

a heart for rhinos



IAN PLAYER ARCHIVES

Veteran of a previous 'rhino war', Dr Ian Player has a special connection with these charismatic animals and is following efforts to combat poaching with great interest. This world-respected conservationist has valuable insights into how we can tackle the current crisis, and shares them with *Africa Geographic's* Rachel Lang.

Rachel Lang The crisis confronting rhinos today is arguably the most serious they have ever faced. What are your thoughts on how their disappearance would affect not just South Africa, but humanity as a whole?

Ian Player It would be a disaster, an enormous disaster. We have already reached the point where, if we don't find a solution, we are likely to see the extinction of rhinos. And what is happening to them is symptomatic of what is happening to the environment as a whole. If we don't get it right, we as human beings are going to suffer.

I sit on the judging panel for the South African Breweries' Journalist of the Year Award and each year it is terrifying to read the journalists' stories: the sewage

that goes into rivers, the acid water rising from the old mines... When you read all those articles at once, it comes home to you how very bad the whole situation is. That's why we have to save the rhino. By saving the rhino we are saving ourselves – and if we're not interested in saving ourselves, what are we doing here?

RL Is the government doing enough?

IP It's neither accurate nor fair to blame the government. There are people within the conservation industry who are doing everything they possibly can, but we are up against a pretty formidable force.

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RL Can we ever change, either by logic or by economic or legal means, the deep-seated belief that rhino horn has medicinal value?

IP You can't just destroy beliefs. You can't uproot a Christian's faith, and in the same way I don't think you can hope to uproot Eastern peoples' faith in the powers of rhino horn. They've had this conviction for 2 000 years, and you're not going to just get rid of it. Life doesn't work that way.

RL It may sound like a strange question, but is a rhino that has been dehorned, or one that is farmed, still a rhino?

IP A rhino without its horn is like an elephant without its trunk, and I've been quite adamant about that from the beginning. Nor do I like the idea of farming rhinos. I mean, it's the wildness of the animal that makes it so appealing to us. We feel a spiritual connection with wild animals because much of the wildness in ourselves has been destroyed.

RL Whether animals have emotions is a topic that's often tiptoed around. What is your view?

IP Every animal has emotions! I discovered this with rhinos in particular when we were catching them and putting them in bomas before relocating them. Each individual rhino had a different temperament, but we only found that out by working closely with them. That's why I have a lot of sympathy with the animal rights movement. However, it is very important to differentiate between sentimentality and emotion, and there is great confusion in the animal rights movement about this.

RL Do you remember the first time you saw a rhino?

IP Yes, it was a very moving experience for me, very emotional. I had just arrived at the Imfolozi Game Reserve as a relief ranger and was there to do some anti-poaching work. It was one of those heavily overcast days with a slight drizzle. I was on foot near Masinda Camp when ▶



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Ian Player developed a special affinity for rhinos as a young man while working with the endangered animals in South Africa's Imfolozi Game Reserve.

two white rhinos came out of the bush. I was struck by their prehistoric appearance, like ancient dinosaurs emerging from the earth. The drizzle, the dark cloud, the flies buzzing around the animals as they moved – it all made a very great impression on me. I knew intuitively that somehow my life would be associated with rhinos – and so it has proved to be. Throughout my life I've done my best for the rhino.

RL Do you ever dream of rhinos?

IP Yes, I do. Recently I dreamt of a rhino that had had its horn chopped off and it was coming towards me. I tried to chase it away, but it refused to go, it just kept coming at me. I'm 85 now, so I'm very tired of fighting and often think that it's up to other people to continue the struggle. But the dream was telling me that I can't give up.

RL What made you decide that you wanted to work in conservation and make a difference there?

IP As a pioneer of the Dusi Canoe Marathon, I paddled from Pietermaritzburg to Durban in 1950 to test the route and was expecting to see a large number of wild animals along the way. But all I saw was a couple of grey duikers. This was a big shock to me, and when I made enquiries I found out that the wildlife had been wiped out. Then, after the first race in

December 1951 I returned to work late and was fired. So while I was looking for a job I learned about the Natal Parks Board, and I applied for a position and was accepted. My life was never the same again. When I came out of World War II at the age of 19 I was completely lost, didn't know what I wanted to do. But then I got into conservation and I knew it was something I could dedicate my life to.

RL You led Operation Rhino in the 1960s and it successfully boosted the white rhino population in South Africa. Could an Operation Rhino 2 be carried out today?

IP It's a different world now. The most important thing we have to do is to save the rhinos that still exist, and that can

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only be done in two ways. There have to be more rangers in the field, and they must be supplied with good intelligence because it's like fighting a war. You can't win a war unless you've got troops and you're getting information. And that leads to the second element we need. There have been a number of meetings, 'rhino summits' if you like, but we need top businessmen to be there too so that we can debate the best way forward.

RL There is a lot of discussion on the best route to take – legalising trade in rhino horn, farming rhinos, and so on – and some of the views are quite polarised. How do we find a middle ground?

IP Well, first you have to look at history. For instance, you can't now say no to buying

and selling rhinos because sales *have* taken place and it was the conservation agencies that initiated them. So you can't just take the commercialisation of rhinos off the table. But the important thing is how we do it and for what purpose. We have to decide how best to regulate it and make sure it's for the animals' benefit, not our own.

And then we should always remember that everyone has a right to express their opinion. I have been saying for a long time that it is the spiritual impact of wild places that motivates the higher ideals of conservation. You can't go into a wild area and not be deeply moved. If we could only get the world's leaders around a campfire in the wilderness, with all Africa's animals around them, they would stop screaming and shouting at one another and find a way forward.

RL As ordinary people, how can we make a difference?

IP Keep talking about it. That's how it stays in people's minds. Otherwise they forget; it's human nature that we don't want to think about bad news. Every debate is important because it keeps the issue alive, and right now that is critical if rhinos are to survive.

RL Do you have hope for the rhino?

IP Yes, I do. There are enough people in this country who are determined to ensure that rhinos survive. All through my life I've been very fortunate to have worked with some truly wonderful people. I've seen what really dedicated people can do.

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OPERATION RHINO

Following the decimation of white rhinos in southern Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the species found a refuge in the Imfolozi Game Reserve in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. Under the protection of the Natal Parks Board, and thanks to the dedication and hard work of Imfolozi staff, rhino numbers in the reserve climbed to about 650 in 1960. Led by Ian Player, Operation Rhino was launched to capture excess rhinos in Imfolozi and, using new techniques, to translocate them to reserves within the species' former range. By thus establishing new populations, Player and his colleagues oversaw a remarkable and much-lauded rise in the fortunes of the white rhino.