

Reserve in 1952 it was like entering a deserted world. Wherever I looked there was silent bush and mile upon mile of uncropped red grass. I saw nothing but a few solitary grey duiker. It seemed impossible there were four hundred white rhino. I camped out that night and no moths or other insects came to the lantern light. The aerial spraying with anti-tsetse fly insecticides had been too effective. It was not until the following morning, a dull overcast day, that I saw my first white rhino."

Dr Player was a 25 year old junior ranger. He could not stop thinking of the white rhino. Little did he know that this was the beginning of a relationship that would span the rest of his long life. Veterinary Services relinquished control to the Province of Natal, and the young

free from the threat of poachers. This idyllic situation would soon become a problem as the land was insufficient to sustain the pace of growth. Culling was suggested. Dr Player fought this, and in response launched Operation Rhino which saw the capture and transporting of rhino, and repopulating South and Southern Africa including Kruger, Eastern Cape, Botswana, Mozambique, and Namibia.

The detail of this exploratory darting, experimentation with drugs, and capture is to be found in his book and makes for a compelling story. When Dr Player first suggested the darting of a white rhino to move it, there were many who thought he was crazy. *Some think he is still crazy to suggest selling off stockpiles of rhino horns now.*

The Millennium – The Pendulum Swings Again

This history shows how the fate of the white rhino has swung, like a pendulum back and forth. However, the pendulum settled and no-one would have foreseen the clock start to tick once more towards extinction. With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps the warning signs were there. The poaching of rhino began in Southern Africa, more than 15 years ago. War shouldered the blame, or perhaps masked the poaching.

As a result South Africa holds the last of them - 93% of the African populations of the southern white rhino *Ceratotherium simum simum* and critically endangered black rhino, *Diceros bicornis*. We're the last stop before they



The reason that there are wall to wall private game reserves from Hluhluwe to Pongola, was directly because of legal hunting.

Dr Player was to deal with the situation. Poaching increased. New rangers joined, Zulus from the tribal reserve were recruited to increase protection of the reserve and soon poachers diminished, game increased. *Surely more patrols, now just like then would see a reduction in poaching? Or is there corruption in the ranks?*

There were an estimated 60,000 black rhino on the continent of Africa, and 2,000 of the Northern white rhino in the Belgian Congo, Sudan and Uganda. Today the Northern white rhino is extinct in those territories and the black rhino reduced to only 4,800. In the whole of Africa.

1958 – 1965 The Turning Point

Dr Player threw heart and soul into the white rhino protection programme and their numbers increased. All game increased, the vegetation grew back. Rhino calves were often seen trotting across open plains, with their mothers,

1970 –1980's Hunters Save Rhinos

There was an explosion in the number of white rhino, and game ranching was starting. The world population was estimated at 10 to 12,000 - a phenomenal success. However, there were now too many in some areas. The then Natal Parks Board were selling them off for around R300 a rhino at the time. Game ranchers were buying them and charging hunters R25 000 each. These ranchers though bought more land, converting agricultural land to game farms, stocked more game, and rapidly increased game habitat. *Fair enough.*

"The reason that there are wall to wall private game reserves from Hluhluwe to Pongola, was directly because of legal hunting. Game, including white rhino, had value, they were worth stocking, protecting, and keeping. They took off sustainable numbers because it was in their business interest to do so. Initially it was mostly white rhino, but the rest of the game followed."

– the white and black rhino leave the planet. The white rhino is a buffer. Once the easier to target white rhino are all gone, it will be time up for the black rhino too.

"Dr Player, do you believe the situation is critical?"

"A count needs to be done, so that we have accurate figures and can make an assessment. But, the red flag is up. The warning is there. If we don't do something, they will leave our planet and everyone in this generation is responsible."

"Do you support legal hunting and if so why?"

"There is a huge difference between legal hunting and poaching. People confuse the two. People in the hunting community who are hunting illegally are on a par with poachers. I'm going to be speaking to hunting associations; they need to police their own. Legal hunting ensures that owners earn an income in order to protect their rhino. Remove this and they can't protect their rhino. There are already people, perhaps not involved in hunting, that are phoning conserva-