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THE ELEPHANT WARS

LAWRENCE ANTHONY RESCUED THE ANIMALS
IN THE BAGHDAD ZOO AND SAVED RARE
RHINOS IN A WAR-TORN CORNER OF THE
CONGO. CAN HE HALT SOUTH AFRICA'S PLAN
TO KILL SCORES OF ELEPHANTS?

by TOM CLYNES *illustration by* NESSIM HIGSON



IT'S EARLY EVENING IN Zululand, and Thula Thula game reserve is beginning to live up to its name, which means "peaceful." The baboons have taken their domestic squabbles off the lawn, making way for an easygoing herd of impalas, which graze on the tree-shaded grass beyond the veranda. As the sun melts into the horizon a family of vervet monkeys frolics in the trees, and a pair of tawny eagles turns slow circles above the outdoor bar.

Lawrence Anthony, my host, has spent the afternoon on the phone with a confidant of the leaders of a Ugandan guerrilla army that has commandeered a national park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The conservationist usually leaves the hospitality side of the safari business to his wife Françoise, who is a masterful cook and hostess. But with Françoise in Cape Town on a wine-buying expedition, Anthony is stationed at the bar, making small talk with guests eager to gush about the day's close encounters with elephants and rhinos and giraffes. Anthony excuses himself to take a look at a broken ice machine and then chides the bartender, in a mix of Zulu and English, for having only three whites on the wine list — a mortal sin in South Africa's high-end safari business. Returning



from the kitchen, he pulls a Dunhill from his pack and bends stiffly at the waist to light it in the flame of an oil lamp, then eases himself into a wicker chair.

"The days of *Born Free* are over," he tells me, exhaling a smoky sigh. "If you want to save animals nowadays you'd better be able to make a good martini."

HE DOES INDEED MIX a good martini, but Lawrence

Anthony stirs up an even better shit storm. Most recently he has thrown himself into the middle of the controversy over the South African government's decision to lift its 14-year moratorium on culling elephants. Elephants take an enormous toll on their surroundings, damaging plant life and food and shelter sources for other animals. Though still endangered in parts of central Africa, elephants have multiplied in southern Africa to the point that they are stressing ecosystems in fabled reserves such as Kruger National Park. If the cull goes forward, hundreds, if not thousands, of South Africa's approximately 20,000 elephants would be killed, entire families gunned down by sharpshooters.

"There's no humane way to cull elephants, and there's no scientific basis to support culling," says Anthony. "They're



fending off looters to save the animals starving in the city's forsaken zoo (showing neutrality, Anthony saved Uday Hussein's lions, too). Last year he dropped into war-torn southern Sudan and convinced a murderous rebel army to stop poaching and start protecting a subspecies of rhinoceros teetering on the edge of extinction.

Anthony has emerged over the past decade as a particularly effective conservationist, a get-things-done presence in a world in which passion and science often sink in the cautious currents of inertia and rhetoric.

"Lawrence is able to find highly positive solutions, and he's proven himself willing to stick his neck out in places where most conservationists won't go," says Dr. Ian Raper, president of the Southern Africa Association for the Advancement of Science. "And unlike a lot of nonscientists who care deeply for animals, he isn't caught in a romantic swoon."

Anthony may not be swooning, but there is a romantic edge to his "fuck it, let's go" approach to conservation — a sincere and sometimes naive approach that you'd have to call quixotic if it weren't so abidingly effective. Anthony's obdurate sense of justice may be what drives him from one adventure to

doing it for the money, but it's going to cost them more in terms of lost revenue from tourism. Plus, as we've seen, the thousands of traumatized elephants that escape death are going to be dangerous to humans. It may well be irresponsible to keep the park open if the cull goes ahead."

Over the last two years Anthony has rallied sympathetic scientists and animal-rights supporters around the world against the proposed cull. He has accused government officials of weakness and incompetence. Worse yet, he says, is that the government will be profiting from the killing by selling or offering as gifts to local communities the skins and meat of the carcasses or, as was permitted last summer, selling the "stockpiled" tusks to Japan, where demand for ivory is strong despite the ban.

Anthony and other prominent conservationists — among them South Africa's Ian Raper and Kenya's Daphne Sheldrick — say the elephant population can be brought under control by darting the animals with contraceptives, removing man-made watering holes, and creating transfrontier parks that would allow elephants to roam across borders. But the government has dug in and issued what it calls its final decision. The debate is over, they say, and the culling could begin as early as this year. Even some conservationists, including Richard Leakey, the famed paleontologist and former head of the Kenya Wildlife Service, say a herd-thinning may be necessary; others have thrown up their hands, claiming that the fight is unwinnable.

Then again, winning unwinnable battles is something of a specialty for Anthony. A few years ago he rescued two rogue herds of traumatized elephants that were about to be shot and rehabilitated them, a feat that earned him the moniker "elephant whisperer." In 2003 he made a mad dash into Iraq during the American invasion, renting a car in Kuwait City and driving to Baghdad, then dodging bullets and

A MATTER OF TRUST

Anthony with one of "his" elephants

the next, but it's balanced by a childlike curiosity and mischievousness — as well as an utter disregard for his own limitations.

"When I was a boy," Anthony says, "my father told me, 'Lawrence, you must not try to be interesting; rather, you must be interested in things.' I'm not afraid to go down paths, and I'm lucky enough that I'm not affected by others' opinions. I have never felt the need to accept the status quo or pay homage to the authorities."

LAWRENCE ANTHONY IS THE ELDEST CHILD IN A WISECRACKING Afrikaner and British family that moved around southern Africa — Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi — as his father was sent to open up new offices for an insurance company. According to his mother Regina, "Lawrence would drag home everything from orphaned chimps and bush babies to village children and lost diplomats. I remember my husband and I would look at each other and say, 'Where on earth did this child come from?'"

Unable to get into university, Anthony began selling encyclopedias, then insurance. Eventually he went into business as a property developer. He was what some Afrikaners call a *kaffir boetie*, which can be translated as "nigger lover." When apartheid finally fell apart, leaders of the Inkatha Freedom Party came to him for help with the transition to a postapartheid government.

"Basically they wanted me to help them figure out whom they could trust," Anthony says. "Our family had always associated with blacks, so it came easily."

He had long dreamed of running a safari business that would fully involve local communities in ecotourism, something that South Africa, in the receding shadow of apartheid, has been largely unable to do. In 1998, while driving through the hills above the town of Empangeni on his way to a meeting, he noticed a nearly 5,000-acre hunting reserve for sale, set in rolling hills that were once the private hunting grounds of Shaka, the great Zulu warrior king.

The only problem, Anthony told Françoise, who is known as Frankie, was that the reserve was too small to have lions, one of the “big five” animals (along with rhinos, leopards, buffalo, and elephants) on every tourist’s wish list.

“Frankie said not to worry, that she would cook to replace the lions,” Anthony recalls. “And on the strength of that noble sentiment we sold everything and came to live in the bush.”

It took five years for the Anthonys to get Thula Thula into reasonable shape. Now they are on the verge of linking it with Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park, via a 40,000-acre chunk of pristine land owned by six rural communities. The endeavor will create a superpark that will serve as an important migration corridor for wildlife and allow locals to benefit from conservation by owning a piece of the booming ecotourism industry. And it will let Anthony expand his elephant herd, which has grown to 15. Tellingly, he did not seek funding from any of the big environmental NGOs, for which he has little reverence.

“Enough of this endless protesting and raising money to save the seals and the whales,” he says. “They’re spending billions, and everything’s getting worse. You’ve got Greenpeace throwing tomatoes at people they don’t like, which only serves to acknowledge their inability to achieve real things. Then you’ve got people at the science-based organizations so worried about their reputations that they won’t take risks. Without risk, nothing gets done.”

In 2003, Anthony came up with an idea for a new kind of NGO, which he would name the Earth Organization. “The idea is to support people who are ready to take creative action. We want people who are willing to actually do things, not just be members and give money.”

The Earth Organization’s first major project came in 2006, when Anthony heard of the plight of northern white rhinoceroses, which are holed up in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s Garamba National Park. With only four of them left in the wild, the northern white rhino is the most endangered large mammal on Earth.

Garamba had been invaded by Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a guerrilla group led by the most wanted man in Africa, Joseph Kony. After the LRA killed 12 game rangers and eight UN troops, Anthony decided to “go up and have a talk” with the army.

“It was a desperate measure,” Anthony tells me. He traveled to the southern Sudanese city of Juba, where LRA representatives were holding talks with the Ugandan government.

“I had never seen so many guns or felt so much tension,” Anthony says.

“I couldn’t believe it,” a Kenyan mediator, Professor Medo Misama, recalls. “I said, ‘You came all the way from South Africa to negotiate with the guerrillas on behalf of a rhinoceros?’ It was impossible to see him as a normal human being. But I realized he had a serious agenda, and there was something sincere about him that defied logic.”

Misama arranged a meeting with the LRA representative Martin Ojul, who invited Anthony to the LRA’s camp. Misama pleaded with Anthony not to go. “They’ll take you hostage,” he said. “They won’t object to putting bullets in your head.”

Anthony was trembling when he entered the LRA’s camp. “I’ve worked with a lot of killers,” he recalls, “but the LRA makes them look like high-school prefects.”

Unbeknownst to Anthony, though, Kony had recently dreamed that salvation would come in the form of a white man from South Africa.

“It took some time to break the ice,” Anthony says, “but they eventually started to perceive me as having some sort of spiritual connection with the animals.” After two days of negotiations, he convinced the LRA to issue a statement pledging to “act as curators” for all endangered species in the park, including the Congo giraffe and the okapi, and to allow park rangers to work without interference.

Although one conservationist criticized Anthony for “shaking hands on agreements with men who have raped, kidnapped, and

murdered,” the agreement marked the first time a conservation organization had participated in UN-sponsored peace talks. And, Anthony argues, there was no other choice. “The LRA, as the park’s only authority, had the rhinos’ future in their hands.” The Earth Organization notched its first success; the agreements endure.

A SOUTHERN AFRICAN GAME RESERVE WITHOUT LIONS IS ONE thing, but one without elephants is a sure nonstarter. Shortly after the purchase of Thula Thula, Anthony learned of a herd of seven elephants that, deemed incorrigible, were set to be shot. Elephants, like apes and whales, have highly organized societies and long memories, and these seven had witnessed family members killed by humans, consequently turning dangerously aggressive.

Anthony had no experience working with elephants (in any mental state). Undeterred, he built an electrically fenced *boma*, or corral, and brought in his starter herd. Within 24 hours the elephants were running amok through a neighboring village, charging cattle herders, and trampling a ranger’s hut in nearby Mpumalanga.

“It was chaos,” says Anthony, chuckling at the memory. “I called in a friend with a helicopter to search overhead while Frankie and I cruised the back roads in the Land Rover, asking people if they had, perchance, spotted seven crazed elephants.”

In the end, it took a week — and an expensive combination of trucks, cranes, and tranquilizer darts — to get the herd back home. The incident did little to endear Anthony to his new neighbors. Even though each of the 55 jobs at Thula Thula supports an estimated eight villagers, in a place where unemployment is around 60 percent and the rate of AIDS is 40 percent, Anthony understood that if his elephants threatened any more humans, they’d be shot.

In desperation, Anthony drove to the rebuilt *boma* and lived outside it. “They were bananas,” he says. “Nana, the matriarch, just wanted to kill me. But I knew I needed them to trust at least one human being or there’d be no hope of saving them.”

At first the elephants responded best to being ignored. Then Anthony started talking quietly, keeping his voice at a constant tone as he sang Bob Dylan songs and “all kinds of rubbish.” After two weeks

“There’s no humane way of killing elephants, and there’s no scientific basis to support the cull,” Anthony maintains.
“THEY’RE DOING IT FOR THE MONEY.”

Nana put her trunk through the fence to smell Anthony. Then she gave him a nuzzle. Immediately the herd settled down.

Anthony insists his purpose is to help the elephants settle, not to tame them, though he admits that he sometimes gets “a bit fringy” about elephants. “I’m willing to go out on the wobbly edge of science and pay attention to my own gut feelings when I’m dealing with the herd. Some scientists will mock me, but there’s something mystical, almost spiritual, about it.”

THE NEXT AFTERNOON ANTHONY TAKES ME OUT IN HIS BEAT-up Nissan pickup to meet the herd. We snake along rough dirt roads, through the savannas and scrub forests above the Nseleni River, which is nearly dry.

“The Land Rover’s a bit more sure-footed, but it’s in the shop,” Anthony says. He leans forward on the wheel and looks over at me, raising an eyebrow. “Elephant attack,” he says.

The heads of giraffes rise above the bushes and thorny trees a few



LIONS OF ARABIA U.S. soldiers brought Uday Hussein's pets to Anthony.

and pushed it upside down into a grove of trees. With one of the tourists on top of him, Anthony managed to get his pistol out and fire a few shots into the air. mNumzane paused and regained his senses. The animal pulled the broken windshield off the Land Rover and put his trunk inside. "He started sniffing and nuzzling my body," Anthony says, "as if to say he was sorry."

After a few more encounters with other animals and guests, Anthony recalls, "It was clear that mNumzane was going to kill someone. I made the decision to shoot him. When I went out to do it, he came over to me to say hello. I couldn't do it. I had to hire someone."

Night has fallen by the time we spot the rest of the herd, crashing languidly through a grove of low trees, side-lit by the reddish cast of a full moon. Seven or eight adults come toward us, followed closely by three calves.

"Look at them!" Anthony says. "They're so big and beautiful."

He shouts out a vaguely Tarzan-like call to Nana, who cocks a massive ear in our direction and starts walking over. I feel the earth shake as the others follow.

Nana vents her displeasure with one of the young bulls, who comes bounding toward us, flapping its ears and shaking its trunk menacingly. "That wasn't a real charge," Anthony tells me. If he'd been serious, I am assured, the elephant would have put its ears back and curled its trunk to take the blow.

Suddenly Nana, who stands 10 feet high at the shoulder, is at Anthony's window, extending her trunk into the cab. Two huge nostrils come toward us, drawing tremendous quantities of air with each deep, hissing breath. They sniff at Anthony's shirt, leaving a string of goo across his chest. The trunk sniffs tentatively at me; the nostrils draw away quickly at my unfamiliar scent. She goes back to nuzzling Anthony, who keeps murmuring sweet nothings, keeping the tone of his voice constant and reassuring. He peels open a loaf of bread and offers a few slices, which the elephant grabs with the end of her trunk and lifts up into her mouth. It's the most stunning animal encounter I've ever had.

IN APRIL OF 2003, AS THE AMERICAN INVASION OF IRAQ WAS under way, Anthony watched bombs dropping on Baghdad and thought

about the animals in the city's zoo, the biggest in the Middle East. He knew that zoo animals had suffered terribly in most of the past century's conflicts. He checked with an American diplomat and learned, not surprisingly, that there was no plan for the Baghdad Zoo — that the animals were, in fact, caught in crossfire in the heart of the city, without water or food or anyone to care for them.

"Something moved inside me," Anthony says. "I decided that I was not going to be a bystander."

Within 48 hours he was on a flight to Kuwait. He rented a car and bluffed his way through one shoot-to-kill checkpoint after another, telling dumbfounded soldiers that he had *(continued on page 155)*

feet from the road, swiveling on their cartoonish necks as we pass. We stop to get a good look at one six-month-old calf; it's already moving gracefully, and venturing surprisingly far from its mother. We continue wending our way upland, past herds of zebra and assorted antelope — impala, gnu, kudu, waterbuck, duiker, nyala — and a rhinoceros.

"We've lost three of our four original rhinos," Anthony tells me. "One poaching, one drowning, one elephant attack."

Dusk is approaching when we come across our first elephant, a 20-year-old bull named Mabula. Anthony stops the truck a good distance away, and we watch the huge beast stomping around, aggressively tearing at trees and shredding bushes. It's easy to see how elephants can ruin the ecosystem for everyone else.

"He's in musth," Anthony says. "He's horny and pissed off."

When an elephant bull is in musth its testosterone levels can increase up to 50 times, enough to short-circuit rational thought. Now, Mabula looks over at us and flares his ears, then takes a couple of steps toward us in a halfhearted mock charge.

Now the senior bull of the herd, Mabula replaced mNumzane ("Sir"). "mNumzane and I had a wonderful relationship," Anthony says. "He came to the lodge twice a week looking for me. He was like a big child." Anthony goes quiet for a moment, and I watch his lips crook into an abrupt, melancholic smile. "But he became very big, and eventually he went very wrong."

One night late last year Anthony and two guests from Uganda came across mNumzane in an agitated state. "No matter how well you know them, they're not thinking straight when they're in musth. I saw him pass in front of us in our headlights, and I knew we were too close. Then one of the Ugandans yelled, and I looked over and saw the elephant's head at the window. He had lost the plot."

mNumzane got his tusks into the truck and flipped the vehicle onto its side. "The Ugandans were going nuts, yelling and screaming — the wrong thing to do." mNumzane shoved the truck over again

In Baghdad, Anthony found zoo cages piled with filth, gnawed corpses, and Bengal tigers too weak to lift their heads.

"I CONSIDERED SHOOTING THE LOT."

been “assigned to take over the zoo.”

Arriving in Baghdad, Anthony encountered a horrific scene at the zoo: many animals dead, the survivors laying listlessly in cages piled high with excrement. Clouds of blackflies swarmed over gnawed animal corpses. He found Bengal tigers too weak to raise their heads and Iraqi brown bears huddling miserably in the corners of their cages.

“I didn’t think I’d be able to save them,” he says. “I considered shooting the lot, to put them out of their misery.”

Instead he began ferrying water from fetid canals, in buckets liberated from a five-star hotel, and feeding the animals moldy vegetables and American soldiers’ MREs. Taking charge of a team of former zoo workers, Anthony fended off looters with a pistol obtained from a sympathetic U.S. soldier and bartered the use of his satellite phone for food and other essentials.

At night Anthony holed up in what was left of the Al Rashid Hotel, where he was taken in by Captain Larry Burris of the 3rd Infantry Division. Burris, who had led the first platoon into Baghdad, would later describe Anthony as “one of the bravest men I’ve ever met.”

“He, and everyone else, thought I was out of my depth,” Anthony says. “I was.”

In the brief calm between President George Bush’s “mission accomplished” declaration and the eruption of the insurgency, the media caught wind of the rescue operation, and news crews descended on the zoo. Anthony’s celebrity led to deals for a book, *Babylon’s Ark*, and a movie, tentatively titled *Good Luck, Mr. Anthony*. After six months in Iraq — during which not a single animal died at the zoo — Anthony was awarded the United Nations Earth Day medal.

BETWEEN 1967 AND 1994 SOUTH AFRICA shot some 16,000 elephants before international pressure from conservationists such as Richard Leakey brought a halt to the killings. Yet Leakey, who now runs the Kenyan NGO Wildlife Direct, recently came out in support of South Africa’s new elephant management plan.

“I objected to the culling of elephants in southern Africa before because the body of knowledge about elephants was ignored,” Leakey told me by telephone from his home in Nairobi. “Back then, a sharpshooter and a warden flew over in a helicopter, shot as many as they could, and left the rest to fend for themselves. South Africa has come a long way since, and they’ve stated that it will be done with the most humane and ethical methods available. I hate culling, but conservationists should consider the entirety of the range of species in an ecosystem. With population growth and climate change, the parks themselves will disappear unless some measures are taken.”

Leakey agrees with Anthony that contraception should be part of the solution, though he says it wouldn’t work fast enough to sufficiently reduce the population of elephants, which have a life span of up to 70 years in the wild. As to Anthony’s notion of removing the water holes, Leakey says it “will just drive the elephants out of the park, where they will end up in conflicts with humans or die in desperation.”

In February, South African environment minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk announced that the country would end its 14-year moratorium on culling elephants. The report struck Anthony like a fist to the nose. He, Ian Raper, and others believe the push to resume culling is driven not by science and concern for animals, but by commerce — pointing to a government report the Earth Organization says puts income from culls at \$1.23 million a year, versus a cost of \$174,000 per elephant cow for contraception — and fear that neighboring countries, which also have surpluses of pachyderms, will see South Africa’s policy as a green light to begin their own lucrative elephant harvests.

“Are we now converting the priceless Kruger Park into a gigantic elephant meat factory farm, under the guise of a cull?” asks Anthony. Culling is likely to begin at smaller South African reserves, where elephants are wiping out critically endangered plant species.

A majority of scientists I interviewed said that South Africa’s elephant-management plan, in which culling is proposed as a last resort after all other options have been exhausted, is a reasonable and scientifically based response to what everyone agrees is an elephant population crisis in southern Africa.

“The issue of how to allow elephants living space alongside an expanding human population is one of the most pressing conservation issues in Africa,” says Iain Douglas-Hamilton, the pioneering elephant researcher who founded Save the Elephants. “The South African government took a great deal of trouble to get it right and deliberated for over a year, seeking the opinions and information of leading scientists in the field of elephant ecology and behavior.”

Anthony and other prominent conservationists and animal-rights activists still feel that the government team did not fully examine the alternatives, especially contraception. Non-hormonal contraception, which involves darting breeding females from helicopters, has been successfully tested on small elephant populations, though the method isn’t a quick fix; it would take about 14 years to make an appreciable dent in populations — too long, in the minds of some, to wait. There’s concern too about the effects of this method on the herds’ social structures, centered as they are on calf-rearing. Douglas-Hamilton says, “If a cull goes wrong it will affect them for a long while. [However,] most elephants in much of Africa are stressed by people and suffer probably more from that than from a one-off cull.”

“I don’t think [government officials] are sufficiently informed about the latest advances in elephant contraception,” Anthony says, noting the one-shot, two-year treatment.

Raper agrees. “Contraception is a workable alternative to the cull,” he says.

ON MY FINAL NIGHT AT THULA THULA, Anthony orders a “big, ballsy” Cape cabernet and we repair to our table.

“Most people look as though they’re in a *dwaal*, in slumber land,” he says, leaning forward in his chair. “What do they care whether all the chimps go extinct? There is a world out

there where things mean something; there is this huge, glorious adventure that is life, and we can choose to grasp it and say, ‘Fuck the rules, I’m going to do something.’”

If the cull goes forward, Anthony says, it will spark international outrage. “Imagine, if you will, the effect of shocking images of dead and dying elephants and the butchering of slain carcasses being projected into the living rooms of households across Britain, Europe, the USA, and elsewhere. What effect will this have on tour operators, travel agents, and ecotourism when the Humane Society and others boycott the country?”

Andrew Rowan, CEO of Humane Society International, says that he is not ready to call for a boycott. “But I can guarantee that if they start culling, our 10.5 million constituents won’t sit idly on the sidelines.” Yet even Rowan, who grew up in South Africa, concedes that the country’s new regulations are generally positive. “For instance, they ban the capture of elephants for commercial uses such as elephant-back safaris or circuses, and they prohibit the export of captive elephants to zoos.”

Positions like Anthony’s are “emotional,” says Richard Leakey. “There are those who can’t abide any idea of killing any sentient animal,” he says. “I respect that, and it’s an attitude I may have shared, but my position has changed with regard to this one very well-demonstrated case in South Africa. I sympathize, but I can’t afford the luxury of leaving animals to destroy ecosystems.”

Anthony remains steadfast. “The careful positioning of anyone against the cull as emotional is all part of the spin,” he says. “With all of our expertise and ability, we can certainly find a better solution than the trauma of slaughtering elephants by the thousands. Let’s stop thinking of a cull and start getting creative. Let’s set new ethical standards in elephant and park management that will serve as an example to the rest of the world.”

ANTHONY AND I SIT ALONE ON THE VERANDA after the other guests have gone off to bed and finish the bottle.

“People ask why I go to these dangerous places,” he says. “They say, ‘You might die.’ I tell them, ‘Do you think you’re not going to die?’ The idea that human life is precious, that we must preserve it at all costs, is crap. I learned that from the blacks. Somehow we whites have managed to convince ourselves that life is about security and buying things. Consequentially most people lead boring, insipid lives. We are horrified to die, and so we surround ourselves with bullshit. We’ve lost the fucking plot.”

Anthony thinks for a minute, then tells me that he believes he can muster enough opposition to the elephant cull to sway the South African officials, no matter what they’re saying now. “This government knows a thing or two about international boycotts,” he says. “And so we are cautiously hoping to win this war.”

He stubs out his cigarette and leans toward me. “Mind if I ask you something about America?” he says.

“The one thing I’ve never understood is the expression ‘to think outside the box.’ I don’t get it. If you’re in a box, why think about it? Why not just climb the fuck out?”

THE

ELEPHANT WARS

