

TRIBUTE

A tribute to Blythe Loutit

Pierre du Preez

Blythe Loutit, co-founder of the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) and renowned conservationist and artist, passed away after a long illness on Tuesday, 14 June 2005. She was 64 years old. Blythe was the leading force in the conservation and protection of the desert-dwelling black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) in the Kunene Region, north-west Namibia.

The youngest of four children, Blythe was born Blythe Pascoe on 14 November 1940 at Pieter-maritzburg, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, and grew up on an extensive farm, surrounded by animals and plants. Her mother, Dulcie Pascoe, was a landscape gardener, and Blythe could remember accompanying her on many of her jobs designing gardens.

In 1973 she married Rudi Loutit, a conservationist. Five years later they moved to Ugabmund in Skeleton Coast Park, where Rudi was posted as warden.

At Girls Collegiate School her art teacher was a naturalist, focusing attention on detail. By all accounts Blythe was more interested in her horses, dogs and the plants around her than in school, dolls and girl friends so it's no wonder that she moved into the world of conservation. She joined the Natal Parks Board, furthering her interest in botany, which led to her introduction to formal illustration. She trained in scientific illustration at the Botanic Research Institute of South Africa and illustrated several books on the flora of Namibia (and South Africa). She also painted landscapes and wildlife.

From 1982 onwards, she worked tirelessly on rhino projects in Namibia and headed SRT, which was set up to stop the slaughter of the desert-adapted black rhino surviving in the Kunene Region (former Damaraland and Kaokoland).

Blythe's life's work in saving the desert-dwelling black rhino started when she and her Irish terrier,



Keyyn Adcock

Blythe Loutit, conservationist and artist, and her companion, Eccles.

Eccles, set off in 'Monty', an old short-wheel-base Land Rover, to investigate the unique vegetation of the area adjoining the Skeleton Coast Park in the Namib Desert. She got stranded with a puncture and a broken jack on a track in the lonely park and there she met Ina Britz. While Ina showed her how to use a high-lift jack, she told Blythe that close by at a remote spring that she had just visited she found three dead rhinos at the water. They had been riddled with bullet holes from an automatic weapon. Their carcasses were horribly mutilated and only bloody tissue remained where their horns had been hacked off.

It was the early 1980s; Damaraland was a 'restricted' area, yet the South African Defence Force and administrative officials were having a free-for-all annihilating its rich animal population. They were killing rare and endangered wildlife—indiscriminately and in any way possible: from helicopters and

land vehicles, at the scarce waterholes and with automatic weapons.

There and then two women decided this massacre of precious wildlife had to end. With assistance from their husbands, conservation-conscious businessmen in Windhoek, and community leaders in Damaraland they established the Namibia Wildlife Trust, which eventually led to the formation of SRT as it is still known today. A small group of people started patrolling and monitoring the area—specifically keeping an eye on the black rhino and elephant populations. It was never easy. Early days were marked by much frustration: many tears flowed over the failure to stop the poaching, raising funds was difficult, and criticism was levelled at the way the trust was being run.

But if one could choose the qualities that most reflected Blythe's personality, those qualities would probably be her sense of humour and her stubbornness—a strong combination. She never gave up.

Much of the trust's work in the early days was supported by children. Blythe had the vision to see that if SRT could get children with their boundless energy involved in a conservation project, it would be to great effect. Rhino friendship patches became the rage at schools, and children sold them to all and sundry to raise the 1000 rand they needed to sponsor their own rhino. It was a child who wrote to the trust in the late 1980s saying, 'If they are killing rhinos only for their horns and the horns are like fingernails, why don't you cut them off?' and that is just what the Department of Nature Conservation did. Two dehorning operations in Damaraland, besides protecting the rhino, raised awareness of their plight to new heights. Much controversy resulted but the trust's profile became more prominent and finding funds became a little easier.

To raise funds for the rhino, Blythe sold her own paintings throughout the years, most significantly at Christies in London and through the David Shepherd Foundation. Blythe illustrated six books on plants and wrote and illustrated several scientific and general publications, including her own book for children, *The Magic Elephant*. A close friend of 25 years, Sharon Montgomery, who worked with Blythe at SRT, wrote in an article in the April 2005 edition of *Flamingo* that while Blythe was famous for her artistic talent, it was her 'passion for rhino that has made her the focus of attention both in Namibia and internationally'.

SRT was the first non-governmental organization to actively involve the local community in its conser-

vation efforts. Tourism, craft-making, guiding and direct employment benefited the area, and SRT became a household word. Blythe's imagination, creativity, stubbornness and sense of humour were the adhesive—without her, there would be no SRT today and the rhino would be very much worse off.

Over the years SRT developed a monitoring system and established a rudimentary computer database for each rhino. Today the black rhino population in the north-western regions of Namibia is one of the best documented in the world. While in 1985 during the first census only 56 rhinos were counted, there are now well over 130 individual rhino records.

Seven rhino generations have been monitored, respected and loved in Damaraland. Blythe has moved on, but her spirit of dedication and her love of rhinos and all other animals will remain. On behalf of all rhino lovers and conservationists, we wish her peace, knowing that she has done during her lifetime what few people could ever have achieved.

Her husband, Rudi, survives her and is continuing her work.

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

- 1986, Peter Scott Merit Award at the IUCN Species Survival Commission in Costa Rica
- 1988, Endangered Species Trust Award
- 1991, Operation Survival Award
- 1996, presentation of the keynote address at the Species Survival Commission African Rhino Specialist Group General Assembly in Montreal, Canada
- 2001, BBC award for saving a species (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*)

Raoul du Toit adds

At an early stage in my work on rhinos it was very important to meet someone like Blythe who was getting on with the job of rhino conservation in such a straightforward way, with no glamour, unlike a lot of the other people I was working with. Blythe not only gave a friendly, human face to rhino conservation but also showed that if you take one step at a time you can make a big difference, which she certainly did over the years. Despite all the conservation politics that have swirled up at times in Namibia, no one can deny that Blythe's heart was always 100% in the right place and without her, a lot less would have been achieved for the desert rhinos.