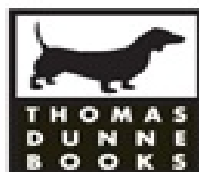


THE LAST RHINOS

MY BATTLE TO SAVE ONE OF THE
WORLD'S GREATEST CREATURES

LAWRENCE ANTHONY
WITH GRAHAM SPENCE



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Copyright

This book is dedicated to the courage of Ian Player, Nick Steel, Kes and Frazer Hillman-Smith and those other brave men and women who spent their lives trying to protect and save one of the most magnificent creatures ever to have graced this earth: the rhinoceros.

The author condemns past and present governments of Vietnam, China, Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia who have failed to take effective action to end the superstitious use of rhino horn in so called traditional medicine. Their criminal neglect has driven the rhinoceros to the very brink of extinction all over the world.

It was barely light when the radio first crackled into life.

‘Code red! Code red! Come in, Lawrence, come in. Over.’

‘Standing by.’

‘Bad morning.’ The caller paused. ‘We have a dead rhino at Hlaza Hill. A female. Over.’

Dread froze my blood. I looked up at the sky above the distant Hlaza Hill, the highest point on the new community game reserve that abuts Thula Thula, my own reserve and my home in Zululani, South Africa. There were no vultures and no gunshots had been reported, a sound that echoes like a thunderbolt across the African wilderness when the wind is right.

‘Cause of death?’ I asked, fearing the worst.

‘Poachers. Both horns are gone. There’s blood all over the place. Professional job. Looks like they used an AK-47, or maybe an old military-issue R1.’

I could feel my fists clenching. Rhino poachers – the disease of the wild that was now becoming pandemic.

‘How long has she been dead?’ I asked.

‘Can’t be more than a few hours. They probably took it around midnight. There was plenty of moon to help them.’

‘OK, I’ll be there now. Out.’

I glanced at the pump-action shotgun leaning against the passenger seat of my Land Rover, reached for the ammunition box and stuffed my pockets with handfuls of SG cartridges. I hoped against hope that the poachers were still on the reserve.

The green-black flies were already gathering when I arrived at the hill. The air was metallic with the rank smell of blood. The rhino lay uncharacteristically on her side, legs splayed awkwardly at right angles to her stiff body.

I got out of the Land Rover and walked across to the three rangers standing nearby. Nobody said anything. The shock of the kill, the dominating presence of the huge dead creature, stifled our words.

Rhinos have an ancient, eternal beauty. With their massive bodies, clad in thick folds of prehistoric body armour topped by a magnificent scimitar horn, they fascinate like few other creatures. Weighing up to three and half tons and reaching six feet high, they are the largest land animal in the world after the elephant.

In death, there was no trace of that beauty. The regal horns, viciously hacked off with honed machetes – or *pangas*, as we call them in Africa – left the noble face crumpled and desecrated. The eyes gazed vacantly. Pools of blood had congealed around the grotesquely disfigured head. Without its horn, the imposing creature looked as vulnerable as a baby.

I could see my own turmoil mirrored in the rangers’ faces. In Africa, the war against poachers

intensely personal. There are two types of poacher: the local tribesman looking for something small for the pot; and the heavyweights, the professional killers, who want rhino horn and elephant ivory. The first who will shoot a ranger then brag about it. Poaching any animal is a crime, but killing a rhino or elephant is not shooting to feed a hungry family. It's blood money. And it's an intimate, violent invasion of our lives.

'Who found the body?'

Bheki, my most trusted ranger, looked up and pointed at a young Zulu guard, Simelane, standing a little way off. I beckoned for him to come over.

'*Sawubona*, Simelane,' I greeted him. 'What happened here?'

'*Sawubona*, Mkhulu. I was on patrol when I saw the dead rhino,' he replied quietly, staring at the ground.

'Who was with you?'

'I was alone.'

'You were on patrol out here all alone?' I asked, surprised. Poaching patrols always consisted of two armed men.

'Yes, I was alone.' He was barely whispering.

I was about to press on with the questioning when a loud Zulu voice interrupted me.

'Mkhulu, there is too much blood.'

It was Bheki, down on one knee closely examining the rhino's head.

'There is too much blood,' he repeated. 'That means they were in a hurry. They took the horn while she was still alive. Maybe unconscious, but alive.'

For a moment we just stared at Bheki. Then it sank in. These monsters had hacked the horn off a living animal.

'Which way did they go?' I asked Bheki, who had been at my side in several firefights with poachers over the past decade.

He pointed east. 'Four, maybe five hours ago.'

That meant that unless they were in hiding, they would be almost out of the reserve and heading towards the townships, where we would never catch them. However, that didn't mean we wouldn't try. At the very least, it would give us something physical to do to vent our fury.

'OK, we all know the drill,' I said. 'These guys are probably carrying AKs and we all know what that means. If we make contact and they so much as think of lifting their rifles, shoot fast and shoot first, as we'll be up against automatic fire.'

I looked at the solemn faces. Armed only with shotguns and Second World War-era Lee-Enfield .303 bolt-action rifles, they were completely out-gunned, but that would not deter these hardy dedicated men for a moment. They would be facing automatic weapons, replying as fast as their wrists could work their rifle bolts. You cannot imagine the courage that takes. I had a pump-action shotgun that was fast and deadly and spread nine lead balls in a lethal cluster. Our weapons complemented each other well. The .303s had a longer range than an AK, and the shotguns at close quarters in thick

bush didn't miss. Used in tandem they were a match for the illegal AK-47s so favoured by poachers. 'Bring your own water and keep your safety catches on. Let's go!' We would be moving as fast as we could in thick bush, and I didn't want anyone tripping and blasting the person ahead of them.

The going was tough and by mid-morning we were well off the beaten path, following barely discernible game trails used by the poachers. The sun burned relentlessly, a typical Zululand scorcher and sweat poured from our bodies, stinging our eyes and drenching our shirts. But hyped up with adrenalin and anticipation, we never eased our blistering pace. If we faltered, any slim chance of catching them would be lost.

It's difficult to remain calm when you see a rhino brutally slaughtered for a horn that consists of little more than keratin, the same fibrous structural protein you find in hair and fingernails. In fact it's impossible. You're more likely to be consumed by raging fury, but that won't do any good. Rhino horns are used for mythical medicinal purposes in countries across Asia, as part of their traditional healing systems. In traditional Chinese medicine it is believed to cure types of fever, for instance. And the increasing wealth of these economies has created an insatiable demand. Tens of thousands of rhinos have been killed in Africa, with several subspecies hunted to extinction. The demand is reminiscent of a nineteenth-century gold rush, and with good reason. On the streets of China or Vietnam, ounce for ounce the horn is more valuable than gold. If you truly want to grasp the situation faced by conservationists, do what a poacher does and look at a rhino and see a three-foot-long horn made of pure gold. Game rangers are in the unenviable and extremely hazardous position of trying to protect solid gold. What should be locked securely in a vault instead walks around on four legs in the bush.

It is not an exaggeration to say that every rhino on the planet is now in mortal danger. Unless something fundamental changes, and quickly, every last one in the wild will eventually be killed.

As we pushed on, we periodically picked up traces of the killers' trail, such as footprints, a small patch of flattened grass, a marked tree or flecks of blood, probably oozing from the horn that the killers would be carrying in a hessian sack. These signs that we were on the right track provided the edge we needed, with Bheki urging us to speed up the chase.

However, Simelane, the young Zulu ranger who had discovered the dead rhino, was starting to worry me. Twice he veered off into the bush alone, following false leads and losing us valuable time. Maybe his strange behaviour was due to the stress of tracking the killers, I thought, as well as the possibility of an ambush around the next corner.

An ambush was my biggest worry. The penalty in South Africa for rhino poaching is a fifteen-year jail sentence and there was no way these professional killers were going to risk being sent away for that long. They knew it and we knew it. If the killers sensed they were being followed and we were waiting for us, there is no doubt we would be in a lethal firefight – at close quarters, in thick bush with minimum visibility and maximum chaos.

Eventually the punishing pace took its toll. I called a halt for a brief rest and sent one of the rangers ahead to high ground to try and pick them out from above.

'Nothing,' came the reply on the radio from a nearby hill. 'I see nothing.'

I could tell by the frustrated look on Bheki's face as we waited that the spoor was now cold. We were too late; and, sure enough, a couple of hours later when we finally reached the boundary fence all we found was a slash where they had snipped through the wire, carefully avoiding the electrical strands. They were well and truly gone.

'Next time,' I heard Bheki whisper as he unloaded his .303. 'We will get them next time, Mkhulu.' I nodded silently, also unloading my shotgun as we started the long trek back.

At home, I reported the incident, first to the police and then to our local Parks authority, KwaZulu Natal Wildlife. The latter phone call was tough, as they had just donated the now dead animal to a project I was working on. I was joining my reserve, Thula Thula, with the huge Zulu tribal trust area to form what we believed would be one of the finest game reserves in the country. It was to be called the Royal Zulu and would be a unique joint venture with local tribes. The project would provide meaningful benefits to poor rural communities through conservation and eco-tourism, giving them a stake in the future of the African wilderness. Thanks to years of apartheid when game reserves had been racially exclusive, many rural Zulus regarded conservation as a 'white man's' concept and had little regard for it. Now we aimed to rehabilitate their traditional spiritual and cultural links to the bush that once were so powerful. We would demonstrate that poaching animals provided food for a week, but protecting them provided jobs for ever. These animals are worth infinitely more alive than dead. We had to get locals to buy into that concept with total commitment, otherwise we as conservationists would start to run out of options – as the hornless mound of rotting flesh we had just seen confirmed.

KZN Wildlife had donated four white rhinos as part of the Royal Zulu venture to provide breeding stock, and the manager I had phoned to break the news to was understandably unhappy. I knew what was coming next.

'Lawrence,' he said, 'this is really bad. We're worried about the security, man. I mean, you've got three more rhino there and we don't want to lose those as well.'

'I know. I've activated *impimpis*,' I replied, referring to our informants in the local tribes who were paid to collect information about poaching or theft, 'and we're increasing patrols as from tomorrow. I'm going to catch those bastards if it's the last thing I do.'

'Well, good luck. But I think in the interim, we had better get the animals into a safer area until everything settles down. Rhinos are like a bloody magnet for poachers these days.'

'OK, I understand where you're coming from,' I replied. 'But they have just been delivered to us, so how did anyone even know they were here? There had to be a tip-off from your side. How do we know they will be safer with you?'

He sighed. 'That's my biggest nightmare.'

He was a decent man whom I knew well. I also understood what he was saying, but it really galled me to be told that we were going to have to return three rhinos. Our security was by necessity among the best in the area. After all, we had been protecting a herd of elephants for almost ten years. But these days nothing, including one's own life, is guaranteed in the bush when rhino poachers are about.

However, there was nothing I could do. If the Parks authority wanted to take their animals back, so be it. Unfortunately that meant there would now be only one rhino left on the reserve, a female. A German tourist had called her Heidi, and the name had stuck. An elephant had killed her mother some years ago in a tragically unequal battle over who had right of way. She had been crushed by a full blown charge, and I still remember standing next to the corpse and seeing a movement in the bush some yards away. It was Heidi. Barely weaned, she had watched her mother's awful fight to the death. I approached to see if she was all right, but she ran off into the bush.

Then our other rhino drowned in a flash flood, an unavoidable tragedy, which left only Heidi.

Since then Heidi, who enjoyed grazing with a herd of wildebeest, had grown up with us and become a favourite with rangers and trackers. She had matured into a beautiful creature and loved approaching the game drive vehicles, captivating visitors to the reserve with her playful antics of approaching and retreating, peering myopically and running in the flamboyant, bouncing style of rhinos. We had to do all we could to protect her now.

Yet there was something funny about the Parks Board rhino's death; something I couldn't quite put my finger on. I summoned Simelane, the guard who had discovered its carcass, to my office.

'Mkhulu,' he said as he approached, and we shook hands. Mkhulu loosely means 'grandfather' in an avuncular sort of way, and it is my Zulu nickname. Rural Zulus give nicknames to most people and some can be bitingly accurate in depicting your shortcomings, either physical or social. I was lucky; at least mine was benign. I have a friend who sometimes taps his hand rapidly when sitting. He ended up with the epithet Thathazele, meaning 'the nervous one', and the name stuck. Yet he is one of the bravest men I know.

'I see you, Simelane. Well done on finding the dead rhino.'

'Yebo.' Yes.

'How did you find it?'

'I just knew it was there.'

'Did you hear the gunshot?'

He shook his head. '*Aibo.*'

'Did you see any hyenas, or maybe vultures?'

He shook his head.

'But the rhino was a long way from where you patrol, more than a mile off the path. Why were you in that area?'

'I just knew something was wrong. So I went to have a look.'

'But you somehow found the exact place. How did you do that?'

'I just felt it. Things were not right that morning.'

'OK. Thank you,' I said, purposely bringing the conversation to an end.

He left. I was now extremely suspicious. Simelane could have been telling the truth – Zulus sometimes do have a sixth sense in the bush – and he may just have thought something was wrong. But something didn't gel. I knew my game guards well and they seldom left their patrol areas. And

they did, they never went alone.

I called Bheki on his cellphone. 'Stay close to Simelane,' I said. 'Try to get his confidence and see what you can find out about him and the rhino. I don't trust him any more.'

The next day the phone rang. It was the police.

'Ja, Lawrence, we may have something,' said the sergeant, whom we had dealt with before. 'The story is that a gang, we think from Johannesburg, came here, hired a professional gunman and gave him a drawing of a rhino's head and where to shoot. X marks the spot, as they say. We're told he was paid five thousand rand [\$700 US]. But you can forget about the horn. A Taiwanese ship that has been docked in Richards Bay for the past week left last night – convenient, hey? It'll be on the high seas by now and you can bet your game reserve that the horn was on it.'

Five thousand rand? The horn would sell for a fortune in the East. The fact that the gang may have come from Johannesburg, 400 miles away, also spoke volumes. This meant we were dealing with the professionals, the big boys. These were no local poachers, who usually only hunted for the pelt anyway. No, these were either the Boere Mafia – a name given to a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking organization that regarded the sometimes chaotic post-apartheid South Africa as an easy way to make big money in hunting and poaching – or a Far East syndicate, getting marksmen from outside our area to do their dirty work.

'We've done the post-mortem,' the sergeant continued. 'They used an R1, similar in calibre to an AK. One bullet straight into the brain from very close.'

That too was interesting. The R1, a locally manufactured semi-automatic combat rifle, was used extensively by the South African Army during the border wars before apartheid was abolished. This could indicate that someone with former army links had supplied the weapon to the gunman, which again could point to the Boere Mafia, who dealt in anything from canned lion hunting, in which caged animals were shot from vehicles, to ivory and rhino horn.

The next morning I called my section ranger, Vusi Gumede, and asked him to send Simelane to my office. Vusi came back ten minutes later.

'Simelane hasn't reported for work today.'

Bingo.

'OK, take some rangers with you and go to his house. Get him here by force, if you have to.'

An hour later, Vusi returned. Simelane had packed his bags and fled. Even his wife did not know where he was.

Simelane, who knew the reserve well, had possibly taken the killers right up to the animal. Maybe he was even the shooter. I passed the information on to the police.

That evening we went out on patrol. There were just four of us: myself, Bheki and two tough game guards, Thulani and Nkonka. All of us were hoping for a contact. We wanted those poachers badly.

We walked all night along the fences, or sat for hours at lookout points, watching silently, searching for the flicker of a giveaway torchlight, constantly updating each other, whispering on walkie-talkies. But we found nothing. I fell into bed, exhausted, as the sun rose. The next night we

were out again.

And the next.

The waxing gibbous moon shimmered like a beacon – poachers love to operate on bright nights. We had been patrolling for five hours and it was now just before dawn, the time of night when spirits are at their lowest ebb. Bheki and Thulani were scouring the bush about a hundred yards away, when suddenly Nkonka grabbed my arm and pointed. I immediately crouched low. He pointed again, and then I saw it: the briefest, tiniest glint of light just down the hill. This is what we had been waiting for. Slowly I thumbed the safety catch off my pump-action shotgun as we moved down to intercept them.

We got into position, took cover behind two large marula trees on the banks of a small stream and waited patiently. The adrenalin was pumping hard when two figures emerged from the dark about thirty yards away, and then they saw us and ran straight towards Nkonka, firing wildly. In an act of incredible bravery, Nkonka left his cover behind the tree, stood up and charged straight back at them, firing from the hip with his bolt-action Lee–Enfield .303. All hell broke loose as the night erupted in a cacophony of blasts and shouts. It went on for what seemed like an age, but was probably little more than ten seconds. I was swinging my shotgun back and forth looking for a target, but from my vantage point it was just shadows, and I couldn't let off a shot in case I also hit Nkonka.

Then it was silent. They had gone, melted into the bush.

'Nkonka!' I whispered desperately. 'Are you all right?'

'Yebo, Mkhulu. I am fine.' It was a miracle – he had run into a hail of bullets, returning fire with a weapon that had to be manually cocked every time he fired. And he was unscathed.

'Thank God. Well done.'

Bheki and Thulani came running over. I could see by Bheki's face that he was bitterly disappointed to have missed the action.

'Look,' said Nkonka. He shone his torch at a dark pool. Blood. One of the poachers was wounded.

'Let's go,' Bheki responded. He flashed his torch and followed the spoor as best he could. Even now and again he would lose it and we would double back to pick it up again.

Even with the light of the moon the going was too tough, and the ground too hard to hold tracks, so reluctantly we decided to go home.

The next morning I sent Bheki out to see if he could pick up the spoor again, and he managed to follow it to a hole in the fence where the poachers had escaped. He reckoned there were three of them.

He then showed me something else – one of the footprints exactly matched the trail we had been following a few days before. It was the same gang that had killed our donated rhino. It was just as I had hoped, although I couldn't believe their audacity in coming back so soon to kill yet another animal. They were obviously after Heidi.

Thanks to Nkonka, we had won the firefight with at least one casualty on their side. Now the word was out: Thula Thula was ready for anyone coming after elephant or rhino.

About a week later, I was at the safari lodge when the phone rang.

It was Julie Laurenz, one of South Africa's top TV journalists, who is based with her photographer husband Christopher in Durban, South Africa's sunny holiday resort situated about a two-hour drive south of Thula. They were doing a story on rhino poaching in Africa and had heard about the one killed on our reserve, as well as Nkonka's courageous firefight. I outlined what had happened and we discussed the general gravity of the situation. Not only is the supply chain to Asia becoming significantly shorter due to Africa's burgeoning trade links with the continent, she told me, but professional gangs are now more sophisticated, darting animals from their helicopters and then killing them with automatic weapons. The horns are ferreted out of the country hidden among legal cargo – even, it is claimed, smuggled out in diplomatic bags.

As a front-line journalist, Julie always had the latest information. She then gave me some startling news: she had credible reports that there were fewer than fifteen northern white rhinos left in the wild. And those pitifully few survivors were all situated in the Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – or DRC. The park is in the far north-east of the country, near the border with Sudan, about 2,200 miles away.

I knew the northern whites had been in trouble for a while, but not even fifteen?

'Are you sure that's right?' I asked.

'Yes, maybe even fewer,' she said. 'The park's been abandoned by the authorities. Unless a miracle happens, they are on their way out.'

I thanked Julie and put the phone down. Another major life form gone, I thought, while the rest of the world barely blinked. The northern white rhino had existed for millions of years in a home range stretching across the centre of Africa, through Chad, the Central African Republic, the Congo, Sudan and Uganda. Now, but for maybe only fifteen survivors of a veritable holocaust, they were gone. I was stunned at the news.

In South Africa we have the southern white rhino, like our Heidi, which looks almost identical but is genetically different from its northern cousin. The southern white rhino also nearly became extinct fairly recently. In the 1960s, there were fewer than 500, and those were confined to the world famous Umfolozi game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal.

Then came along perhaps one of the most remarkable conservationists of all time, Dr Ian Player, an absolutely fearless man who, more than anyone else I know, has the wilderness imbued in his soul. Player was the warden in charge at the Umfolozi game reserve at the time, and with a few equally dedicated men he launched Operation Rhino to save the last remaining animals. He showed scant regard for bureaucracy in his quest to save these magnificent creatures, and ruthlessly pursued poachers. Thanks to the courage and vision of one man the gene pool survived. Today a staggering 9

per cent of the world's total number of rhinos is in South Africa.

However, modern-day poaching is now threatening to destroy all his good work.

The image of the butchered rhino on our lands, her face crumpled and her horn hacked off, would not leave me. Knowing that these massacres were getting worse all over the continent pulled some trigger in my psyche. If we could help to save the last northern whites, perhaps we could set an example and just maybe keep the gene pool alive. It would take a few generations to recover, but at least this beautiful species would survive.

I knew I had to try.

By now, in early 2006, the guest lodges at Thula were paying their own way, run by Françoise, my wife, who always pulled us through tough times. Our community projects were working well and the Earth Organization, a conservation group I founded, was expanding internationally. Today it is known as the Lawrence Anthony Foundation and continues to be driven by motivated people who place the welfare of the plant and animal kingdoms ahead of personal gain. However, it all had to be controlled and managed and this new project would take me away for extended periods.

But sometimes you have to go for it in life. If you just sit around thinking, then nothing ever happens. And with that I was seized by a moment of clarity.

I immediately got hold of my sons, Jason and Dylan, who are directors of the Earth Organization in Durban, and explained my thoughts. We agreed to meet the next day.

By the time I arrived at their office, Jason and Dylan had already got things going. They had invited a couple of people from the Earth Organization to attend the meeting: Grant Morgan, a logistics expert, and Marga Marzalek, an administrator. The response was instant; everyone was captivated by the idea of helping to save the rhinos from extinction. We all agreed that this was something we had to do; a noble, urgent and worthwhile project. We started gearing up immediately with research and fundraising and investigating the necessary logistics, authorities and permissions to capture the rhino and move them into a protected area in the DRC or, if necessary, Kenya or South Africa.

We would be going into a lawless part of Africa, where there was no administration to speak of and where civil and tribal wars were rife. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and its neighbours in the Great Lakes region had been in turmoil for three decades. Life there is short, sharp and brutal, and first-class military backup would be absolutely critical. The project would sink or swim on security.

I knew the exact man for the task: JP Fourie, an ex-Special Forces operative with a deep love for the wilderness. Now a successful businessman specializing in aviation, JP had close ties to Africa and the DRC. He knew how to look after himself when the going got tough, but, more importantly, he knew how to avoid trouble.

'JP,' I said when I called him, 'I'm looking at putting an expedition together to try and prevent the extinction of the northern white rhino in the Congo. There are only a few left and then they are gone for ever. We will be going into the far north of the country to the Garamba reserve. It's no-man's land, security is a big issue and I need a right-hand man.'

‘Sounds like fun,’ he replied. ‘Let’s talk.’

Jason and I immediately took a plane to Pretoria, South Africa’s pretty capital city in the north of the country, to meet him.

Aged thirty-six, JP was ruggedly good-looking; a well-built six foot two with green eyes and curly brown hair. The discipline of many years as a soldier was complemented by shrewd business acumen and a warm sense of humour that he reserved for close friends. He was every inch a professional.

He reflected on what was being asked of him: to go into a violent part of the world on a rescue mission that had no guarantee of success.

‘These poor bloody rhino,’ he said in his strong Afrikaans accent, staring out over the bustling back garden where we were having our meeting. ‘We are not messing around here, Lawrence. This is not a cowboy adventure, my friend. I have made some calls and this place is bandit territory. It’s in the middle of nowhere. There are no police, no army, no laws, no nothing. It’s riddled with rebels, the tribes are unruly and everybody and their brother is armed with an AK-47. I heard that conservation officials were forced to abandon Garamba park completely because of the violence. Guards, ranger managers, admin staff – they just left, as it was too dangerous for them to stay. It’s a poacher’s paradise.’

‘Yes, I have heard of it.’

‘They are busy trying to get back in, but there was no one there for a good while.’

He continued, ticking problems off with his fingers. ‘We will need a plane and helicopter for starters, and how do we refuel? There is no aviation fuel for five hundred miles. Supply lines will be long. We can’t get guns in so we will have to source them when we get there. That could be arranged.’

He paused. ‘It would be crazy to go in through Uganda. Coming in from that direction will take us into territory held by the Lord’s Resistance Army. This is a bunch of heavily armed Ugandan guerillas hell-bent on toppling the Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni. They operate in the north and east of Garamba park, and they are a nasty bunch. No one knows exactly where they are, and if you get anywhere near them they’ll bring the plane down. They just wiped out two UN attack helicopters. That means we would have to go in the long way, from the south via Kinshasa. It’s probably a nine-hour flight from Kinshasa to Garamba in a small plane, if we can find a pilot crazy enough to make the trip. And once in, we will be exposed on the ground for protracted periods. I said it before; this is wild stuff.’

‘That’s why we have to do it,’ I replied.

JP looked at me and smiled. ‘My sources tell me there is another animal conservation group either going in or who have just gone in to help the DRC authorities. I’ve done my homework. These guys may be well intentioned, but believe me, they will have their hands full. They don’t know what they are up against. I mean, if they so much as bump into the LRA, it will be all over for them and for the rhino. Man, I don’t even know if we can do it.’

He leaned back in his chair and sighed.

‘We can make this work,’ I said. ‘We have to. If we don’t do this, the rhino go extinct. It’s a

simple as that. This is a one-off chance to do something really important and worthwhile. It's a battle worth fighting.'

'Perhaps,' he said, and then continued, 'We will need a contingent of the very, and I mean very best fighting men. We have to have assault rifles, H+K MP3s, Berettas, and 20mm grenade launchers. At the very least, maybe even RPGs if we can get permission.'

JP looked straight at me. 'The only reason these remaining few rhinos are still alive is because they are deep in the bush and difficult to find. If we bring all those rhinos to one place, the word will get out, and who knows whom it will attract. The horns are worth a fortune.'

'What about money?' he added suddenly. 'This is going to cost a bundle.'

'I think I've got that covered. I will know for sure in a couple of days.'

'Lawrence, are you sure about this? I know you have been into some pretty rough places before for the sake of animals, but this is different.'

'I'm going in,' I replied. 'I must get this expedition together.'

'How long will this take?' he asked.

'Well, we will have to get there and set up camp,' I said. 'Then we have to find the remaining rhinos by helicopter. It's a big area, so let's give ourselves a week for that. Then we have to dart them and get them into a safe holding area, a *boma*, which we have to build near the airstrip. It will need a heavy-lift helicopter to carry them there. Once they are in the *boma* and stable, we bring in a big enough transport plane, something like a C-130, and fly them out. Let's say about three weeks to a month in total. That is if everything goes smoothly,' I said.

JP must have sat silently for a full minute and a half. I didn't say a word; he needed to make his decision without prompting. Then he slowly stood up, looked me straight in the eye and put out his hand.

'OK,' he said. 'If you're in, I am in. You find the money; I will keep you safe while you catch your rhinos.'

We embraced firmly. This was no small task.

JP loves wildlife and adventure, both of which the DRC project promised in spades. He also had a good relationship with the DRC embassy, which was a vital bonus. Getting a true professional like him to join the expedition lifted my spirits, and I travelled back to Thula with a renewed sense of purpose.

There would be two separate components to the initiative: the expedition itself, and a backup team operating from a home base in South Africa to deal with support and logistics. Jason, my eldest son, would accompany the team on the expedition. JP would handle the security and I would handle the animal side, overseeing the darting and capture, for which we would need the very best wildlife veterinarians. Dylan, my younger son, would remain behind to manage the entire operation and coordinate our efforts. Grant was to tackle logistics and source supplies and equipment. Marga would handle communications and admin.

Jason had some other good news when I returned home. BHP Billiton, the mining group, had taken

an interest in what we were doing and committed substantial funds to the enterprise.

The Earth Organization's policy of 'Cooperative Ecology', CO-ECO we called it, was paying off. We believe that the blind demonizing of commerce and industry that defined the green movement in the past has to end. People have to live on the planet. Both sides must develop a better understanding of the use and value of the natural world. If an animal-rights group bluntly opposed mining, then we would expect all their members to stop using metal and glass in their own lives. Respect for biodiversity needs to be ingrained into industry and sensitive areas must remain sacrosanct, but there is plenty of room for cooperation and compromise.

My next stop was with Dr Ian Raper, the very able President of the South Africa Association for the Advancement of Science (S2A3), Africa's oldest scientific association. Ian, who lived in Pretoria, was also president of the Earth Organization's scientific advisory board, providing a strong link between South Africa's universities and scientific community for all our activities.

'This is an absolutely vital initiative,' said Ian after much discussion. 'It's much more important than I first thought, and you can count on me. I will address a letter to the DRC government advising them of our support and involvement, and I am going to speak with our own government. This is more than just a rescue; it must be a long-term joint South Africa–DRC initiative. After the rescue, I am thinking of sponsoring education bursaries where promising students will receive financial assistance in the areas around the park.'

By the time we finished talking I knew it was all really coming together.

Ten days later Jason and I were back in Pretoria to meet JP and Ian, and the four of us found ourselves at the DRC embassy in the office of the very capable Ambassador Bene M'Poko. As is the case with many African leaders, the ambassador was impeccably dressed, his European business suit contrasting severely with my khaki bush attire. There was a sincere and dignified manner about him, though, which gave me some comfort as we engaged with him on the subject of the anarchy in Garamba and our proposed rescue.

'The Garamba National Park was completely abandoned recently by our management,' said the ambassador after introductions and the inevitable small talk. 'We are going back in and we already have one conservation group assisting us. But the circumstances are still highly volatile and we can use all the help we can get. The situation with the rhinos is critical and, as you know, we are facing real security concerns.'

He paused to pour tea from a very delicate and very ambassadorial tea service.

'We know of your organization and your work with wild animals in Iraq during the coalition invasion, and we have read your document with interest,' he said, tapping the proposal on the desk in front of him. 'Also, our government received a letter from the president of your scientific association,' he added, nodding at Ian.

He leaned back.

'Your offer of help is most welcome and most timely. I have discussed this with our Ministry of Environment. The initiative is approved, and everything is in place for you to visit the minister

Kinshasa for proper introductions to his department. This will be followed by an immediate fact-finding trip to Garamba, and you will proceed from there with the department. I have spoken with my counterparts in your government and it will be a joint operation between our two countries. Gentlemen, are we agreed?’

We were indeed. Everybody stood up and started shaking hands. Personally, I thought high fives would have been more appropriate, but then we were in the embassy. We had put the project together in record time, and now we had the go-ahead.

I should have realized that things in Africa are rarely that simple.

I arrived back at Thula Thula just in time for breakfast. My French wife Françoise, radiant as ever, was up waiting for me.

We had met coincidentally while catching a taxi in London twenty years before. Since then she had made a remarkable transition from the streets and bistros of cosmopolitan Paris to the African bush. However, it seems the longer she lives in Africa the stronger her French accent becomes.

Françoise was followed by the dogs. Bijou, her snooty little Maltese poodle, my immediate superior in the household pecking order, deigned to give me a brief acknowledgement. Bijou believed with good reason, that as far as Françoise was concerned she was the most important life form on the game reserve, and conducted herself accordingly.

Next to greet me was Big Jeff, who did so with considerably more enthusiasm than Bijou. I think Jeff is a cross between a Golden Labrador and a seal, or at least he looks and acts like it. We rescued him from abusive owners and he has repaid us with unconditional faithfulness and loyalty, dispensed primarily from his favourite position lazing near the swimming pool. I was thinking of entering him into the world sleeping dog championships but that would be unfair on other contestants.

And then there was Gypsy, a little black rescue dog we picked up from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Gypsy was a wonderful mutt, a 'pavement special' as we say, who had a heart as big as Africa. She slept on our bed and spent the night purposely angling to get her butt right in my face as a wake-up present.

As motley a bunch as they were, we loved them all. I have my two sons from a previous marriage, Jason and Dylan, but Françoise never had children, and Bijou, Jeff and Gypsy were her South African family. She treated us all equally, or almost equally. Whenever I went to the fridge to see what was for dinner, I was never quite sure which food was ours or which was the dogs'. Indeed, there were times I just chose the canine cuisine. Françoise is a superb French chef – the best in the world, as far as I'm concerned – so no one is complaining.

Max, my magnificent Staffordshire bull terrier who had died a few years before, was buried close to our cottage. I thought of him often, of his courage and of the wonderful bush adventures that we had together. If alive, Max would have been with me at last week's firefight with poachers, and given half a chance would have latched on to one of the killers' legs. And Staffies don't let go.

After an exquisite French breakfast (I have got used to croque-monsieur and croissants) I fell dead asleep. I would again be on duty that night and patrols wouldn't stop until we caught the poachers or they fled the area.

It had been a hectic few weeks, from firefights with poachers to putting together a plan to save the Congo rhino, and so when I awoke I decided to take an afternoon off and be alone in the bush during daylight for a change. I drove into Thula Thula's remotest section and then abandoned the Land Rover

and hiked down through the savannah to my favourite spot on the banks of the Nseleni River.

Leaving the security of a vehicle, alone and unarmed, puts everything into a new perspective in the bush. You're suddenly completely isolated from humanity and consumed by the living wilderness. It is a total immersion into a primordial world. Some are alarmed by it, others revel in it. That day it was just what I needed.

The ancient river was moving slowly on its course, pooling deeply here and there, its slippery muddy banks reaching out of the tangled undergrowth down into the dark silent waters.

A hardcore rule in Africa is to treat any stretch of water as home to Nile crocodiles, so I found a comfortable rock high up the bank overlooking some deep pools, sat down and breathed in the surroundings. It was a gloriously hot African day under an azure sky puffed with the whitest nimble clouds. Not enough cloud for rain, but just enough to take the edge off the heat. For a second I thought about how long it had been since we'd had a good thunderstorm, followed by a real soaking, but the day was perfect and I refused to worry right now.

You have to sit still at a river until the inhabitants decide your presence is benign. Once you get the nod of approval, everything erupts vibrantly back to life.

Frogs always take the lead. Being right at the bottom of the food chain has its challenges, especially when singing out to attract a mate alerts predators to your hiding place, so they have evolved a very clever defence. Gathered into the reed beds, their loud calls and descants mysterious echo and reverberate, disguising their exact position from the host of birds, lizards and catfish who would eat every last one if they could find them. It is only the females that can penetrate the canorous deception.

Next out were petite metallic-blue malachite kingfishers, which hovered and zipped in and out of the pools, rippling the water as they dived and sometimes surfaced with a prize tadpole or, if they were lucky, a minuscule bream. Dragonflies decorated in the brightest oranges, blues, greens and deepest blacks flitted on transparent wings.

As always, a hammerkop was stalking the shallows, its sharp inquisitive eyes glittering half hidden behind a pitiless beak. This legendary crested brown waterbird builds large clay-and-stick tree nests that can bear a man's weight. A rather macabre Zulu prophecy says that if a hammerkop lands on your roof during a thunderstorm there will soon be a death in the family.

A tiny swirl of water gave away the first croc. He had perceived my arrival and silently submerged his giant reptilian body. I could just see it underwater, a huge shadow beneath the surface slowly moving closer in case I was available for lunch. A chill went through my body. No matter how many you see, crocodiles always evoke a grotesque fascination in me. But so many are dying in Africa as man takes over their habitat that they, too, could soon be on the endangered species list. We protect them like Thula Thula like every other creature. Eventually he decided I was out of range, but patiently hung around in the reed beds on the off chance I might do something stupid like go to the water's edge. That would be the last thing I did.

Two terrapins, *ufudu* as the Zulus call them, waddled into the pool and fiddled around in the

shallows looking for worms and other turtle treats. Nothing goes near them, not even a crocodile, for they are basically aqua-skunks, squirting a foul-smelling urine at their enemies that not even carbolic soap can easily remove.

The busy riverine life fascinated me for a couple of hours, easing the stresses of the past few days. Total immersion in the wilderness is the purest and most natural of all therapies, and best of all, you don't have to do anything except be there. The sights and sounds are remedies for the soul, while the scents of the African bush are nature's original aromatherapy.

Then some of the big boys of the Bushveld arrived. A herd of huge, heaving, hot and dusty Cape buffalo appeared far more stealthily than I would have liked. They took ownership of the biggest pool, striding into the water belly-deep to slake their thirst, disdainful of the presence of the crocodile. I quickly looked around and made a mental note of the quickest tree to climb if they came any closer, but they were just getting on with their lives and not interested in me at all.

And sometimes you get really, really lucky. In a side eddy I picked out movement and sat forward in concentration, hardly recognizing the shape, not daring to believe. *Voilà*. It was a submerged python, his long body lying slack and motionless below the reeds with just the tip of his nose showing. He could have been there for days already, immobile, in a demonstration of patience unparalleled in nature, waiting for the right prey and the exact moment. Then he would strike, fast and deadly, instantly wrapping fifteen feet of writhing muscle around his chosen victim and crushing the life out of it in minutes. Depending on the size of his kill, he would not eat again for several weeks, if not months.

Times like this made me realize how vital our conservation programmes among the local community were. Without these educational projects, this glorious world unravelling in front of me could be lost in a few short generations. It still might be.

The lazy afternoon was coming to an end when suddenly something didn't feel right. I had a prickly skin sensation that I was being watched. I have long since given up questioning my gut feelings, nature's inbuilt alarm system, so I immediately sat up and looked around, scrutinizing every tree, bush and shrub for something unusual. Nothing.

Not satisfied, I stood and half turned to look behind me. I instinctively froze dead still. Facing me, less than twenty yards away, were two massive, mud-covered buffalo bulls, dagga boys they are called, arguably the most dangerous animals in Africa – and they were giving me their full attention. I quickly broke eye contact and looked away, forcing myself to remain motionless, frantically calculating my options.

I didn't have any. They were standing too close to my designated escape tree, so that was out of the question. On the other side, the thickly tangled river undergrowth prevented me from making a run for it. My only remaining escape route was down the slippery riverbank, where the crocodile was still waiting. Then, just to hammer home my unenviable predicament, if I somehow made it past the crocodile, I would stumble into the rest of the buffalo herd.

I did the only thing I could. I turned very, very slowly and walked away from them down onto the

riverbank as far as I could safely go, and sat on my haunches, listening for the dreadful sound of a charge from behind, while keeping an eye on the water for the croc.

Nothing happened. They weren't being aggressive at all, just a bit curious as to what I was doing in their space. As soon as I paid them respect, they ambled off to follow the rest of the herd. With my heart thumping loudly, I reminded myself never to leave my rifle behind again. Not to shoot to kill, but a warning shot will often scare off a threatening creature and give you enough room to escape. You see, a firearm is such an alien contraption in these surroundings that I hated carrying one.

The sun was low when I reluctantly took leave of the river and started the trek back to the Land Rover.

In Zululand, there is no gentle easing of day into night, as in the higher latitudes. It's just a brief pause of dusk, a blazing sunset to arrest your soul and then all of a sudden you are in the dark. As the last sunrays quickly faded to salmon pink, I gently came back to the real world and reached forward to key the Land Rover's ignition.

Suddenly I heard a crack like a rifle shot and turned to see the top of a huge acacia robusta tree rocking back and forth in its death throes. It then slowly toppled and crashed down in a roar of timber and leaves.

Elephants. No other animal in the world can do that. No other land creature is that powerful, not by a long way. The herd was nearby.

I stretched my hand out of the window to feel the air. A gentle breeze coming in from the southwest placed me securely downwind, away from long prying noses. I got out of the vehicle, consciously slowed myself down to elephant mode, and waited. Five long minutes later, I was rewarded when Nana, the glorious matriarch, slowly eased her towering bulk out of the copse of trees, lifted her trunk and tested the air.

I caught my breath, thrilling again at the sight of this magnificent creature who had taught me so much about her kind.

But even in the gathering gloom I could see all was not right. Leaving the herd to feast on the fallen tree, she appeared to be walking out of the thicket at an angle, favouring her right side.

As I watched, the herd's second-in-command, Frankie, emerged behind them and stood next to Nana. She turned towards her, their huge heads barely a foot apart. They stood like that for ages, unmoving, as if meditating. Then Frankie turned slowly, as though she was just letting the momentum of her five-ton weight pull her, and moved into the lead position. Nana followed, the rest of the herd slowly gathering in behind them.

I had never seen that before. Nana was the matriarch, she always led the herd. She was always very visibly at the front. She dictated every move they made.

Had there been a coup d'état? Or had Frankie, by some form of arcane pachyderm ritual, been appointed the new leader?

That seemed highly unlikely. Nana was a respected and admired matriarch and her decisions were always wise and benevolent – were law. Frankie may be the most volatile and quick-tempered in the

group, but she never questioned Nana's authority.

I watched as they made their way across the clearing, their colossal shoulders lifting and falling until they were swallowed up by the jagged outlines of the evening bush. It may have been my imagination playing tricks in the dark, but it seemed as if ET, one of the younger cows, was nudging Nana, helping her in the right direction. That too was unprecedented. Nana never needed any form of assistance. Indeed, she was the one who always provided it. In fact, it was Nana who had settled ET when we got her as a traumatized teenager. She had also been earmarked for a legalized kill until we managed to get the hunter's licence revoked. We were just in time to save her life.

Even so, she was in bad shape when we got her. Left alone on a 'Big Five' game reserve as an adolescent, ET had shrieked herself hoarse. She was now almost mute, her vocal chords destroyed, her trumpeting no more than a strange honking sound. We named her *Enfant Terrible* ('bad baby' in French), as she had regularly charged me when she first arrived at Thula Thula; such was her hatred of humans. Amazingly, Nana had intervened, stopping her with the broadside of her body or with gentle taps of her trunk on ET's forehead until the youngster learned that I was not going to harm her. The irony that she was now helping Nana was not lost on me.

Still, I was extremely worried. What was going on? What had happened to Nana? Was she injured or ill? The thought of anything going wrong with her, my friend and inspiration for the past decade, was simply too awful to contemplate.

My cellphone was on silent but I could feel it vibrating in my pocket. I took it out and looked at the number. It was a text message from Françoise telling me dinner was nearly ready.

There was no more to be done that night, so I started the Landy and drove off down the bush track deep in thought. I had decided not to have further contact with the elephants now that they had settled so naturally into the reserve. This was working well with the other elephants, but with Nana the feeling was not mutual. She still tried to come to me whenever she sensed my Land Rover was nearby and I always drove off with a heavy heart. As much as I wanted to be with her, to me it was an iron law of nature that wild animals are meant to be just that: wild. I had only decided to work with them because they had been so disturbed when they first arrived at Thula Thula. If I hadn't done something, the Parks authorities would have shot them. In those days they continuously charged us and smashed through electric fences, shuddering through the pain of 8,000 volts as they snapped the live wires like cotton thread. Throwing caution to the wind, my young ranger, David Bozas, and I had gone to live near them in the bush until I gradually earned the trust of Nana. I finally got her to believe that Thula Thula, with its lush grasses and perennial water supply, was her new home. That she and her family were safe here. They were now one of the finest herds in Zululand.

But something had gone worryingly wrong. Reluctantly, I decided I might have to enter their lives once again.

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