds Toto an apple. "Anybody who'd want to kill one of these sweet rhinos ought to be hung up."

Hard words, but then Bentsen knows whereof he speaks. A reformed big-game hunter, he once shot and killed a rhino himself. "I wouldn't shoot one again," he says. "It's just not something the world can afford any longer."

For their living room, Bentsen and wife Marge choose a hunting motif. Below, the couple shoots doves on their vast Texas ranch. "Real hunting," says Calvin, "involves respect for the animal."



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Bentsen, who grew up in McAllen, just north of the border, understands the urge to hunt. Before he was old enough to carry a shotgun, he'd go "shagging" for his father, Elmer, scrambling through the

brush to retrieve the birds his daddy shot. Later, Elmer, a wealthy banker and real estate man, took him deer hunting. By the time Calvin had made his own fortune in real estate, big game had become his grand passion. Along with his wife, Marge, and their three daughters, Bentsen went on six safaris between 1965 and

1982 and managed to bag the so-called big five—rhino, elephant, lion, Cape buffalo and leopard. "I don't have a guilty conscience or anything like that," says Bentsen, who still hunts birds and deer. "In those days we might see herds of 100 elephants. Last time I was in Kenya we'd be lucky to see five or six. It wasn't the hunters who caused the herds to dwindle, it was the poachers with machine guns."

Elmer Bentsen had bought La Coma (Spanish for a local berry tree) in the 1940s and raised cattle there. In 1975 he and his son started stocking the ranch with exotic animals. There are now some 400, including axis deer, fallow deer,

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wildebeest and the endangered Grevy's zebra and gaur. The first rhinos arrived in 1983, after Bentsen and several dozen other affluent hunters banded together to save as many as possible. Thus far, they have placed 135 on private game ranches in Africa and brought 21 more to the U.S.

For the once-endangered Chula, Macho and Tombe, living well is the best revenge. The climate of south Texas is similar to that of their native Zimbabwe, and they are protected by a round-the-clock guard posted outside their superstrong, rhino-proof four-acre corral. Since rhinos are solitary and somewhat ornery—they will even charge each other—they cannot be herded. Instead, the powerful one- to two-ton creatures are moved around using apples as a lure.

Bentsen himself enjoys feeding them, but he has learned to do it carefully. Two months ago, he lost the tip of his pinkie when he dropped an apple, went to pick it up and had his hand pinned against the corral fence by Chula's horn. "My fault," he says. "I should have been watching more closely." Bentsen loves his rhinos but understands they can't be treated as pets. "They've gotten to where they come to the sound of my voice," he says. "But these animals need to be treated with respect. They can get to where they're not afraid of you, but you always ought to stay afraid of them."

—Kent Demaret