

To the rescue of SA's rhinos

A private game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal is taking no chances with the risk posed by poachers, and has assigned guards to their special charges, writes **Vivien Horler**

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

In what might be seen as an ironic contradiction, 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-Umfolozi and now Thula Thula, and yet have never seen a zebra.

"White people visited reserves and admired the animals, but black people couldn't do that.

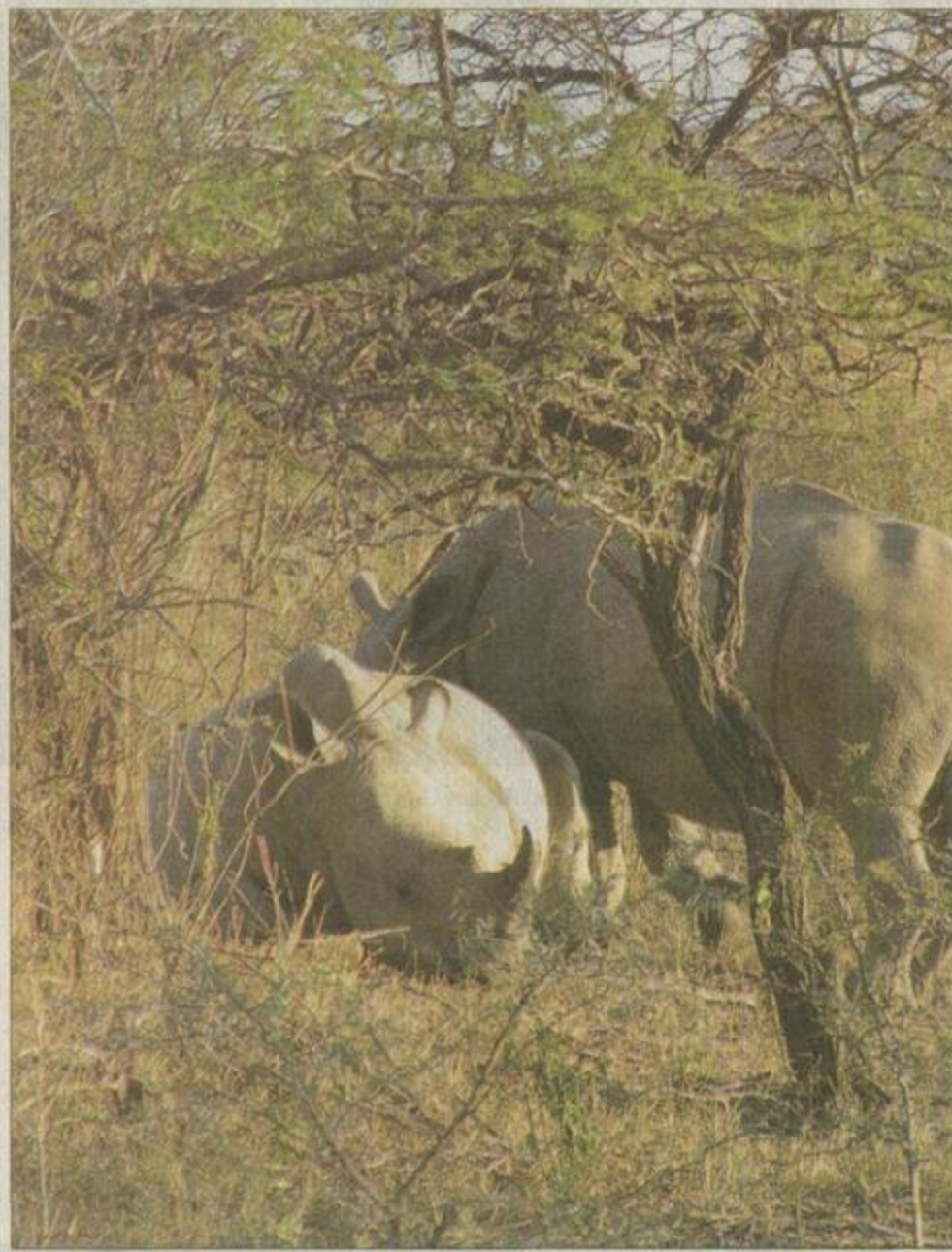
"The old style of tackling poaching was guns and fences and uniforms and exclusivity, but you can't do that any more – meaningful moves against poaching depend on communities."

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 the 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. The aircraft's identifying numbers had been covered so there was no way to trace it. "We saw the helicopter, but had no idea what



BIG BABIES: Juvenile rhinos Nthombi and Thabo roam (fairly) free at Thula Thula, a private game reserve near Empangeni in KwaZulu-Natal.

PICTURES: VIVIEN AND THOMAS HORLER

it was doing. The next day we found Heidi, who had been shot. She'd had a huge horn, nearly a metre long and was 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, because of its price, has long been available as a traditional medicine 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 Heidi'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 – the animals are sometimes darted and have their horns hacked out while unconscious, leaving them to bleed to death – losing rhinos is also horrendously expensive.

Anthony says a white rhino costs around R375 000, and a black rhino, double that. 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.

"So the large-sounding numbers mean nothing – entire sub-species have been wiped out in the past few decades."

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, he says, locals know that you can get 15 years in jail for rhino poaching. Recently a man was convicted in Ulundi, and sent to jail for 15 years. "The news flew around Zululand," says Anthony.

"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."

At Thula Thula, the solution has been bodyguards and community outreach. 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 were taken 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.

Not having been reared by their mothers, the baby rhino have needed all sorts of coaching from McPhee, including how to take mud baths, which are important to protect their skin and get rid of parasites.

"I've had to be their mum and constant companion," says McPhee. "They're becoming more independent now, but will still come to me if they want comfort or a cuddle. Thabo, particularly, still likes to be kissed on the nose and have his face stroked."



GUARDIANS: By day, Alyson McPhee and Bheki Gumede never let the rhinos out of their sight.

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 hurt 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.