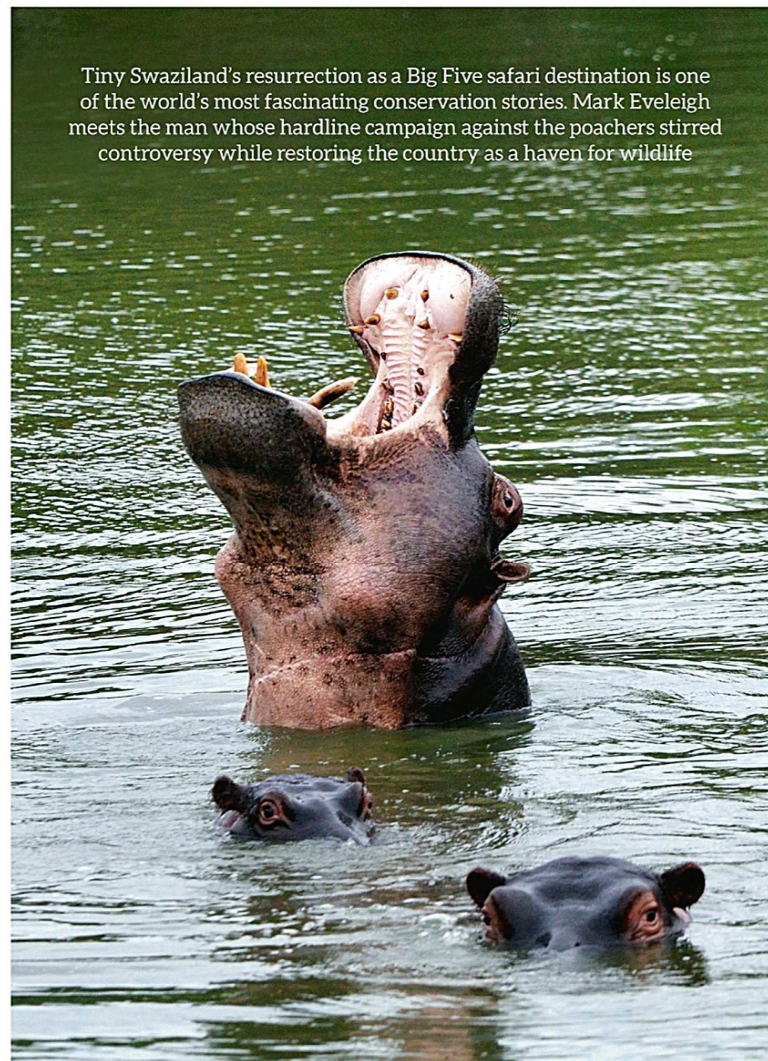




## The kingdom that roared

Tiny Swaziland's resurrection as a Big Five safari destination is one of the world's most fascinating conservation stories. Mark Eveleigh meets the man whose hardline campaign against the poachers stirred controversy while restoring the country as a haven for wildlife



## Conservation Fighting the poachers



Left: A black rhino.  
Below: Ted Reilly, who  
heads the country's  
parks. Bottom right:  
Helping out a hippo in the  
early days at Milwane



The Swazi people have always considered the lion a semi-sacred icon, synonymous with their revered king, while the she-elephant is the symbol of their venerated queen-mother. Yet both animals had become extinct in the country

by 1940. By the end of the decade, almost all of Swaziland's wildlife had been exterminated – by poison, habitat loss, trophy hunters or in bushmeat snares.

### Back from the brink

The tale of how Swaziland has resurrected itself as one of Africa's Big Five safari destinations – featuring elephants, lions, Cape buffaloes, leopards and rhinos – is astonishing. The lush, mountainous kingdom sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique is one of the world's few remaining absolute monarchies and it has chosen an approach that combines zero-tolerance for poaching with reintroducing lost



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**D**on't worry,' said the ranger as I tiptoed nervously behind him. 'If a black rhino charges we'll make a plan.' I'm no expert, but I was pretty convinced that if a rhino charged us out of this dense bush there would be little time for making plans.

We had been walking for almost two hours, on a patrol along the boundaries of Mkhaya Game Reserve, in the heart of Swaziland's wild lowveld. We had already come across a herd of five white rhino and were less than 20 metres away before we realised that the gigantic animals were even there.

Although the aggressive black rhinos and unpredictable buffalo eluded us, I had been reassured to notice that the rangers' bush-calloused index fingers rarely wavered from the trigger guards of their M5 assault rifles. These men constituted one of Swaziland's elite SAS-trained anti-poaching patrols and between them they'd racked up more than two decades as fighters in the war to save the rhino.

Swaziland's conservationists have a history of 'making a plan' even under the most desperate of circumstances.

In the 1930s this small southern African kingdom formed the grazing lands of such immense game herds that the British colonial government, which ruled until 1968, officially declared wildebeest vermin, to be wiped out with Vickers machine guns or at poisoned waterholes. A bus service called The Impala Express transported a thousand impala carcasses to Johannesburg every week.

By 1950 almost all the country's wildlife had been exterminated – by poison, habitat loss, trophy hunters or in bushmeat snares



species. By so doing, it has managed to redeem its natural resources from what must have seemed beyond the point of no return.

'When I was a kid on Milwane, our family farm, you could drive across this country and feel like you were passing through one endless herd of animals,' recalls Ted Reilly, who heads the country's parks.

In 1950, Reilly left for school in South Africa, before going on to work as a ranger both in that country and in Zambia (then known as Northern Rhodesia). Shocked by the devastation he found on his return, less than a decade later, he decided to try to restore as much of the wildlife as he could and, with the blessing of Swaziland's King Sobhuza II, a friend of his father's, he set out to restock Milwane.

### A man on a mission

We are sitting on the veranda at Reilly's Rock, the pretty lodge that now occupies the old family home. Even at the age of 78, Reilly looks like he's ready for whatever the bush might throw at him: his threadbare shirt collar drapes like a vulture's ruff around a stocky neck and his old green bush hat hangs in tatters over shaggy eyebrows.

Reilly spent much of the 1960s tracking down the last of Swaziland's wildlife, often racing his battered old Land Rover through the bush at 50mph while firing tranquilliser darts with one hand at the retreating hind-quarters

## Conservation Fighting the poachers

Armed Swazi rangers keep  
an eye on some giraffes. Left:  
animal skulls are a grim  
reminder of the poaching  
trade. Bottom: Lions were  
reintroduced in 1994



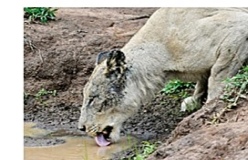
of wildebeest, zebra and bushbuck. Half a century later, it's still easy to get a feel for Reilly's idiosyncratic driving style as he powers his open-top Landcruiser up a rock koppie and down through special predator-proof enclosures that provide shelter for precious herds of roan antelope, red hartebeest, dainty suni and pixie-eared oribi (small types of antelope).

The 4,560-hectare Milwane Wildlife Sanctuary was never intended to be a Big Five park, so guests are able to cycle and walk without guides among zebra, wildebeest, nyala antelope and even alongside man-made dams inhabited by hippos and crocodiles.

Milwane was made the country's first formal conservation area in 1964.

## Another answer?

■ More than militarised rangers are needed to keep animals truly safe, say experts. Savvy media campaigns could help reduce demand for ivory in Asia, where the biggest markets lie. Lessons learned from the drug war could also help. The use of 90s chub drug Ecstasy sank after dealers ruined its reputation by mixing it with other substances. In South Africa, rhino owners have begun injecting their animals' horns with a mix of toxins and dye that makes consumers sick. The hope is it will lower demand and stop poachers from shooting them.





Left: Some of the brutal traps and snares that have been removed from the reserve. Right: A nyala doe grazing



about far more than the tale of one man and his Land Rover. Swaziland's healthy hippo population, for example, originated in zoos, and the growing herd of roan antelope was a truly international effort, made possible by zoos in the UK and Czech Republic, and with funding from Swiss and Dutch donors. The white and black rhinos returned in 1965 and 1987, and the venerated elephant and lion were finally reintroduced (in 1986 and 1994) from South Africa's Kruger National Park. 'Without the discipline and commitment of all our rangers, Swaziland would have no wildlife left to admire,' said King

It became such a success that King Sobhuza II asked Reilly to do the same for Hlane Royal National Park and, later, for Mkhaya Game Reserve. And so Swaziland Big Game Parks (BGP) was born. In 2014, having helped to reintroduce the Big Five game animals that had been hunted to extinction, it celebrated its 50th anniversary. Park-entry fees are kept deliberately low, ensuring that 56 per cent of visitors are from Swaziland itself.

BGP has shown that it is possible to achieve economic independence with revenue coming from tourism and self-renewing natural resources rather than relying entirely on donations. Today BGP employs 365 people, working as guides and rangers, or in maintenance and hospitality, at camps and in lodges that can host up to 380 guests (plus campers).

#### Challenging the poachers

Reilly and BGP have so far been responsible for reintroducing 22 large wild animal species – including lion, elephant, rhino, giraffe, buffalo, sable, hippo, tsessebe and eland – to the country. Film footage from the 1970s shows Reilly capturing zebras with his bare hands to bring back to the reserves, but the BGP project is

#### African rangers, guardians of wildlife

■ Being a wildlife ranger is one of the most dangerous professions in the world. Rangers risk their lives daily to protect endangered species, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that more than 1,000 have been killed worldwide over the past 10 years.

■ Rangers in Uganda, DRC and Rwanda have saved mountain gorillas from extinction.

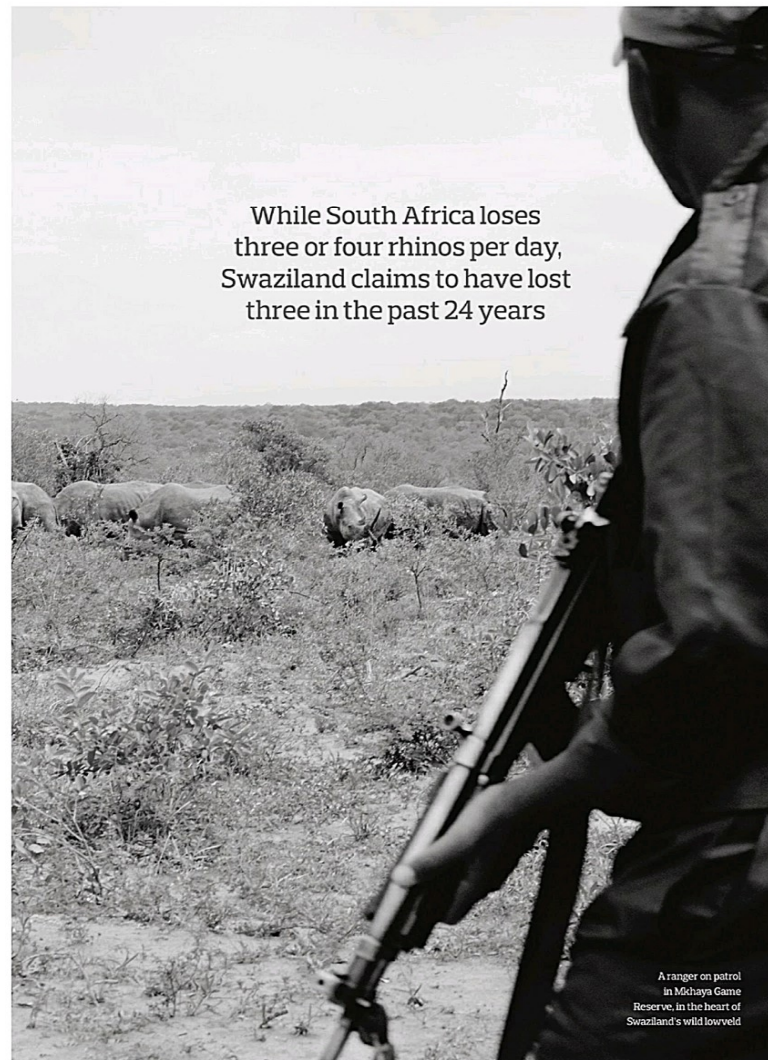
■ Maasai Rangers in Kenya have helped to increase the local lion population on their lands from just six individuals to more than 70.

Mswati III, Sobhuza's son and successor, in a speech welcoming the return of the lion – that 'symbol of royalty' – in 1994.

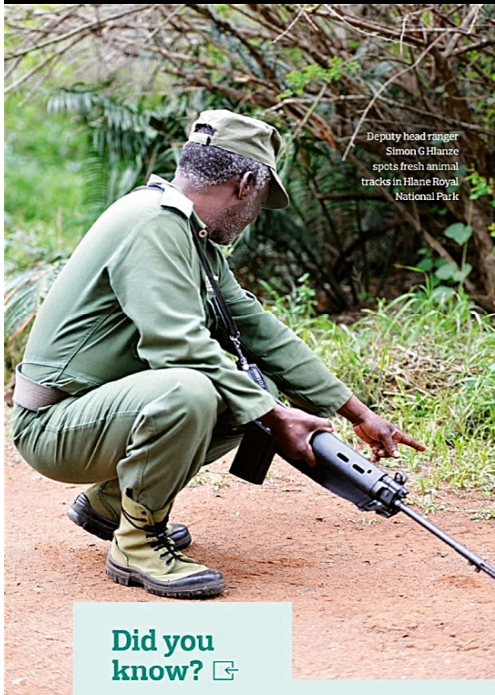
As the king's official wildlife adviser, Reilly initiated the Game Amendment Act of 1991. Prior to that poachers – who had been killing about two rhinos daily – were routinely bailed and re-armed even before their court appearance, and rangers were frequently counter-charged for assault. The legal amendments allowed rangers to use force to prevent poaching. While this law has proved controversial in recent years, with some rangers accused of overstepping their powers, Swaziland's rhino population has survived. While South



While South Africa loses three or four rhinos per day, Swaziland claims to have lost three in the past 24 years



A ranger on patrol in Mkhaya Game Reserve, in the heart of Swaziland's wild lowveld



Deputy head ranger  
Simon G Hlanze  
spots fresh animal  
tracks in Hlane Royal  
National Park

## Did you know? ➡

- The value of rhino horn by weight has surpassed that of gold, diamonds or cocaine.
- Rhino horns are not bone and aren't hollow like elephant tusks. They are made entirely of keratin, which grows throughout the animal's lifetime, just like our own hair and nails. It is similar in structure to a horse's hoof.
- If a rhino is de-horned without cutting into the skull, it can grow back to almost full size after three years. However, if the rhino's skull is cut into
- while being de-horned, it could complicate or completely compromise the re-growth of the horn.
- The white rhino isn't white, it's grey – it got its name from the Afrikaans word 'weit', which means 'wide' and refers to its mouth.
- Rhinos are part of a group of mammals called odd-toed ungulates, and are speedy on their feet, reaching 60 to 65km/h when they run.
- A group of rhinoceros is called a 'herd' or a 'crash'.



Photograph: Mark Evered

## Conservation Fighting the poachers



Sonnyboy Dlamini is one  
of Swaziland's Big Game  
Paries' most experienced  
safari guides

Africa loses three or four rhinos a day. Swaziland claims to have lost just three in the past 24 years.

### Fighting for the future

Simon G Hlanze has been fighting to protect Swaziland's wildlife for almost 30 years. As deputy head ranger at Hlane Royal National Park, he has spent countless hours on anti-poaching patrols around the 200km of game-driving tracks in Hlane Royal National Park (Swaziland's biggest protected area) and has personally collected many of the thousands of wire snares left by poachers that hang like trophies from the ranger stations at all three of the BGP reserves.

'We don't find so many bushmeat snares these days,' he says, 'maybe only a couple a week. But we're worried that, as rhinos become harder to find in South African parks, we'll start to see more encroachment from organised poachers.'

Hlanze is already well known, but I've been warned not to photograph any of his men. As with the numbers of rhinos, Hlanze declines to estimate just how many foot soldiers are under his command. Six of his colleagues have already paid with their lives in defence of the rhinos – being a wildlife ranger can be more risky than being in a national army. Some of Swaziland's rangers are ex-poachers themselves and their traditional bush-skills were the ideal basis for SAS training.

'There were probably times when the SAS were learning as much from some of our guys as we were from them,' quips Sonnyboy Dlamini, one of BGP's experienced safari guides.

In many parts of Africa, poachers are invariably better armed and motivated than the underpaid rangers. Swaziland has reversed that to the point where even the toughest poaching teams are reluctant to tackle the BGP foot soldiers: 'Our men are dedicated,' Sonnyboy explains, 'and because we have such good intelligence around the parks we usually know the poachers are coming even before they arrive.'

Along with the financial rewards, education plays a huge part in this. About 30,000 Swazi schoolchildren visit the reserves as part of the BGP's educational programmes each year. Perhaps it is because Swaziland has come so close to completely losing its wildlife that local people seem to have a greater appreciation for the need to protect it.

'We don't inherit the Earth from our forefathers,' goes an old Swazi saying, 'we borrow it from our children.'