

OBITUARIES

IAN PLAYER 1927–2014 **Champion of white rhinos passes away at 87**

Tribute by Peter Hitchins and Clive Walker
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Ian Player began his conservation career as a game ranger with the Natal Parks Board in 1952, eventually retiring as Chief Nature Conservator. His accomplishments were many and included leading a team of dedicated rangers who were responsible for capturing and translocating the white rhinoceros from the Umfolozi Game Reserve in the 1960s.

The proclamation of Umfolozi Game Reserve, as Africa's first official nature reserve in 1897 had saved the southern white rhino from extinction. For the first few years the principal job of Ian Player and the team of rangers under his control was to protect the existing population of rhinos, which at that time were found nowhere else in the world. When Ian and his staff realized that the species had reached its carrying capacity in Umfolozi, they petitioned the Parks Board to take action to extend its range.

In Operation Rhino, which ran from 1961 to 1972 under Ian's leadership, the Natal Parks Board donated, sold and delivered 1,109 white rhino to other protected areas across Africa and zoological gardens around the world. The rest is history.

Ian introduced wilderness trails to the game reserves of Zululand and in 1957 founded the Wilderness Leadership School, a unique conservation education programme to develop leaders and preserve wilderness. Since then, thousands of young people and adults from all ethnic communities and many nations have graduated from this field school and have made a great impact on conservation in their communities. He also set up a training programme for rangers and trained many young game scouts who became famous in Zululand. He travelled extensively on annual trips

throughout Africa, Europe and the United States. On these trips, Ian gave lectures, promoted conservation films, and raised money for numerous environmental projects.

In 1977 he established the World Wilderness Congress, now a triennial event, which first convened in October of that year in Johannesburg. More than 2,000 of the world's leading scientists, politicians, financial leaders, poets, politicians, artists, journalists and others shared the platform to focus attention on conservation needs, protection of wilderness areas, and how such goals could be accomplished. Ian wrote a number of books, among them *Men, Rivers and Canoes* 1964, *The White Rhino Saga* 1972 and *Zululand Wilderness* 1997. He was honoured by many organisations around the world for his commitment to conservation and environmental education, and served as a member of the Natal Parks Board and later the South African National Parks Board.

Ian Player's work had a huge impact on conservation in South Africa. But he was a modest man who acknowledged that his many accomplishments were only made possible by the commitment and self-sacrifice of the dedicated force of rangers who served under him. In paying tribute to Ian we at the same time wish to pay tribute to all who at this time are engaged in the field in the present battle to save the rhino.

Peter Hitchins and Clive Walker are both former members of the IUCN SSC African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG). Peter Hitchins first met Ian in 1960. When he joined the Board as a ranger in 1961, he worked under Ian and came to know him well. Clive Walker was inspired by the the Wilderness Leadership School that Ian founded, after attending a trail in the Umfolozi Wilderness in 1972. This led Walker to establish the Lapalala Wilderness School in the Waterberg in 1981. He jointly with Ian served on the SANParks Board between 2000 and 2003. (See plates 14, 15 and 16 centre page viii).