



Big babies: Juvenile rhinos Nthombi and Thabo roam (fairly) free at Thula Thula, a private game reserve near Empangeni. However, guardians Alyson McPhee and Bheki Gumede never let them out of their sight.

Pictures: VIVIEN AND TOM HORLER

THULA, THULA THE RHINOS ARE SLEEPING SAFELY TONIGHT...

VIVIEN HORLER

POACHING poses such a severe threat to rhinos' lives that at Thula Thula, a private game reserve near Empangeni in northern KwaZulu-Natal, the rhinos have armed bodyguards.

In what might be seen as a contradiction in terms, these wild, free-ranging animals are followed in the bush day and night by guards who are dedicated to ensuring that they do not meet the fate of so many other rhinos in Africa, slaughtered for their horns.

Thula Thula is owned and run by Lawrence Anthony, the man who helped save many of the animals in the Baghdad Zoo after the beginning of the war in Iraq, and whose book on the subject, *Babylon's Ark*, made for gripping reading.

He has also written a book called *The Elephant Whisperer*, about coping with a troubled herd of wild elephants he took on at Thula Thula.

In many ways Thula Thula doesn't quite meet one's idea of a wild reserve deep in the bush – that's because it is not remote at all, and from many parts of the reserve you can see villages on the surrounding hills.

This is not, however, unfortunate – it is part of Anthony's plan to involve communities in the wildlife of Africa. Guns and guards can only do so much, he believes, and the true way to fight poaching is to restore communities' traditional and cultural ties with nature, ties that were destroyed by colonialism and apartheid.

"People around here have lived on the edge of reserves all their lives, reserves like Hluhluwe-Imfolozi and now Thula Thula, and yet have never seen a zebra. White people visited reserves and admired the animals, but blacks couldn't do that. "The old style of tackling poaching was guns and fences and uniforms and exclusivity, but you can't do that any more – meaningful moves against poaching depend on communities."

So Anthony has held "hundreds"

of meetings with the communities surrounding Thula Thula – where many locals have found work – and in consequence poaching for meat has dropped in the reserve by 90 percent.

The other kind of poaching is organised hunting of elephant and rhino for their tusks and horns, and that is a different matter altogether.

Rhino poaching in South Africa is out of control, he says, with an average of one animal a day being slaughtered.

Thula Thula has lost two rhinos to poaching. In the second attack the poachers came in by helicopter.

"We saw the helicopter, but had no idea what it was doing. The next day we found Heidie, who had been shot. She'd had a huge horn, nearly a metre long, a magnificent specimen."

The current spate of rhino poaching began when the Vietnamese minister of health went on TV to announce that his cancer had been cured by rhino horn. In China rhino horn has always been a traditional medicine available, because of its price, only to the wealthier sections of society.

"But now, with the Chinese economy booming, more and more people can afford rhino horn. Weight for weight, I understand, rhino horn is more valuable than gold in the final powdered form.

"So Heidie's metre-long horn is seen by the poacher as a horn of gold. That gives you some idea of the problem."

Apart from the cruelty, losing rhinos is also horrendously expensive. Anthony says a white rhino costs about R375 000, and a black rhino double that. And insurance companies will no longer cover them.

And then, of course, there is concern about the species. Historically there were thousands of Western Black and Northern White rhinos and save for five Northern Whites in a facility in Kenya, where they are trying to breed them, they are all gone. But there is good news; for one thing official attitudes are

changing, says Anthony. In 1996 two poachers were caught with duiker carcasses and shotguns, and the magistrate, a Zulu woman, acquitted them, saying "Zulu men must hunt".

Nowadays locals know that you can get 15 years in jail for rhino poaching.

"Attitudes are changing – people know that animals and reserves bring in money, and people and the government are saying why should foreigners take our rhino? There's been a huge change in perceptions."

Thula Thula has just two rhinos, both two years old and relative babies – although almost a ton in weight each. Both were hand-reared, so are particularly vulnerable to poaching as they don't fear people.

Nthombi, the female, was rescued after her mother had been killed by a rhino bull. The male, Thabo, was found near a waterhole in the Free State with his umbilical cord still attached, and no sign of a mother. It is assumed she had been poached. They came to Thula Thula, where their primary carer has been Alyson McPhee, 29, a veterinary nurse from Bristol, who came to South Africa as a volunteer, fell in love with Nthombi, and has stayed. To this day McPhee follows the two rhinos all day in the bush, in the company of security guard Bheki Gumede. At night two other guards take over.

"I've had to be their mom and constant companion," says McPhee.

"They're becoming more independent now, but will still come to me if they want comfort or a cuddle."

They have less human interaction as they get older, but they still need protection. McPhee gets very fierce when the subject of poaching comes up.

"If anyone hurts these rhino, I'd hunt the poachers down, torture them for a week and when near death I'd tie them to a tree and let the hyenas do the rest."

Hopefully with Anthony's community outreach programmes and the 24-hour bodyguards, it will never come to that.