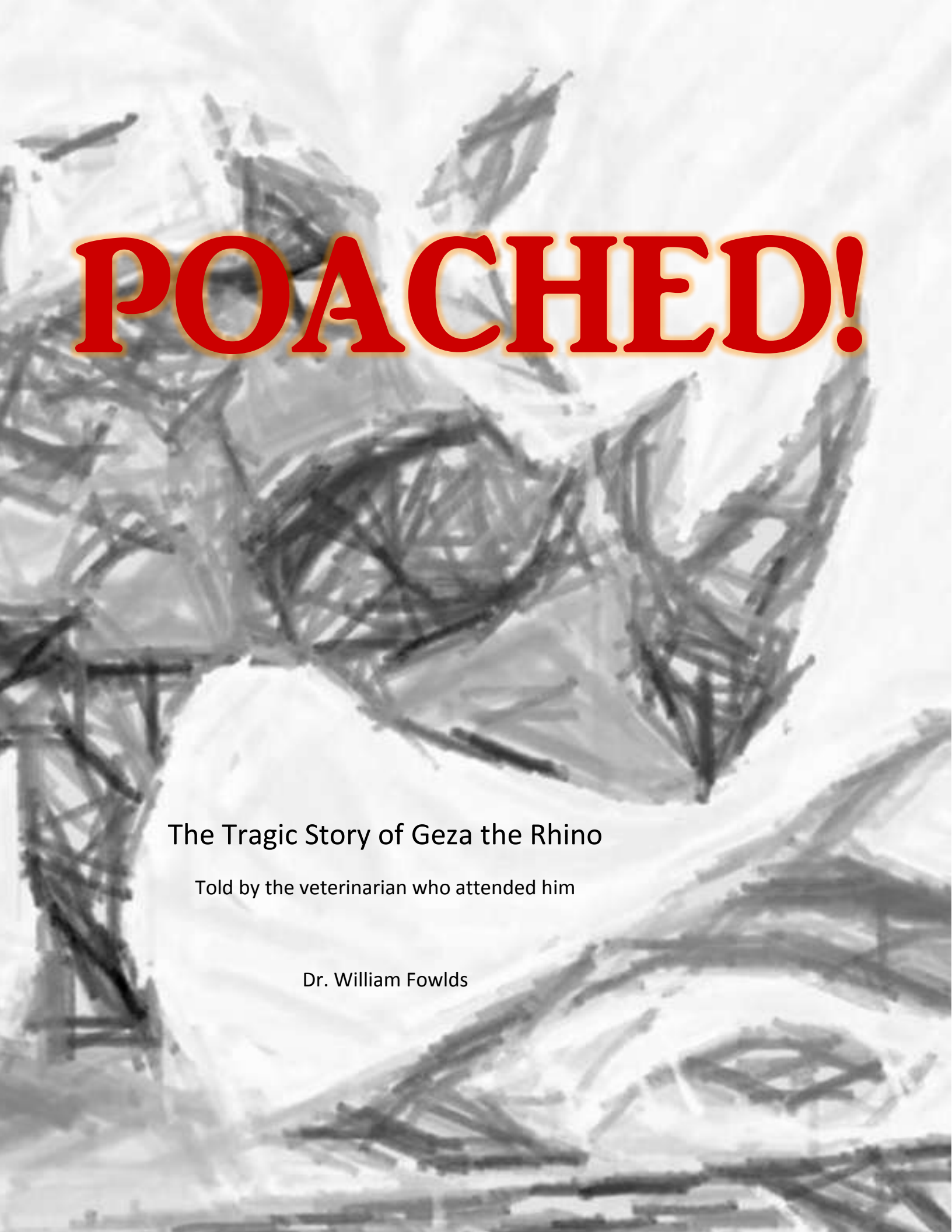


POACHED!

The Tragic Story of Geza the Rhino

Told by the veterinarian who attended him

Dr. William Fowlds



Geza and his mother Nomabongo



POACHED!

This is the story of a white rhino callously mutilated by poachers and left alive with his horns and part of his face hacked off with pangas.

By Dr. William Fowlds

Wildlife Veterinarian

This deeply moving personal journey in the race to save Geza the rhino is told by the veterinarian who was called in right after the poachers' brutal attack.

Dr. Fowlds kindly gave us permission to share it with the hope that hearts would be softened and this vicious war on the rhino for its horn might be curbed.

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FATEFUL DAY

On 11 February, 2011 I found myself forced into a personal experience of the most horrific, man-inflicted animal suffering. An experience that has affected me beyond what I thought was possible. More than five months on and I still struggle to contain and express the emotions burned within me, that churn to the surface every time I talk about that day.

> I don't expect to make sense of it, or the similar rhino deaths that take place daily in my country. I do intend to ensure that the account of this one rhino's tragic end, will reach into the conscience and hearts of all men and woman, and compel each of us to do something towards stopping the suffering of this magnificent species and others like it.

I count myself truly blessed to be able to live my dream as a wildlife vet in a part of Africa that satisfies my senses and fills my soul. One of my many privileges is that I get to work with rhino in the wild. These living dinosaurs are truly iconic symbols of our successes and failures as custodians of this planet. The current rhino situation is a dying testimony of our conservation efforts. If we are not able to save the rhino from extinction, this flagship species that's larger than life, what hope do we have of saving the rest?

On that fateful morning in February, I was called by Mike Fuller of Kariega Game Reserve, in the Eastern Cape, who informed me that one of their rhino had been poached. My heart sank, as I relived that dreadful feeling, a few months before, which had hit me when news of a rhino poaching on my own game reserve came through. Knowing how slow the initial crime scene proceedings can take, I

expressed my heart-felt remorse and said I would get there later in the morning. There was a silent pause before the sledge-hammer ..... ”William, he is still alive!”



Images of the hacked bone and bloodied tissues I had seen previously came flooding back, doubting the truth of this outrageous claim. As I fumbled for questions to check my own doubts, the description of this poor animal began to take shape. “The horns are gone, it’s a bloody mess”, added Mike. I had seen one picture of a rhino who had suffered the same fate and the anger when I saw it the first time, crowded my thoughts as I tried to listen to directions and get my planned day out of the way.

As I drove rapidly for 30 minutes following the directions; the location, the description and the circumstances around this animal started to sound familiar. I remembered that two rhino from my own reserve, Amakhala, had been moved to Kariega three years before and had been joined by another two animals from a different reserve, making a sub-adult group of four rhino. At least one of these four, was now in an unthinkable situation and I prayed it wasn’t one I knew.



On approaching the location where the rhino had last been seen, I was struck by the tranquil beauty of the place. A small, open area alongside a meandering river with broken vegetation joining up into thickets of valley bushveld on the hill slopes. A picture-book setting which could have been used to depict a piece of heaven. It just didn't seem possible that somewhere here, there was an animal that was going through a living hell.

Mike could not bring himself to accompany me, having been to hell and back already that morning. I grabbed my small camera and began working my way into the wind to where I was told he was last seen.

The horror of that first encounter will remain branded in my memory forever. In a small clearing enclosed by bush, stood an animal, hardly recognisable as a rhino. His profile completely changed by the absence of those iconic horns attributed to no other species. More nauseating than that, the skull and soft tissue trauma extended down into the remnants of his face, through the outer layer of bones, to expose the underlying nasal passages.





CAUTION: Graphic video footage as Dr. Fowlds found Geza

Click on the photo to watch





Initially he stood on three legs with his mouth on the ground. Then he became more aware of my presence and lifted his head up revealing pieces of loose flesh which hung semi-detached from his deformed and bloodied face. He struggled forward and turned in my direction, his left front leg provided no support and could only be dragged behind him. To compensate for this, he used his mutilated muzzle and nose as a crutch and staggered forward toward me. His one eye was injured and clouded over, adding to his horrific appearance.

At first I stood shocked in front of the sight before me, then I struggled to comprehend the extent and implications of the jagged edges and plunging cavities extending into his skull. As he shuffled closer in my direction, now scarcely 15 meters away, the realisation of his pain overwhelmed me. I had been so stunned by the inconceivable, I had neglected to consider the pain. What possible way could I have any reference of understanding the agony he was in? How long had he been like this? Were his efforts to approach me a weakened attempt of aggression towards the source of his suffering or was there a desperate comprehension of finality, a broken spirit crying out to die.

I crouched down trying to steady my shaking hand which held the camera, as I realised that this was possibly Geza, the young rhino I had sent to this sanctuary three years ago. Thoughts and emotions raged through my head. How low had we fallen to inflict so much suffering on such a magnificent creature whose care had been entrusted to us? Could any reason justify this happening? Without thinking I apologised under my breath, “I am sorry boy, I am so, so sorry.” His breathing quickened in response to the sound. Was he trying to smell me, was this their characteristic huffing which is part of natural investigatory behaviour or was this a pathetic version of rhino aggression in response to a source of threat. I was close enough to see the blood bubbling inside his skull cavities and wondered how



every breath must add to the agony, the cold air flowing over inflamed tissues and exposed nerves.

I expected at any moment for his suffering to snap into a full blown rage, but it never came. I backed away slowly and he kept staggering in my direction, not showing any aggression, just one agonising effort after another. For a moment the thought even crossed my mind that this animal, in an incomprehensible amount of pain, acting completely out of character, could be desperately seeking something, anything, to take away the pain.

I didn't trust my own eyes to recall the detail of these injuries and so I recorded some images, and backed away from this vortex of emotions and pain. On the walk back to the vehicle where Mike now waited, the weight of responsibility began to descend on my shoulders. This poor animal, suffering at the hands of my own species, through at least one night of absolute agony, now relied on me for relief from this torture. My gut instincts told me he had little chance of healing even though I had experienced rhino making some spectacular recoveries from severe injuries. I recalled having heard of a few other cases of rhino having survived and scrambled for the details somewhere in my swirling mind.

Thinking I should be fairly hardened to trauma and the sight of poached rhino and mutilated bodies, I had to re-assess my own reaction to what I had just seen. This took things to a new level. This stirred up anger and despair and regret and shame more than anything I had ever experienced. This brought the suffering of this and many other rhino right into the living room of my soul.

Surely, I would never be able to think of a rhino poaching in the same way ever again. If we are shaped by our experiences, then this experience was a watershed



moment in my life. Part of that watershed was out of my control, but the other part involved decisions which were optional and would take me across an ethical line which had been formed by a lifetime of nurturing and training.

Knowing that this reserve relied on my professional opinion on what to do next, I buried my personal emotions and approached Mike with three recommendations.





THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, I confirmed their fears that, in my opinion, there was no chance of saving this life and the most humane thing to do would be to end this tragedy by euthanasia for this animal.

Secondly, I asked for time to consult with some of the other vets who had experienced similar survivors just in case there might be some hope for this animal.

Thirdly, with considerable trepidation, I asked if they would consider allowing the world to see the horrendous suffering that was taking place a short distance from where we stood. The practicalities, though, would involve getting a camera on site to take broadcast quality footage, something that would take a few hours to happen in this remote part of the reserve.

Could a vet, who is supposed to care deeply for animals; who is trained to be the mouthpiece for those that can't speak for themselves; who more than most should understand the extent of suffering that this animal had gone through and was still enduring, be at ethical liberty to extend the suffering of this animal a little longer. Would those who do care, and even those who purport not to care, be shocked out of their complacency at the sight of such inhumanity?

The request sounded irrational to my own ears, and I wrestled with the thought of it. For the previous three years our association of private game reserves had built up measures to combat the looming threat of rhino poaching. I had seen the mortality figures escalate in 2009 and double again in 2010 despite a series of attempts to curb the carnage. Seven animals had been poached during this



escalation within 60km's of me, and there was still no sign of the public or the law enforcement agencies finding the will to stop it.

Many of the animals poached were being immobilised with veterinary drugs before having their horns and underlying skull bones hacked off with pangas and axes. The assumption is that these animals are under anaesthetic and so don't feel anything. I assure you, they feel; as, in many instances, the amount of drug used does not kill the rhino. If they don't bleed to death, they wake up under circumstances which I am finding difficult to describe.

I had always wondered why the poachers made such a mess of the rhino's faces when their modus operandi suggested that these were well organised criminals. The sight of Geza that terrible day brought the realisation that many of these animals were probably still alive and responsive to the mutilation that they were being subjected to; hence the panga marks chaotically arranged around the facial areas.

My mind was telling me that to keep this animal alive was wrong, but somewhere inside I felt certain that the story of this despicable suffering could get to even the most hardened minds. The people driving the demand for this bizarre product, who say they take rhino horn to feel good - surely, they couldn't feel good knowing that animals are suffering to this degree at their hands. If they could, in some way, be made to feel part of the massacre, then perhaps this cruel and senseless killing might stop.

It was agreed to call in a camera to get the footage while I phoned colleagues for second opinions. For the next three hours I went back several times and agonised



over my decisions while watching his condition deteriorate. During those hours I learned that this rhino was indeed “Geza” – the Naughty One - a male born on Amakhala, the reserve on which I live. He was born in January 2006 as the second calf of “Nomabongo” – the Proud Lady. His mother was the first rhino to come to our reserve, which like many in our area, was a reserve which had transformed previous farm land into protected areas.





THAT DAY IN NOMABONGO

I vividly recall the day Nomabongo arrived in 2003. Her presence, just one rhino, immediately transformed the whole atmosphere of that landscape from farmland into wild land. I also remembered the first week of Geza's life. Unlike Nomabongo's first calf, which she hid from us for 6 weeks, the "Proud Lady" showed off her boy calf within a few days of giving birth to him and a photographer friend captured these moments in some breathtaking photos.

Geza's name came about because from a very early age he would challenge older rhino in a mischievous manner and then bundle back to the safety of his ever protective mother. In social gatherings with other mothers and calves, Geza was always the instigator in the interactions, always playful to a point of seeming to show-off.

Typical of normal rhino social structures, when Geza was two and a half years old his mother pushed him away as she prepared to give birth to her next calf. During this time Geza joined up with another rhino cow and her female calf named Landiwe, who was born in May 2006.

Geza stayed with Landiwe and her mother. The mother provided the protection from mature bulls that Geza now needed as he was still not old or big enough to protect himself. This grouping remained until it was decided to remove some rhino off our reserve and Geza and Landiwe were relocated in August 2008 as a pair. They adapted well, as they knew each other and, as young rhino in a new environment, this helped ensure a successful relocation.



The group of four young rhino, were the first to be introduced into this section of this sanctuary and their presence there had the same effect of transforming the reserve back to wild land. Now two and half years on, Geza was critically injured and the other rhino had disappeared into the thicket vegetation. Even if they were still alive, this event would ensure their removal from this area and with them a part of the soul of the land would die too.





POACHING SITE

As the hours passed slowly by, the location of the actual poaching was discovered and a crime scene investigation commenced, piecing together the train of events which had taken place there. A large pool of blood marked Geza's initial fall and where the hacking took place. Pieces of flesh and bone lay in the blood stained grass nearby. He had stood up at some stage and staggered about ten paces before falling on a small tree, where, judging by the signs of his struggling, he had lain for some time. Again, a large area of blood stained earth bore testimony to his solitary ordeal. Every dozen or so paces another pool of blood marked where he had stood a while. I imagined his body going through the phases of drug recovery which, without an antidote, would have taken him through cycles of semi-consciousness before he was plunged back into the reality of his painful wounds. It could not be accurately ascertained how long he had been left in this state. Could this have possibly happened two nights ago? We were not sure. The possibility of this was too much to comprehend so, for now, I kept it out of my mind.

His front left leg had been cut off from circulation while he struggled on his side and this accounted for his eye injuries too. When cells get starved of oxygen they die off and release inflammatory chemicals inducing a cycle of swelling, pressure and pain ending in necrosis. By the time Geza was found, he had lost all use of his left front leg. Through blood loss, shock, dehydration and pain this animal was paying dearly for man's senseless greed.

The wait for what seemed like ages eventually passed. The camera-crew arrived and I was finally able to bring this nightmare to an end. The most humane way to end it all was to administer an overdose of opioid anaesthetic. The method would



have to be the same way the poachers did it, with a dart. A heavy calibre bullet to the brain would ensure finality - no return to hell.

As the dart penetrated his skin I wondered if this rhino had any mental association of being darted all those long hours before and the agony that ensued. Would he recognise that dart impact and the ordeal that followed shortly after? Would any feelings of helplessness suddenly be overcome by one final fit of rage as I would expect it to be? His response was to take only a few paces in our direction as the dart penetrated, before his injuries stopped his advance.

Within a few minutes the drugs were taking effect and even though his final conscious moments could have been extremely painful, I knew that the pain would be subsiding as he began to slip away. One final close up inspection of his wounds confirmed there was no going back and I injected more anaesthetic directly into his bloodstream. A sense of relief mingled with sadness, disgust and shame descended over that small piece of Africa, which for long hours had been gripped in tension and violation. The heavy bullet slammed though his skull, with the noise and shock wave blasting out across the landscape, heralding the end to a tortured and agonising struggle.

Geza, the Naughty One, who had touched my heart as a playful calf, died while I held my hand over his intact eye, his shaking body growing still and peaceful. Geza, who had his horns and part of his face hacked off while he was still alive by poachers feeding a chain of careless greed and ignorant demand. Will this rhino, whose suffering I prolonged, so that the world could get a visual glimpse of this tragedy, end up as just another statistic in a war that rages on? Or, will this rhino's ordeal touch us in a way that compels us to do something about it? What I have witnessed ensures that I will never find peace until the killing stops.



As I write this, news reaches me of seven more rhino killed yesterday. Please help all of us on the frontline of this war against rhino poaching. If we can't save the rhino, what hope do we have of saving the rest?

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Dr William Fowlds.

Help us spread the word on what is happening to the species by getting this message out to those who believe that the rhino horn is a valuable product that can enhance their well-being.

Rhino horn has absolutely no medicinal value nor does it offer the most suitable material for ceremonial daggers.



You may feel there is little you can do to help… you probably can't do what Dr. Fowlds does, or join an anti-poaching ranger unit, or wave a magic wand and make it all better, but you can help when you:

1. SHARE THIS EBOOK with a Friend, or two.
2. Visit the Wilderness Foundation http://www.wildernessfoundation.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18&Itemid=24
3. Visit Nikela Rhino Rescue http://www.nikela.org/portfolio/stop-rhino-poaching

Thank you for helping Dr. Fowlds keep his promise to Geza… that he did not die in vain

