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A lad and his Rhino

BY: Neal McKenna, January 18, 2010

Her name is Douwlina. She tips the scales at a delicate 990 kilos and is madly in love. The object of her affection is Marthinus van der Merwe, a rather atypical South African twenty-two year-old. “Ja,” he laughs, “she lives on my parents’ farm and thinks she’s my girlfriend. I really don’t know what she thinks she is, but I do know for sure, she doesn’t have any clue she’s a rhino. Actually, she’s afraid of the other two rhino we have. She won’t go anywhere near them.”

However, Douwlina’s confusion about her identity is well justified. She was raised by a sheep named Bonnie and has always been in the company of humans. Unfortunately, three years ago, her first brush with mankind was not a pleasant one. Less than a day after she was born, her mother was killed by poachers leaving the infant rhino an orphan. “She was about 48 hours old when Dr. Douw Grobler, a wildlife veterinarian, found her wondering alone. He brought her to the Kapama Endangered Species Centre, near Hoedspruit. She was very weak but they managed to save her. She was named Douwlina in honour of him.”

It seems poachers are paid up to \$(US)10,000 per kilogram of rhino horn but the retail value for the processed product can soar to as much as \$54,000 per kilo. Although rhino horn is just compressed keratin fibers, the same stuff that makes up hair and fingernails, it is nearly 100% pure and a prized ingredient used in Chinese medicine.



Marthinus van der Merwe and ‘girlfriend’ Douwlina

Currently, the call for rhino horn is on the rise and sadly most of it, *available for sale*, comes from South Africa. This spike in demand has been attributed to a so-far unidentified Vietnamese government minister who recently claimed he was cured of cancer after ingesting a potion containing rhino horn. While clinical evidence remains inconclusive, this testimonial has had devastating repercussions in South Africa where, since mid 2008, more than 200 rhino have been poached – 38 of them inside Kruger National Park!

“Rhino poaching takes place all over Africa,” says Juanita Ungerer, General Manager at the Kapama Endangered Species Centre. “Where there is game, there will be poachers. According to the Anti-

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Poaching Unit in South Africa, there are approximately 14 000 white rhino and less than 4 000 black rhino left in our country.”

Conservationist, Pelham Jones says: “Rhino poaching has been problematic in southern Africa for a number of years now. Rhino herds are spread out over a large number of properties; we have a very good road system and communication systems are well developed – all these factors work to the advantage of the poacher.”

Meanwhile, when Douwlina reached one year in age, she was moved to Leopard Rock Nature Reserve, the van der Merwe’s private game estate, near Hoedspruit, in Limpopo province. There, life has been sweet. “When we got her, she was about a year old but she has grown a lot since then,” says Marthinus. “Now she is about 1.4 metres tall and 2.4 m. long. But even when she was “little,” she still seemed very big. When she first came to the farm, I was really scared of her. It was my mom who was the brave one and started getting close to her, talking softly and gently touching her. Douwlina responded well to that and liked it even better when we started hand-feeding her apples and crunchy vegetables. Then, my mom started giving her mud baths, sort-of like how a rhino mama would do it and that was it. We were in.

“I spent a lot of time on the farm that summer and Douwlina and I became best friends. We got to know each other really well and eventually, she was following me wherever I would go. I think she fell in love. She was my shadow. I would go jogging with my dog and she’d follow behind. And soon, she was jogging right beside me, like she would have done with her mother. She runs pretty fast for a big girl. I’ve been told they can sprint short distances at 45 kilometers per hour. I would like to be able to do that!

“Rhinos have really poor eyesight,” he explains. “And their eyes are on either side of their heads, so I don’t think Douwlina sees the world like we do. But she has a good nose. She can sniff you out no matter where you go. I remember going to one worker’s house on another part of the farm. I hadn’t been over there in a long time and I know for sure she had never been there. Yet, not long after I got there, Douwlina showed up and surprised everyone.

“She also recognises the sound of my car’s motor. When I was in university, she would be the first to know I was arriving home and would run to the gate to meet me. But now, because there is so much poaching going on, security has had to be adjusted. We have installed two new and very tall electric fences, one encircling the other, around our property. Right now, she is getting used to living in a space that is very close to her natural environment. She shares it with a herd of young buffalo, and she likes being with them...

“Rhinos are not supposed to be particularly friendly but Douwlina is,” Marthinus continues. “She is shy and a bit timid but she’s still quite social. She likes to meet people as long as they don’t make any sudden moves. Sometimes people forget she is a wild animal and that makes the whole situation quite unpredictable. What makes her potentially dangerous is the fact that she is not aware of her size or her strength. If she did hurt anyone, it would be an accident. She is not at all aggressive like a white rhino is supposed to be.” He grins. “When she gets frightened, she tries to hide behind me or my mother. It looks pretty funny...

He stops for a moment, obviously remembering and then he chuckles. “I should explain, our house on the farm has an outside court and my bedroom opens onto it. Another thing is the door swings out

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onto the stoep, not inward like most doors do. Sometimes in the evening, I would lie on my bed talking on the phone, and she would sleep in front of my door. The problem is she snores really loud and – well – she farts a lot and the rhino kind are really stinky. There I would be – not able to hear the phone and in a room with no air. I would try to wake her up but this girl goes into a coma when she falls asleep. So, with her body leaning up against the glass doors, I would be stuck inside.

“Other times, she would lean too heavily against the glass and it would break. We replaced a lot of glass and doors during that first year. Finally, I discovered the only thing that really spooks her is a flyswatter. Now, when I want her to get away from the door, or make her leave me alone, I just swipe the flyswatter through the air. The noise scares her and she runs away. Sometimes, I still have to chase her with it to make her stay away.

“Another time, we were having supper in the dining room instead of having a braai out back and Douwlina tried to get into the house to be with us. But, because she was so wide, she got jammed in the kitchen doorway and it took a lot of hard pushing to get her out. With all the commotion, she got scared and that only made things worse. We finally got her un-stuck but I don’t remember if we ever finished supper.”

Without a doubt, life with a rhinoceros who thinks she’s a sheep or maybe even a human presents a lot of unusual challenges but the van der Merwes wouldn’t have it any other way. And, though Douwlina is now being reintroduced into a wild setting on the game farm, she will always have a special place in their hearts.