

It wasn't the physical scars though that made my stomach lurch. It was the haunting pain I saw in Dr Ian Player's eyes as he took an urgent call during an interview with Wildside. News of yet another two rhinos slaughtered mercilessly by poachers.

Dr Player is quick to point out that several other conservationists like Vaughn Kirby, Captain Potter and Mali Mdhletshe hauled the white rhino back from the brink of extinction. He and his team risked their lives to save rhino, they braved unpopular ideas - which worked, and he travelled far and wide to prevent the rhino's extinction. This is a man who flew over the Imfolozi reserve to count all the rhino that were left - all 437 of them in 1953, with a ranger companion Hendrik van Schoor.

It was in his capacity as Senior Ranger of the then Natal Parks Board that Dr Player secured the southern section of Imfolozi as South Africa's first Wilderness Area. He'd later establish the Wilderness Trails which would spur gen-

in Southern Africa, if not internationally. By 1965 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature declared that the white rhino had been saved and it was removed from the 'Class A Protection List.'

## Tragic Irony

At 85 years of age, after all he has achieved, having received an extensive number of awards and accolades from South Africa and around the world, his work was surely done. The white rhino would never again face risk of extinction.

And yet, here I am, sitting with Dr Player in his cottage in Karkloof on an overcast morning asking him, not about his lifetime of achievements, but about rhino poaching. I'm almost embarrassed. The irony drapes the atmosphere, and the phone call he receives about the two rhino just killed by poachers, sends a chilling reminder of the situation.

"Dr Player, did you ever think that the

He doesn't shy away from the prickly issues of legal hunting, or legalising trade in stockpiles of rhino horn in vaults in South Africa. He's neither dramatic, nor sentimental. He is emotional about wildlife, certainly, but a realist whose practical and visionary thinking is the reason I am able, in 2011, to talk to him about living white rhino.

The spacious lounge in his cottage is hemmed in by dark wooden bookshelves near sash windows. The books are illuminated. The overcast weather has cleared. I notice a book by Carl Jung; I think it's the *Psychology of the Unconscious*. A sturdy round table separates two bookshelves and on it is a large bronze bust of Magqubu Ntombela.

Dr Player is seated on a deep earth coloured couch. I take up a seat on a cushioned wooden chair next to him. There are no chairs opposite him, so Rod Macleod who is doing the photography takes a seat on the floor so Dr Player does not have to turn from side to side if we were to flank him. It reminds



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**Everything we have, all that came about is because of the white rhino. The white rhino was the catalyst for the first game reserve in Africa.**

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erations of lovers of the wild. In 1961 he initiated Operation Rhino which would see the relocation of 3 000 white rhino from Imfolozi, to other parts of South Africa, southern Africa and even the United States and the United Kingdom as added insurance of their survival.

He bridged a cultural gap through the sharing of his insights learned from his lifelong friend Magqubu Ntombela, who he talks of as his teacher and to whom he dedicated his book, *The White Rhino Saga*, published in 1973 -during the height of apartheid South Africa.

Dr Player has lived through the trials and tribulations of the white rhino over 50 years. He's mourned failures and celebrated successes. Ultimately the battle was won, Operation Rhino was one of the most successful conservation efforts

white rhino would once again be facing this situation?"

He looked into the mid distance as if seeking the most powerful way to comment on this tragic irony and simply said "Never."

If you've read his books or talked to him you'd know the man is not short on vocabulary, and has a superb ability to explain complexities in rich, descriptive detail. His choice of word was deliberate.

His face etched with deep lines, speaks of his age and years of experience. His mind is razor sharp. His thoughts, crystal clear. His memory is impeccable. His knowledge of wildlife, Zulu culture, history, and conservation is intimidating. His personal life long journey with white rhino is unsurpassed, his connection to the earth and wildlife to be envied.

me of the traditional Zulu story telling circles. Dr Player understands this tradition only too well. He has been called a real African.

Instead of firing questions, I suggest I'd be open to him giving me the information he'd like to give me first. He smiles, and takes the opportunity.

"First, it's most important to look at the history of the white rhino and its suffering in Southern Africa." When he started off in the early 1800's, I regretted my opening line. Acutely aware he had back-to-back interviews, and in an hour's time a television crew was arriving, I wondered if I'd missed the chance to ask questions.