



HAMISH CURRIE, *the founder and director of Back to Africa, talks about how he and a small band of idealists have adopted an alternative approach to species conservation*

WHAT INSPIRED BACK TO AFRICA? I suppose a classic success story of a wild animal being rehabilitated back to the wild is the one about Christian the lion as retold in the current Coronation Group TV ad. But about 12 years ago, at a time of intense rhino poaching, my partner Dr Peter Morkel was delivering rhinos to zoos around the world and he realised that the precious genetic material of many rare and endangered African animals was in captivity abroad. We realised that these animals could play a part in species conservation and the idea of Back to Africa was born.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST SUCCESS TO DATE? We relocated four northern white rhino from a Czech zoo, where experts had tried in vain to get a breeding programme off the ground, to a sanctuary in Kenya just over a year ago and already their behaviour has changed dramatically, so there is a very real hope that they may reproduce. To put it in context, the northern white rhino is the rarest animal on the planet; not only is it extinct in the wild but there are only seven left in captivity, including these four. So the future of the species depends on them being returned to the wild.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A SANCTUARY AND A ZOO? Zoos exist for education and entertainment and so often a large portion of their budget is for displaying animals. Education comes into it but conservation is often forgotten. Charismatic species such as elephants are needed to attract visitors but keeping species in zoos often has little or no conservation value. Most of our projects utilise intensive protected areas (IPAs). We take animals from zoos and contain them in areas where they can be managed. In a sense these IPAs are a step between a zoo and the wild. In these areas animals are kept under intense scrutiny and nutrition and disease are managed; they are also protected from predators and poachers.

A good definition of conservation is 'activities that enhance the persistence of natural habitats and populations', and so Back to Africa is involved in the enhancement of wild-animal populations in Africa using the genes that exist in zoos.