

TRUE LOVE HAS NO BEGINNING

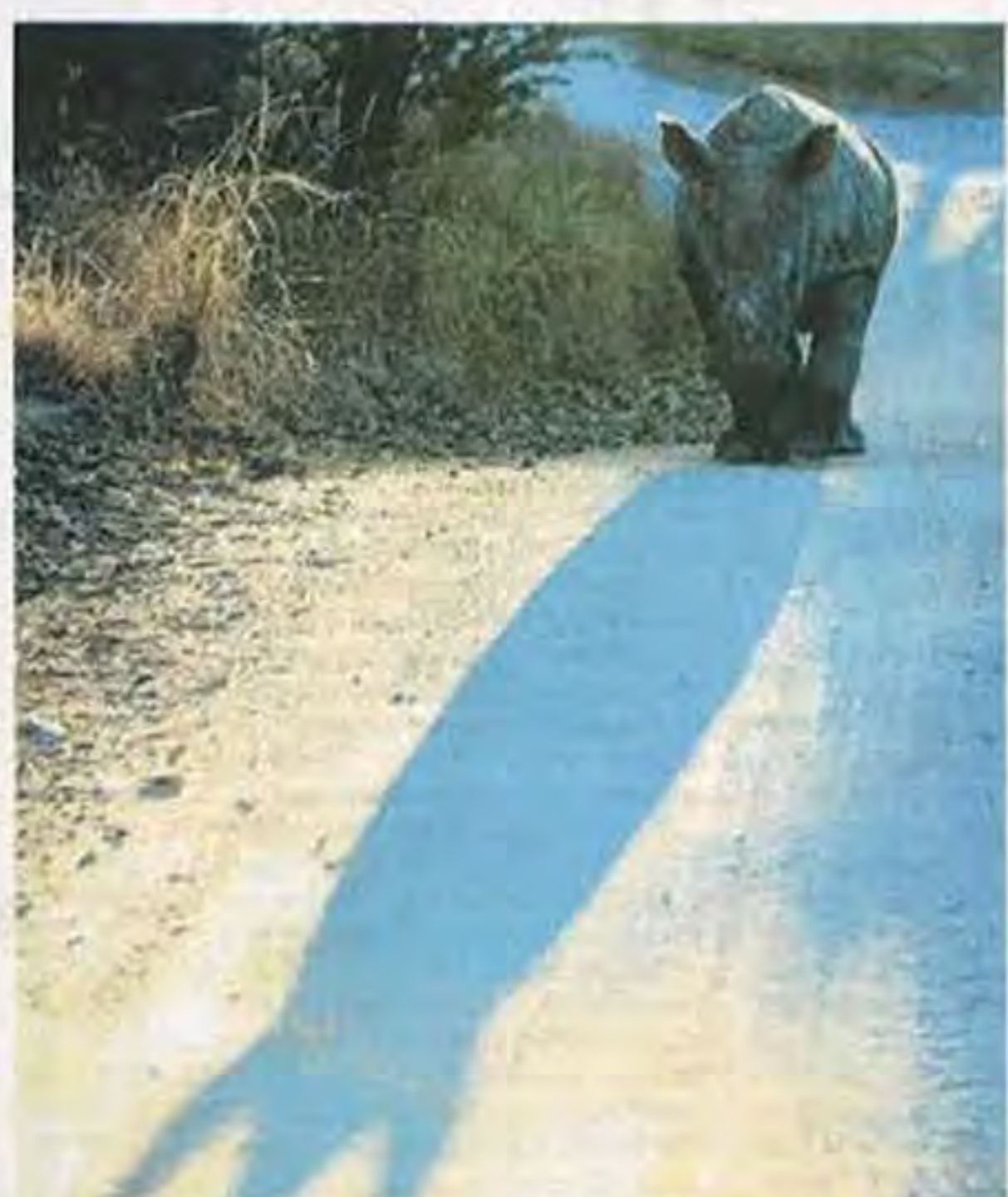
You'll Never Walk Alone



Karien Smit accompanies four-month-old rhino calf Gertjie, affectionately known as Little G, on his morning walk at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre. Gertjie was orphaned when poachers killed his mother last month. For more on the quest to find a companion for Gertjie, see Page 4
Picture: JAMES OATWAY



LONE STAR: Karien Smit, assistant curator of the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, with Gertjie — the four-month-old white rhino orphan who needs an animal friend. A Dorper sheep named Nungu has been placed in his enclosure, but Gertjie does not seem to get along with her
Pictures: JAMES OATWAY



ME AND MY SHADOW: Gertjie was rescued after poachers killed and mutilated his mother

Big baby needs a real buddy

JAN BORNMAN and SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER

WANTED: a companion for Gertjie, a baby rhino orphaned after poachers shot dead and dehorned his mother on a farm in Hoedspruit, Limpopo, last month.

Unlike most other rescued animals arriving at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre, the four-month-old calf wants little to do with the facility's usual do-gooder, a Dorper sheep called Nungu.

When Gertjie arrived last month, Nungu was sent to smooth Gertjie's transition. Bonding is usually a simple process, with the sheep sleeping in the same area at night to calm the distressed new arrival.

This system worked well with Zeta, a zebra, last year, as well as several other animals over the years, such as Jabulani, an elephant who arrived at the centre as a baby 17 years ago.

But not so for Gertjie. He seems to prefer the sight of humans, especially the rangers

who at first slept outside his room to babysit him. Although Nungu shares his living quarters, a small room on the property, the rhino gets irritated and can be a bit rough with her.

"Gertjie obviously enjoys the company of humans more than other animals," said Karien Smit, an assistant curator at the centre.

She said animal companions were important for rehabilitation. "It makes life easier, keeps the orphan company and a lot calmer, and prevents them from easily becoming distressed."

Lente Roode, owner of the centre, said she had been phoning sheep farmers as far away as the Northern Cape trying to find the right companion for Gertjie.

He came to the centre as a "confused and bewildered" orphan after spending an entire night alongside his dead mother.

The heart-rending story of the rhino, who weighed 160kg on Wednesday, but picks up at least 1kg a day, has gone viral on YouTube and several international newspapers have report-

ed on his plight. A live webcam in his enclosure allows staff to monitor him and Gertjie's fans to watch his antics.

The centre cares for about a hundred animals. Gertjie is one of three rhinos. The other two survived savage attacks as poachers dehorned them.

"They cut so deep into their sinuses that we had to bring in experts from Pretoria to assist us in getting the wounds to heal," said Roode.

The rehabilitation of Little G, as Gertjie is affectionately known, could take up to 14 months. It is hoped he will be reintegrated into the wild.

Roode said Gertjie was lucky to survive. "Usually when they kill a rhino cow and it has a calf with it, they'll kill the calf as well. Not really for its horn, but because it is such a nuisance to the poachers," said Roode.

Even though he has no animal companion, Gertjie has been doing well and is picking up weight daily. He seems to especially enjoy his walks and mud baths.