



Protecting prides and crashes

By Keri Harvey

Both Kevin Richardson and Karen Trendler's careers in conservation are driven by pure passion. While Kevin's focus is on lions and carnivores, Karen rehabilitates mostly rhinos and herbivores – and their work's created huge global awareness of these threatened species

Lion whisperer

He's known worldwide as "the lion whisperer" and a champion for lion conservation, but Kevin Richardson believes he simply has an innate ability to understand and relate to wild animals.

"I didn't wake up one morning and want to be 'the lion guy,'" says Kevin, with characteristic irreverent humour. "It was a progression that started 16 years ago with two lion cubs when I worked at the Lion Park near Lanseria, Johannesburg. I was smitten with these little critters, but was told lions would kill me. Yet I saw them as loving and with individual personalities and behaviours." He left the Lion Park in 2005 and took Napoleon and Tau out the following year. Now they're both experienced movie stars, having featured in films and documentaries that raise awareness of the species and its conservation.

"My original plan was to be a vet," says Kevin, "but I didn't get in." So he did a BSc in anatomy and physiology instead. "From that, I certainly never imagined I'd be doing what I am today. I have 26 lions, four black leopards, 15 spotted and two striped hyenas. I love carnivores and find them fascinating. But this is also a life commitment, to look after them for as long as they live."

Kevin's carnivores live where he resides on a 1300ha property 30km outside Dinokeng, towards Roodeplaat Dam. He runs around and plays with them in an approximately 100ha area every other day "because, unfortunately," he smiles, "I also have to do work that entails the Internet, which isn't very lion-friendly". ➤



Also a qualified pilot, Kevin compares playing with his lions with flying a plane. “It’s inherently safe, but accidents do happen,” he muses. “I believe the odds are stacked in my favour, though. There are people who still think I’ll get my head bitten off, and it could happen, but this risk diminishes every day. If I were going in with lions I didn’t know on a daily basis, or walking up to wild ones, that would be a ticking time bomb.”

Kevin believes his head is still on because of his “innate ability to relate to animals and understand them more than most people do. It’s a sixth sense that helps me understand animals intuitively; it’s a heightened sense of awareness and perception that enables me to

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read animals’ emotions. I believe this ability limits my risk with big cats, but I’m not really a lion whisperer. That implies I could go up to a lion in the Kruger Park and get it to roll on its back, which isn’t the case. Even lions which speak lion can’t do this. I’m just tuned into lions, that’s all.”

Still, what works for lions doesn’t work for leopards or hyenas. “They all behave completely differently, so you have to hone your relationship for each species,” says Kevin. “If you treat a leopard the same way as you do a lion, you’re going to come off second-best. You need intimate knowledge of the individual species and then you must apply your knowledge of animal behaviour when working with them. Relationships with lions can only be forged before they’re two years old. After that, you’re an intruder in their territory.”

Kevin says he’s tickled when people ask him his job description. “I think I’m a conservationist first – to bring attention to lion conservation, canned lion-hunting and lions kept in zoos. In the past 50 years, lion numbers have plummeted from 100 000 to about 20 000 in Africa and 75% of their habitat’s been lost [2012]. Lions have been classified as ‘vulnerable’ for some time and I believe the problem is human-animal conflict and habitat

destruction. If we can give lions their habitat back and restore it, they’ll look after themselves.”

To canned lion-hunting, Kevin says: “No – on every level. Recently wild lion numbers have dropped dramatically and canned lion-hunting has soared, so the argument that canned lion-hunting takes pressure off wild lion populations isn’t true. I believe it triggers a thirst for wild lion-hunting too. My dream is for canned lion-hunting to be banned in SA, along with cub-petting – because that’s where the trouble starts.”

He has a simple answer to people who call him irresponsible: “God gave you a brain and you should use it. No, you can’t play with a lion because you see me doing it. Just as you can’t do a heart transplant because you saw it done on TV. You have to have the knowledge and training. It’s definitely not for everyone.”

Still, for Kevin, the most dangerous wild animals are all herbivores. “Those are the ones to watch,” he says, raising his eyebrows. “Buffalo, elephant in musth, hippo and black rhino – not lion. In the wild, lions are really just being lions.”

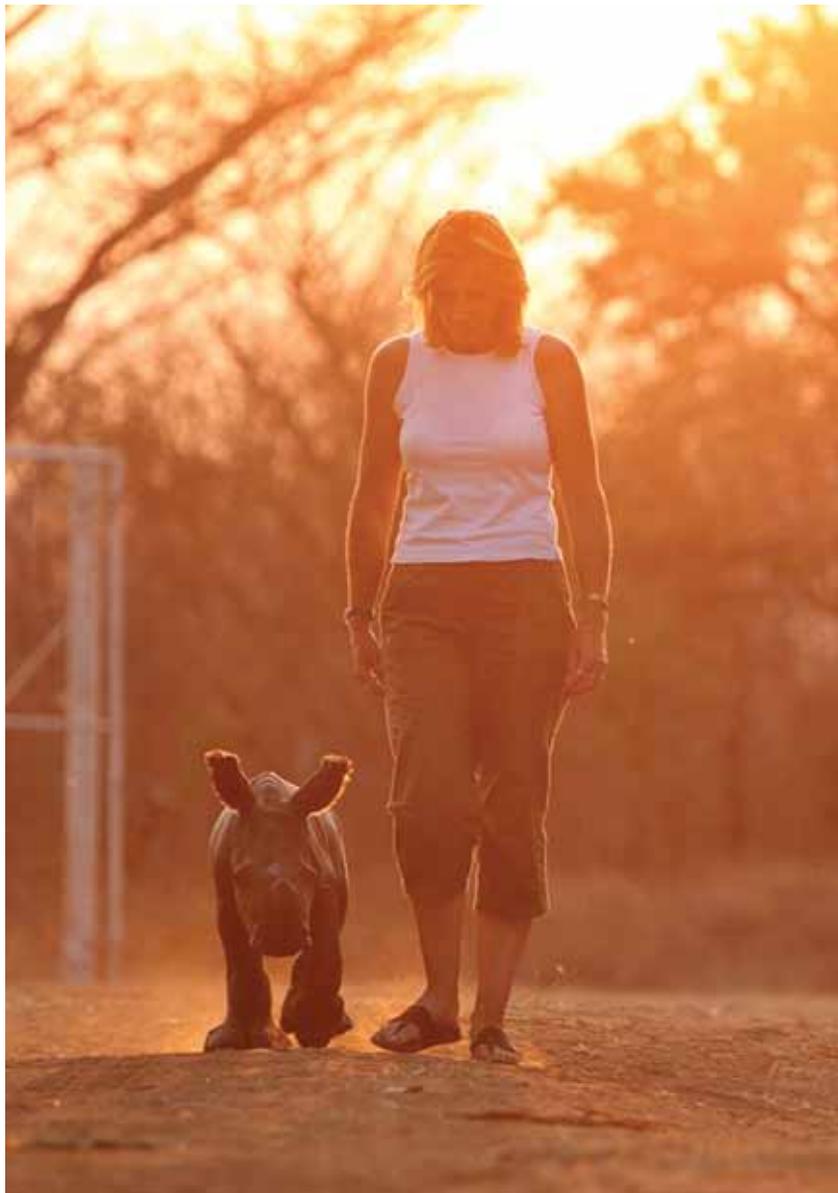
Also see: YouTube: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=MNCzSfv4hX8>  www.lionwhisperer.co.za
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Rhino rescuer

World-renowned pioneer in rhino rehabilitation, Karen Trendler, is at the bloodied coalface – endeavouring to save every injured or orphaned rhino possible. With the poaching of rhino at epidemic proportions, numbers have crashed to the point where rhino are sniffing extinction within the decade.

Involved with wildlife rehab since 1981 and trained in both wildlife management and as a veterinary nurse, Karen first saw rhino on her rehab radar in 1992. Renowned conservationist Clive Walker found a premature orphaned black rhino calf in the Waterberg and called her for help. “It had little chance of survival and we took it on without knowing the implications,” she says. “I think we kept it alive through sheer perseverance.” ➤





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Karen’s rehabilitated more rhinos than anyone else in Africa. “It wasn’t by choice that I became known for rhino rehabilitation,” she says. “It was simply because there was such a need for it.” Now that need’s infinitely greater than ever before.

The physical challenges of dealing with a calf that’s so heavy, big and strong are sometimes hurdles in rhino rehab. The amount of food and care the animals need is also extreme. In the wild, rhino suckle up to 18 months, by which time they’re about seven times a human’s birth size and weight. So special facilities are needed for rhino rehab, because absolutely everything has to be bigger and stronger than normal.

With her extensive knowledge of wildlife rehabilitation – learnt from reading and personal experience, since there was no formal training available when she started – Karen and her team have an impressive success rate with rhinos and other wildlife rehab. To date she’s reared

more than 300 rhino calves, nursed and treated another 300 adult rhinos and rehabilitated 150-200 to full release, with others in semi-protected or managed environments. A number of these rhino have successfully bred and reared young in the wild, which Karen says is the ultimate reward for her.

“Rhinos are tough and have an excellent recovery rate,” she says. “Unlike elephants, which are highly intelligent, philosophise about everything and get depressed, rhinos are relatively simple creatures and if they have a good mud bath, company, food and sun, they recover well. They’re also very prehistoric, each with its own personality, so it’s devastating to see them being lost to human greed.”

She adds that the rhino-poaching crisis has added a new and grisly dimension to rehab. “I never imagined I’d be researching bullet wounds and ballistics, or getting up at night to feed rhino with armed guards protecting me. Neither could I ever have imagined trying to rescue and resuscitate a rhino calf while having to protect a crime scene. This is the reality of the poaching crisis. I find the level of cruelty of poachers difficult to comprehend and am also concerned about burnout, with those anti-poaching staff and rangers working on the front lines.”

Karen says one of the important aspects of her job is minimising the number of people who work with a rhino, “because they habituate quickly to humans and it’s very traumatic for rhino when they have to break the bond and return to the wild. It’s also important to handle rhinos consistently and never to let them know they’re stronger than you are.”

While she says elephants are the most difficult animals to rehabilitate, the sheer volume of rhino cases now is overwhelming. “Each one counts and contributes to conservation. I also do intensive training and knowledge-sharing so that as many people as possible can get involved and help.” She does this through rhino rehab workshops and she’s written a rehab manual too – this while co-ordinating the Endangered Wildlife Trust Rhino Response Projects, providing emergency field response

and support, and also facilitating a national network for rhino response.

In a serious tone, Karen adds: “It’s a really desperate situation at the moment, but I have to believe rhinos can be saved from extinction. We can never give up, but what’s really needed to stop the poaching is the political will and a massive global effort against organised transnational crime. Wildlife is just an innocent commodity and rhinos aren’t the only animals under threat. We have to pull together globally, put politics and egos aside, and make wildlife crime very high-risk – because it’s currently very low-risk, for high reward.”

If this doesn’t happen immediately, we may soon no longer be able to refer to rhinos as crashes, but that the species has in fact crashed – and no longer exists on earth. 🌍

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