

For the love of

# RHINOS

The endangered pachyderms have provided a constant thread through **Sue Watt's** travels around Africa. Witnessing a new, pioneering relocation project in Zimbabwe, she reflects on her enduring fascination for the animals

The tears welled up as I watched Thuza and Kusasa stepping cautiously from their crates into the new Imvelo Ngamo Wildlife Sanctuary created especially for them. After four years of planning and pandemic-induced delays, culminating in an exhausting 500-mile overnight journey across Zimbabwe, these two white rhino bulls had finally come home.

Excited schoolchildren lined their route to the sanctuary, waving banners and flags. VIPs, including the local chief of the Ndebele people, village headmen and district councillors, waited in hushed anticipation on platforms overlooking the boma to catch sight of the first white rhinos to set foot in the

Hwange area for nearly two decades.

"It's always poignant when our rhinos move on, but this is a big moment – it's really something special," Mark Saunders told me quietly, barely concealing his emotion. As Executive Director of Malilangwe Game Reserve, Thuza's and Kusasa's former home a long 17 hours' drive away, he's seen many rhino translocations.

In between the many stops to check on our pachyderm passengers, our journey that night in convoy with vets and rhino experts gave me plenty of time to reflect on the enduring appeal of these charismatic animals, and on the absolute commitment of the people who protect them.

I can vividly recall the first time I saw a rhino, nearly 20



**Left to right:** Mark Butcher of Imvelo Safari Lodges, who conceived the Community Rhino Conservation Initiative in Hwange; the author with guide Tizola Moyo, head tracker of Majete Game Reserve's rhino unit in Malawi, on the trail of Shamwari; meeting Sudan in 2016; Cedric Moyo, second in command of the Cobras Community Wildlife Protection Unit, assigned to guard Thuza and Kusasa in the new Imvelo Ngamo Wildlife Sanctuary in Zimbabwe

WILL WHITFORD (4)

years ago. My partner Will and I were sitting on a bench overlooking Okaukuejo Camp's floodlit waterhole in Namibia's Etosha National Park, safely ensconced behind the fence, wine glasses in hand, waiting for wildlife to come to drink. Almost immediately, a tiny white rhino calf, all cute and squat, emerged from the darkness, trotting jauntily in front of its mother. Utterly captivated, we watched them for half an hour as they lapped the water, the calf sometimes standing motionless by mum's side and occasionally emitting a peculiar high-pitched squeak for her attention, until a lion's roar filled the night air and persuaded them it was time to move on.

## SHAMWARI

That first sighting under vast Namibian skies has always stayed with me, marking the onset of my obsession with these behemoths of the bush. Eight years later, as a travel writer, I went behind the scenes with rangers and dedicated trackers who risk their lives protecting rhinos from poachers.

Worth more than its weight in gold, in traditional Asian medicine rhino horn is illogically believed to heal everything from cancer to heavy hangovers, yet it has no curative powers whatsoever. Today, just 6,195 black rhinos and 15,942 white rhinos survive across Africa.

I'd come to Malawi to report on the 10th anniversary of African Parks' management of Majete Game Reserve, a rugged – and now highly protected – landscape dominated by the Shire River. As part of its hugely successful regeneration, black rhinos had been translocated here in 2003. Shamwari was among them.

"Put your hand in this," beckoned Tizola Moyo, pointing to a pile of pungent, fresh dung. Moyo was the head tracker of Majete's rhino unit and we'd been searching for the animals for six hours to no avail, following virtually indiscernible footprints in dry riverbeds and along grassy trails. Fortunately, the droppings – the size of cricket balls – were quite dry, embedded with little sticks that confirmed the black rhino's

browsing diet. Importantly, they were warm, and that was weirdly exciting. "Shamwari probably did this 30 minutes ago," Moyo informed me.

Minutes later, our trackers spotted Shamwari just 20 metres ahead in a thicket so dense I couldn't see her. But I could hear her. Shielding her 18-month-old calf, she suddenly gave a deep angry snort, telling us to stay away. Dorian Tilbury, Majete's Park Manager at the time, had warned us that black rhinos were "gloriously grumpy." With a palpable sense of urgency, he whispered: "Get behind that tree," and I quickly scanned its trunk for footholds to climb should Shamwari decide to charge. Another noisy warning convinced us it was time to retreat.

"We were lucky. If we'd been tracking Kumi, she would have charged immediately," Moyo said, revealing the trackers' knowledge of the animals. They follow their rhinos every day for monitoring and protection purposes, and know each one by name, by their individual spoor, by unique man-made notches in their ears and by their different personalities.

## SUDAN

Perhaps the most famous rhino personality of all was Sudan. When I met him in 2016, he was the last male northern white rhino on Earth.

Named after his homeland, Sudan spent most of his life in Dvůr Králové Zoo in the Czech Republic, before being translocated to the more natural environment of Ol Pejeta Conservancy, the largest rhino sanctuary in East Africa. Here, some 160 black rhinos and 41 southern whites roam the conservancy's rolling plains and acacia forests in the shadows of Mount Kenya.

The old bull was lying quietly in his enclosure when we arrived. At first, we simply stood beside him in silence – and in awe. "It's ok, you can touch him," his carer Jacob Anampiu whispered. "He likes being stroked behind the ears." Tentatively, gently, I touched Sudan's wrinkled face. His skin was all dusty and as tough as tyres. →



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He seemed to relax, laying his chin on the ground and closing his eyes, then he started to roll over towards my feet. For a second, I imagined him crushing me. "He wants you to stroke his other side now," Anampiu said, smiling. Stunned by Sudan's responsiveness, I obliged, feeling shivers down my spine: it's not every day you get to stroke a rhino, and certainly not one as special as this.

Meeting Sudan hit me hard. I felt humbled, privileged to have seen his gentleness and dignity first hand. But the sudden realisation that we would never see his like again filled me with sorrow — and then anger. I wasn't just staring extinction in the face; I was actually touching it. The demise of his species was down to poaching, hunting and territorial violence in the rhinos'

Central African homelands: northern whites are dying out not through natural predation or evolutionary causes, but through human selfishness and greed.

Sudan died in 2018, aged 45, survived by his daughter and granddaughter Najin and Fatu, the world's last two remaining northern whites. In a ground-breaking project aiming to prevent their extinction and preserve their genetic traits, the team at Ol Pejeta is hoping to create a northern white baby through IVF and stem cell technology, using deceased rhinos' frozen sperm and eggs from the two remaining females. Their struggle for survival has made global headlines and Sudan achieved a huge international following as the poster boy for rhinos everywhere. →

**Watching Thuza:**  
Tourism revenues will help to sustain and expand the programme in Hwange

IMVELO SAFARI LODGES



But why do we love rhinos so much? Is it the quirky prehistoric appearance of these two-ton animals with armour-like hide, stout little legs and horns sweeping skywards from their snouts? Or is it their personalities: the “gloriously grumpy” black rhinos and their calmer white cousins? It’s all this, I suspect, and perhaps something deeper, something intrinsic in us that roots for the innocent underdog, witnessing their fragility and helplessness against cruel, relentless poaching for the sake of irrational beliefs that fly in the face of science and common sense.

**THUZA AND KUSASA**

Fascinated by these intriguing animals, I would track rhinos whenever I could, including in Botswana’s Moremi Game Reserve and in Liwonde National Park, Malawi. Then, in May, after Covid lockdowns, we finally came to Zimbabwe for Thuza’s and Kusasa’s story. For me, this marked the pinnacle of my career, and it was the stars of the story – pachyderms and people – that made it so special.

Thuza and Kusasa are the first white rhinos in Zimbabwe to live on communal lands, rather than in national parks or private reserves. Their new one-mile-square sanctuary marks the start of the pioneering Community Rhino Conservation Initiative (CRCI) which, as more mini-sanctuaries come onboard, will eventually form one larger conservancy for a viable breeding population of some 30-50 rhinos.

It is the dreamchild of Mark Butcher, the tireless and tenacious MD of Imvelo Safari Lodges. But it couldn’t have happened without the collaboration of the communities and the team at Malilangwe, a reserve renowned for its rhino conservation and expertise.

Baba Mlevu, an influential 89-year-old ward headman, persuaded his people to give up their cattle-grazing pastures in the Tsholotsho area for the rhinos. “When I was small, I always used to see rhinos in Hwange. I want to see them again before I die,” he told me. “They were poached out and my children only saw them in pictures. I’m really happy they’re coming back and that younger generations will see them. This is my legacy for my people.”

His hope goes beyond rhinos returning to roam Hwange’s open plains, however. The new fenced conservancy will become a buffer zone to the park, protecting crops and livestock and easing human-wildlife conflict. Sanctuary fees will go directly to communities to fund social projects. And the rhinos will attract more visitors, bringing jobs and tourism dollars.

The rhinos, of course, need security. This is where the new Cobras Community Wildlife Protection Unit comes in. Its 30 scouts, all from local villages, have been rigorously trained to British military standards to protect their charges. Their passion for the project shines through.



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**BABA MLEVU**, WARD HEADMAN

“This will benefit our whole community. It’s going to help our schools, our clinics, our infrastructure,” Cobras’ quartermaster Bokani Mpofu told me. “We own this project, and everyone is eager to see it succeed. If we lose these rhinos, we’re no longer going to succeed, so I would kill any poacher that tries to take my rhinos.”

Along with suitable habitat, the security of the rhinos was critical to the decision-makers at Malilangwe. They have faith in the project too. “It’s so encouraging,” ecologist Sarah Clegg told me. “The motivation and determination to make this project work is very strong. These people are so excited about bringing rhinos back: for them, it’s personal.”

“Of course, numerous factors will determine whether this project succeeds, and they won’t all be under Malilangwe’s or Imvelo’s control. Although the ultimate aim is to reinstate a viable breeding population, the welfare of the individual rhinos is paramount, and we’re determined to meet any challenges and adapt our strategies if necessary.”

What about the rhinos themselves? Sarah records detailed data on all Malilangwe’s rhinos and knows that Kusasa and Thuza, aged seven and eight, always spend time together. “That’s unusual for unrelated bulls,” she explained. “I can’t think of a better pair to start the sanctuary: they’re at the right age, they’re emotionally stable together, and they have a special bond. It’s sad to lose them at Malilangwe, but they’re going to a place I believe in. This project has great potential, and the fact that they’ve got each other gives me a lot of hope for their future.”

On my last day at the sanctuary, a group of schoolchildren had come to see their new neighbours. They were fizzing with quiet excitement and curiosity. One girl whispered to me: “What sound does a rhino make?” and we giggled as I tried to emulate Shamwari’s snorting and the peculiar squeaking of the little calf I had seen in Etosha.

It felt strange to be answering her question: rhinos should have been part of her life, not mine. Now, she’ll grow up hearing those sounds for herself, alongside her own community with the rhinos back where they belong, just as they should be... 🐾

*For updates on the Community Rhino Conservation Initiative, visit [www.hwangecommunityrhino.com](http://www.hwangecommunityrhino.com). Sue Watt visited courtesy of The Luxury Safari Company, Imvelo Safari Lodges and The Malilangwe Trust.*



Sue Watt’s first travel writing commission was for *Travel Africa*, and she has contributed regularly since. • [www.suewatt.co.uk](http://www.suewatt.co.uk)

WILL WHITFORD

**Why move rhinos?** *Well-planned translocations to safe destinations can help reduce the risks rhinos face from poaching, at the same time spreading the rhino gene pool to create healthy new populations. As these charismatic megaherbivores are important eco-engineers, they also help protect habitats and prevent bush encroachment. Their presence has economic benefits too, attracting tourism (which, in itself inhibits poaching opportunities) and its ever-important revenue.*

**Setting in:**

Thuza and Kusasa in the Imvelo Ngamo Wildlife Sanctuary, built for them on communal land near Hwange National Park

IMVELO SAFARI LODGES

