



The Last Rhinos: My Battle to Save One of the World's Greatest Creatures

By Lawrence Anthony, Graham Spence

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When Lawrence Anthony learned that the northern white rhino, living in the war-ravaged Congo, was on the very brink of extinction, he knew he had to act. If the world lost the sub-species, it would be the largest land mammal since the woolly mammoth to go extinct. In *The Last Rhinos*, Anthony recounts his attempts to save these remarkable animals.

The demand for rhino horns in the Far East has turned poaching into a dangerous black market that threatens the lives of not just these rare beasts, but also the rangers who protect them.

The northern white rhino's last refuge was in an area controlled by the infamous Lord's Resistance Army, one of the most vicious rebel groups in the world. In the face of unmoving government bureaucracy, Anthony made a perilous journey deep into the jungle to try to find and convince them to help save the rhino.

An inspiring story of conservation in the face of brutal war and bureaucratic quagmires, *The Last Rhinos* will move animal lovers everywhere.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A riveting account by a compassionate, dedicated man.” *?Kirkus Reviews*

“Riddled with heartfelt anecdotes, Anthony’s brave crusade to save these mammals?even at great risk to his own safety?reads like a safari adventure, a history lesson, and a warning that our careless ways will bring an end to so many magnificent species.” *?Publishers Weekly*

“This inspiring story of courage and conservation is a moving testament of the good that can be done when there is a will.” *?Tucson Citizen*

“The Indiana Jones of Conservation.” *?The Guardian (UK)*

“Anthony has made a difference in the lives of many magnificent animals who otherwise would have been lost to the world.” *?Marc Bekoff, author of The Emotional Lives of Animals*

“In my thirty-five years of studying man/animal communication I have met only a few individuals who have the ability to enter into the metaphysical realm of the exotic animal. Lawrence Anthony has been there and back.” *?Ralph Helfer, author of Modoc*

“Anthony’s enthusiasm and obvious love for the bush shine through in hair-raising, sad, and funny tales.” *?Booklist*

“Anthony deserves tremendous credit for his fearlessness and perseverance in rescuing countless animals against all odds.” *?The Explorers Journal*

About the Author

LAWRENCE ANTHONY (1950–2012) founded the Thula Thula wildlife reserve in Zululand, South Africa; launched The Lawrence Anthony Foundation; and received the UN’s Earth Day award for his efforts to save the animals of the Baghdad Zoo. GRAHAM SPENCE is a journalist and editor. Originally from South Africa, he lives in England. Together they are the authors of *Babylon’s Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo* and *The Elephant Whisperer: My Life with the Herd in the African Wild*.

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THE LAST RHINOS (Chapter One)

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 Zululand, 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 a 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 is 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, 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 horns 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 hard, 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 rhino 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 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 electric 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 areas 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, man...

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