

adventure

YEAR IN THE WILD



SCOTT RAMSAY

I WAS standing a few metres from two adult white rhinos in Mkhaya Game Reserve in Swaziland. They were walking slowly towards us, munching grass and scything their heads from side to side.

Instinctively, I got up to walk further away, but my guide, Bongani Mbatha, held me still.

The grey behemoths walked within metres of us, breathing heavily. White rhinos can weigh more than two tons, about the same as a big 4x4, but their huge feet landed delicately on the ground.

They stand almost 2m tall and if need be, they can run faster than Usain Bolt. And they are strict vegetarians; in fact, they're probably the biggest pure grazers that ever lived on the planet.

The one rhino's horn was as long as my arm. Despite their fearsome weaponry, they hardly cared for me and Mbatha. They trundled past like happy, docile cows. "Gentle giants", wrote world-renowned African wildlife scientist Richard Estes. There are just 20 000 white rhinos left in Africa. Long before modern humans stood upright, millions of these animals ranged all over the region south of the Zambezi and Kunene Rivers.

They were so plentiful – and trusting of people – that hunters shot them without consideration. They were even seen around Cape Town; the first record of a rhino killing was in 1647 by Dutch settler Leendert Janssen, who wrote that one was shot "near the fort".

Today poachers have reduced them to pitiful numbers. The last few remain in national and private parks. Even with protection, they are being killed all too regularly.

Yet they are one of Africa's iconic animals, drawing tourists from all over the world to the region. This was clear at Mkhaya Game Reserve and Hlane Royal National Park. Over the past 10 years, I've travelled to almost all rhino areas in southern Africa, and I'd never before got so close to them as I did in Swaziland.

The biggest population of rhinos is in the Kruger National Park. It is also where most of the poaching occurs. More than 1 000 rhinos were killed last year in South Africa, most of them white rhinos. But in Swaziland, only three have been lost since 1992. As a percentage of the total population in each country, this is just a fraction of the killings in South Africa.

Why the stark difference? There is zero tolerance for poaching in Swaziland. And it's largely because of one man. For his whole adult life, Ted Reilly has led conservation efforts in the kingdom. He spearheaded the creation of the protected areas network, along with the support and endorsement of King Sobhuza II, and more recently King Mswati III.

In 1964, he turned his family farm Mlilwane into a wildlife sanctuary (after the British colonial government denied land for a national park). Reilly was then responsible for reintroducing 22 large animal species to Swaziland, after hunters had wiped them out in the 1950s. The white rhinos were one of these species, along with



UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: Guide Bongani Mbatha and guests get close to white rhinos at Mkhaya Game Reserve.

Pictures: SCOTT RAMSAY

RHINO-FRIENDLY SWAZIS



COSY: The thatched chalets at Mkhaya Game Reserve are unfenced and without windows, making for a comfortable wilderness getaway



IN FOCUS: Hlane Royal National Park is one of the best places in Southern Africa to photograph white rhino.

can't, then an additional two years is added to your jail term."

In South Africa, if someone poaches a rhino, they won't necessarily go to jail. They are given the option to pay a fine and walk free.

"The laws in Swaziland don't provide for a reduction of a sentence, or a suspension of a sentence. This legislation has worked for more than 20 years. Since then, we've only lost three rhinos to poaching."

"Anti-poaching legislation in Swaziland is preventative legislation. A few people say our law is draconian, but it's worked."

The Game Act also enables the rangers to do their job effectively. They have a right to carry arms and have effective powers of arrest. Rangers are able to search anyone, anywhere in the country – not just in the parks – without a search warrant.

"Swaziland also has excellent intelligence in the communities," Ted elaborated, "and we are almost always aware of where the poachers are, and what they are doing. We have a standing public offer of R50 000 reward for any information that leads to the conviction of a poacher; and this has been very effective."

Because of this effective legislation and enforcement, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has ranked Swaziland as the most successful country for rhino conservation in Africa.

On my next walk with Mbatha, we were joined by two French tourists who had travelled to Swaziland from Paris. They had never seen a rhino before, let alone walked near one. Sure enough, Mbatha tracked and found three white rhinos, then he positioned us behind a termite mound. As the creatures came loping towards us, I watched the young French woman's face. It first went a pale shade of white. But as the rhinos kept on walking, almost ignoring us except for a glance or two, her face lit up into a smile and tears welled up in her eyes.

"I can't believe I've just seen a rhino," she said, stunned in delight. "I never thought I'd see these animals."

To walk with rhinos in Swaziland, see www.biggameparks.co.za. Ramsay is a photojournalist focusing on protected areas in southern Africa. Partners include Cape Union Mart, K-Way, Ford and Goodyear. See www.yearinthewild.com

lions, elephants and hippos.

Reilly drafted the Game Act, a powerful piece of conservation legislation that was approved by the king and passed into law.

"According to the Game Act, if you poach or attempt to poach one of the specially protected species (white or black rhino, elephant or lion), you will go to jail," Ted said.

"There's a minimum of five years' imprisonment, which could be increased to 15 years. There is no option of paying a fine to get off your jail sentence.

"On top of your jail sentence, the prescribed value of the rhino poached must be paid back to the owner of the animal. And if you