

Charging at life: Peter 'Mbobo' Hitchins, a life in wildlife conservation

Peter Hitchins, Orty Bourquin, Clive Walker and Stella Hitchins

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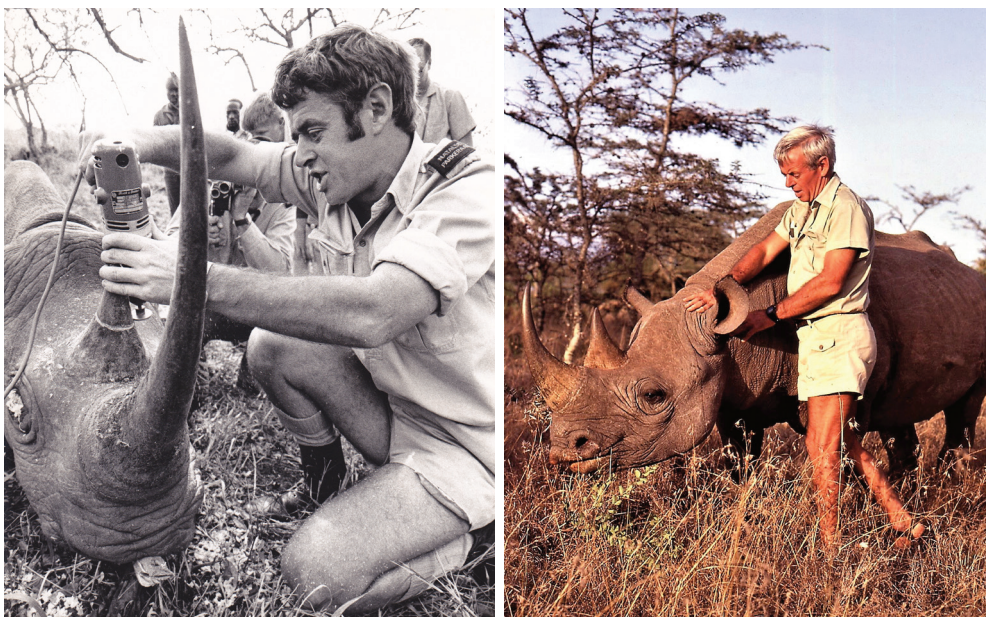


Figure 1. Front and back cover images:

(a) Peter Hitchins (c) Rodney Borland, 1968, the official photographer for the Natal Parks Board;
(b) Peter Hitchins (c) Clive Walker, 1992, either Solio or Ol Pejeta Ranch, Kenya.

Peter Hitchins (1940–2019) was remarkably engaging and deeply knowledgeable about wildlife conservation. I was privileged to meet him for the first time in 1984 in Gaborone, Botswana, at the IUCN SSC AERSG, when the two groups were combined into one. He was the first person to study the black rhinoceros in the Hluhluwe/Corridor/iMfolozi Game Reserve in detail. Here, he monitored rhinos at various intervals from 1961 to 1994. In the early years, he could recognize over 300 black rhinos in Hluhluwe, individually. With his insatiable quest to understand wildlife and habitat conservation, and his strong belief in the intrinsic value of wildlife, he believed the protection of wildlife was the government's duty.

A foreword by George Hughes, former CEO of the Natal Parks Board, provides insight into their long and valued friendship. Both were game rangers in the early 1960s. Peter's bravery and stamina in the bush enabled him to develop a profound understanding and respect for animals and conservation.

In the preface of this informative book, some of Peter's contributions and achievements are given. Peter kept innumerable diaries and data, much of which he never had time to write up; he was essentially a field practitioner. He was always adamant that his vast collection of data and slides "would be useful to someone someday"; and he left behind a wealth of information about the places he worked.

Peter had intended to write his autobiography. Sadly, in the end, he only wrote the first two chapters

of this book. He vividly describes his family and upbringing south of Johannesburg, with clear memories of his school days, where his love of wildlife and the outdoors began. He was fearless, catching many snakes from a young age. Peter's second chapter describes his initial work at the Durban Aquarium. He then had a brief and less enjoyable time at Natal University. Peter was a naturalist and a lover of the bushveld, the antithesis of classrooms where he could not learn first-hand about nature.

His old friend, Orty Bourquin who had known Peter since 1959, wrote the following six chapters relying on the copious entries in Peter's diaries. He describes Peter's initial black rhino work in 1960–1961 as assistant ecologist at Hluhluwe Game Reserve; as field ranger from 1962–1964; his work on game control and black rhino monitoring and surveying from 1964–1967; as duty ranger for iMfolozi Game Reserve; section ranger for the connecting 'Corridor' area; and his black rhino work in Hluhluwe from 1968–1973. This had become the last area in South Africa where both rhino species survived up to the mid-20th century. Peter made significant contributions to rhino recovery and expansion, facilitating translocations to numerous important protected areas in Africa.

Bourquin then describes Peter's years in cane sugar farming, the family business that he ran as a young man to support and educate three young children with his first wife, Margaret.

Another close friend, Clive Walker, contributed the following two chapters, about their important work together for the Endangered Wildlife Trust, along with Anthony Hall-Martin. They were also members of the AERSG and worked closely together from 1973 to 1986. Walker describes their formation of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation from 1986 to 1992, which focused on rhino and elephant research and conservation. These chapters provide an important record of conservation work in those days.

Bourquin writes the following chapter about Peter's complex work managing Songimvelo Game Reserve from 1987–1993 (a former homeland). Peter worked incessantly, struggling against many odds. Improving the reserve and safeguarding the bush for the future was challenging work. Walker also provides a chapter

about a visit to Kenya with Peter in 1992. Walker used Peter's diaries to give his impressions of the time when several people in Kenya were trying to save the last remaining black rhinos after heavy poaching.

Bourquin comments that Peter was a hands-on, pen-and-paper person, suspicious of computer modelling, believing that only in the field could a person make honest and meaningful observations. Indeed, this was Peter's forte. In 1994, he carried out another black rhino survey on foot in the Hluhluwe Game Reserve after an absence of eight years, during which he noticed the large number of trees damaged by elephants, and commented on how few black rhinos were seen. His field assistant was lucky to survive a buffalo attack. Peter, not one for sentiment, says his assistant later came to thank him for fighting off the buffalo. Peter, too, survived a 'close shave' with a black rhino. From studying his diaries, Bourquin remarks that Peter came close to serious injury on numerous occasions but courageously made little of these often harrowing incidents, instead commenting in his diary that he enjoyed hardships in the bush as they brought him closer to nature.

Peter then entered another phase of his life, moving to Cousine Island in the Seychelles with his future wife Stella from 1995 to 2002. Stella Hitchins writes about Peter's numerous successful projects, including monitoring sea turtles and increasing bird numbers significantly, especially three endemic species. Stella Hitchins describes Peter's later years from 2001 to 2019 in the final chapter. Peter's last job was managing a wildlife ranch with black and white rhinos near Pretoria owned by Fred Keeley, who was also the owner of Cousine Island. Peter was pleased to be back in South Africa, working in ranch management from 2002 to 2005.

In 2010, he moved to England with his wife for her veterinary career. Peter was unaware that he was suffering from advanced-stage motor neurone disease. Despite his condition, he maintained a good sense of humour, and expressed a wish for some of his ashes to be scattered on a black rhino midden. This request was honoured, and his ashes were subsequently brought home to South Africa.

The book is enriched by numerous photos showing Peter with his friends, family, colleagues, dogs and various wildlife encounters. A final note expresses Peter's strong views "about the inherent importance of nature, the threat posed to it by disruptive human practices and how it must be conserved in its totality".

Appendix 1 lists Peter's 43 scientific papers and other publications. Appendix 2 describes the Game Rangers Association of Africa, which Peter helped to initiate and name. It started in 1970 with Peter as a key figure. The primary purpose was to keep game rangers informed about conservation and to maintain contact. Early members were opposed to the need for tertiary education, believing true wildlife rangership lay in understanding and managing wild areas and ensuring the biological integrity of habitat, working at the 'coal face' of conservation as the 'foot soldiers' of conservation efforts. Peter epitomized the skills needed for the job and posthumously received their Spirit of Africa award in 2020, which stated, "Peter's determination, perseverance and selfless commitment to the cause was exemplary"; indeed, they were.

This book will be enjoyed by many readers and will inspire young rangers and conservationists to follow in Peter's footsteps. He was dedicated to wild areas, and most notably, for *Pachyderm* readers, safeguarding healthy rhino habitat.

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