

Wildlife Conservation and Pete Morkel

By Mike Morkel

Mike, Pete's brother has written a great biography of Pete. Both Mike and Pete generously helped me prepare this extract. Through Mike's extensive quotes of his interviews with Pete, we come to know this remarkable man. I have also placed photos from Pete's collection to enjoy.

André Morkel

My youngest brother, Pete Morkel, vet and team leader is widely known and respected for his work protecting rhino, elephant, giant sable, giraffe and many other African wildlife species from poachers. Pete has dedicated his life to their management and conservation, including protecting them from poachers. For several decades he has been involved in dehorning rhino, collaring elephant, and capturing and transporting to safety, various animals in Africa, including Namibia, South Africa, Cameroon, Congo, Chad, Angola, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and others in Africa. He has been described as the most experienced rhino vet in the world. It has taken Pete years to acquire the skills and experience for these demanding and often dangerous tasks, which he carries off with flair and a good sense of down to earth humour.



Fitting a telemetry transmitter to Rhino



Preparation



Featured in Paris Match Magazine



Pete preparing syringes



A Day at the Office



Dehorning a Rhino



Pete removing a poacher's snare from a Giant Sable. Gagandala Angola.



Pete and assistants in Gabon with a sedated Elephant



Even Ostriches can be challenging — Chad



Exhausted

Rhodesian childhood

i4 Pete (Peter van der Byl Morkel) was born in 1960 in Umtali, in the eastern highlands of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), the youngest of four consisting of *i1* David, *i3* Claire and myself (*i2* Michael). Our Rhodesian connection started when my grandfather Frank (*g3* Frank James Sievewright Morkel 1896 - 1976) with a diploma from Elsenburg Agricultural College, worked at the agricultural institute in Mongu, in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia). My father *b1* William, or Van as he was more commonly known in his adult life, attended school in Cape Town and early self-reliance was part of his life. He wanted to be a vet but his parents were cash strapped and a necessary scholarship steered him to agriculture, which he took at Natal University at the Pietermaritzburg campus. Dad entered the Colonial Service in Northern Rhodesia as an agronomist working with newly emerging African farmers.

I believe our parents' and grandparents' collective experiences and many hardships have helped to forge many of the characteristics of Pete and indeed all of us children in the Morkel family. A love for the African bush and its wildlife and an acceptance of living modestly on the proverbial oily rag was part of the family ethos, carried though three generations, and likely helped in shaping Pete's love for and his commitment to animals and wildlife conservation generally.

Our family lived in Fern Valley on the outskirts of Umtali (now Mutare, Zimbabwe) where Pete first went to school. Pete spent a year as a boarder with a farming family, the Tweedies while father did post graduate studies in Harare. Pete and the farmer's son Alan became good friends and roamed on the farm and the bush. Pete's year with his mate Alan was filled with nature and wild life experiences. In 1973 Pete returned once again to Umtali to attend Umtali Boy's High School as a boarder. Pete's fascination with the bush experience continued unabated.

Things in the wider world were changing however. The whole eastern border of Rhodesia was being infiltrated at an ever increasing rate by Robert Mugabe's ZANU PF fighters. In 1976 Dave and I had been drafted into the army to do out national service. Dad was doing a lot of time in the Police Reserve forces.

Dad had also travelled extensively in 1975 to Angola and then to various South American countries and the US on a study tour to learn more about coffee. In Pete's words, *"He came back home really concerned and with perhaps a much more realistic view about the ability of Rhodesia to win its war. Dad was also 'pissed off' that there were certain senior politicians that were sending their sons out of the country to complete their education, and presumably to do a skip to greener pastures if the war situation at home deteriorated further."*

September 1976 came and with Pete's 16th birthday that month, the issue was brought to a head. Dad decided that Pete should not stay in Rhodesia but complete his studies in South Africa.

In Pete's own words, *"Yes, I must admit I was pretty shattered to be taken by Dad to South Africa. I didn't feel good or proud about not remaining to complete my schooling in Umtali and especially so when my old mates were called up for the army. As you know, as a country everyone was pretty fired up and taking the 'chicken run', as it was called then, was*

something I didn't want to be part of. With hindsight though, it was a wise and the correct decision by Dad. At the time though, as a 16 year old, it was pretty hard on me to do what Dad had decided upon."

The boarding arrangements at the school didn't last for long. Within a few months Dad had also moved Mum out of Rhodesia. The security situation was not getting any better and also Mum's parents, getting older, needed greater support. Mum started work immediately on her arrival in Port Shepstone at the local hospital and after a short stay in the nurse's home a small house for rent was located. Pete moved out of the hostel and joined Mum at this stage. Financially things were really tough but with the generosity of others a few basic items of furniture were obtained.

With matric just around the corner at the end of 1978 it was time to make some decisions about the future. Pete had good grades and an old family friend, Dr John Hanks who was then Professor of Zoology at Natal University suggested strongly that Pete should study to become a vet as he had so many zoologists that he couldn't find work for.

In Pete's words again, *"I applied for both zoology at UCT and also veterinary at Pretoria University and I was accepted for both. Actually veterinary was not my big interest. I wanted to work with animals and I wanted to be in the bush. Becoming a game ranger seemed to be a good option but it was Dad who advised me that times had changed and that to be a game ranger was pretty much like being a glorified tourist guide. Finally, with the time for acceptance running out I made my decision...veterinary it was to be. It was the right decision as it gave me the chance to experience the best of both worlds; working with wildlife and being able to work in the bush"*.

The only course in veterinary studies was at Pretoria University given in Afrikaans. As third generation Rhodesian, Pete's Afrikaans was virtually non-existent. After the second year they moved to the Onderstepoort campus north of Pretoria, for the remainder of the five year course. The course was tough with heavy workloads. Through hard work, grit, help from fellow students, and encouragement from lecturers Pete managed to stay with the course and graduated as a veterinary surgeon. He also picked up enough Afrikaans to get by.

Getting Started in Game Capture

In July 1984 Pete was called up for his compulsory military service with the SA Medical Corps to do his basic training in Potchefstroom. What with practising marching drills, obstacle courses, rifle range practice and the never ending kit and barrack room 'shine' parades the period of basic training passed quickly. Pete recalls: *"I had a good time at Klipdrift. In fact, I recorded the best time in my squad for the 4,8km run with full kit, battle helmet, webbing, full water bottles and rifle. I was also in the army running team so we were entered into various marathon events. That was great as it meant that we could get out of camp"*.

With 'basics' completed, he volunteered to go to Namibia, the only one from his intake to make this decision. As Pete says, *"I knew Namibia already as when I had been a student I had hitchhiked there a number of times. I liked the country, it was big and open and the people were friendly and welcoming"*.

Pete received a posting to Rundu, situated in the north of the country in the Caprivi Strip, that narrow strip of territory bordering Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Pete recalls, *“I had two wonderful years up there in northern Namibia: they were probably the two best years of my life. At Katima Mulilo I was on the Katanga River, I met Estelle who was working as a radiographer at the local hospital, I had a horse, the Combi and Skelm, my Staffordshire bull terrier, a canoe and a boat. Life was simple and uncomplicated. I had all that I needed and most importantly I had a chance to breathe again and to be in the bush. I became a state vet, seconded from the army, for the Katanga Province and then the Caprivi as a whole”*.

Estelle, when she and Pete had first met, was based at the Rundu Hospital working as a radiographer. As Pete says, *“I remember meeting Estelle when a gang of us younger folk used to socialise together. I also saw her when I used to take dogs and other animals into the hospital to be X-rayed. One day, believe it or not, I needed to take a lion in. I had the lion sedated in the back of my Land Rover and after making my somewhat unusual request of the doctor in charge of the Rundu Hospital he indicated that he would need to check it out with Miss de Klerk in Radiology if she would be comfortable to do the x-rays. She was tiny with big eyes and yes, I thought that she was rather pretty. Once I was able to assure her that the lion was sedated I managed, with some additional help, to get the lion onto the table and we did the x-rays which confirmed my earlier diagnosis. Some days later I plucked up the courage and gave her a ring. We took a shine to each other and slowly we got a relationship going and one thing led to another...”* They were married in October 1986.

In June 1986 the game capture unit of the Directorate of Nature Conservation arrived in the Caprivi to capture lechwe (a wetlands antelope) for a research project. While helping with the game capture effort Pete heard that the capture team needed a vet. He was the only applicant and became part of the team.

“They didn’t see that being a vet was anything special. The only thing that seemed to impress them was that I had a heavy duty truck licence. So, in a way, I started at the bottom, although in theory I was in charge of the team...but in practice I really wasn’t. I learnt in a hard school. I was learning the job, to take it seriously and always to be properly organised. I learnt early on that there must be a vertical command structure in a capture operation, that its very important to support each other and to give a hundred per cent to make a success of each capture. The capture unit in Namibia, which had been established in the 1970’s, had a great reputation”.

The team of about 20 comprising the capture unit included Ovambos, Damaras and Namas, some of whom had been working with wildlife from as far back as the 1960’s.

“During that first year I went to a lot of trouble locating and reading publications. I read up on drugs, on immobilisation techniques, diseases of wild life, physiology etc. It got me off to a good start. At university we had studied physiology and pharmacology, but we had received no training in wildlife.

“In the early stages it was mostly physical capture and I learnt boma (enclosure made out of branches and timber) capture and net catching techniques. Darting from a helicopter is another skill altogether. It’s sometimes not as easy as it might look. Darting animals from a moving platform is a challenge. The more you chase them the more the animal runs and as it runs it needs oxygen and it has to breath hard. With marked exertion animals can be pushed to the limit and at the same time we use drugs which affect the physiology of the animal and cause respiratory depression”.

“To dart a big animal like an elephant or a white rhino is relatively easy in comparison with say a wildebeest running and turning through bushy country. I think that you have to dart almost as though it becomes a reflex action. If you try too hard, you can easily screw it up. I guess its almost like shooting a guinea fowl with a shotgun. The gun must come up, your

eyes must come up to the sight and boom you pull that trigger and down the bird comes. It's the same darting from a helicopter. I find for myself that the best way is to bring it all together at the moment, pull the trigger and nine times out of ten it works. Practice certainly makes a huge difference. A dart well placed is almost worth more than anything else, more even than what you put in the dart. Time and again one can have poor darting because the dart has not been well placed into the muscle of the animal, it takes forever to go down and in the process it over-stresses and suffers the consequences”.

Clearly Pete was a quick learner at darting animals on the move and here I would like to share two brief stories received from Rudi Loutit.

“I first met Pete Morkel when he was the resident veterinarian in Etosha National Park with the then Directorate of Nature Conservation in SWA. In later years we worked together in Damaraland during the time when Pete was the game capture unit's vet. I have some vivid memories of working with Pete”.

“We received permission to dehorn rhino, and were working in a very rugged mountainous area tracking long distances daily to find rhinos we considered highly vulnerable to poaching. Having had little success on the ground, we took a short helicopter flight to search areas known to be favoured by rhino. En route we saw a rhino trotting along in broken country. Pete asked the pilot to circle the animal twice, at a reasonable height. He was frantically writing on his right thigh, calculating the drug dose for darting this adult rhino. Loading the dart, Pete successfully darted the rhino before it disappeared into a narrow ravine. The animal dropped within two and a half minutes”.

“It was for me a remarkable feat to be able to assess the animal's weight in such a short space of time, and seen at an oblique angle. We were able to land and call in the team to complete the dehorning. Amazingly during both the dehorning programmes in 1989 and 1991 Pete had 100 per cent success with all the animals darted and dehorned or translocated to new destinations”.

“A second memory, took place on another occasion during the dehorning programme. Pete had darted an adult female with very large horns while at the same time darting her calf of approximately four months old to avoid the calf running off and losing contact with its mother”.

“With the dehorning process completed, we were in a dilemma as to how to administer the antidote to the female and the calf simultaneously as the calf had run off some 100 metres on being darted, before collapsing. Pete's snap decision was to fly the calf to the female's side in the helicopter thus avoiding any chance of injury to the calf. This done, he had to time the antidote given to each rhino perfectly so they awoke together, and once the female was up, the calf would be next to her and ready to follow her immediately”.

“Having given the antidote, we all withdrew to a reasonable distance and watched the female awake and get up. Miraculously the calf awoke at the same time and stood next to its mother. Once they were able to stand properly the female moved off slowly, followed closely by her small calf. Further confirmation of Pete's extraordinary skill and judgement”.

Etosha and Dehorning Black Rhino

“It was in 1989 that I really started doing a lot of rhino work. At that stage I was based up at the Etosha National Park and there was an outbreak of poaching. We were de-horning and then moving animals out to central Etosha or to the Waterberg. The military were also called in to assist.”

“Dehorning rhino was controversial at the time, but much less so than today. At the time I went to quite a bit of effort to understand what was involved. After studying old horns I realised that there was a substantial concavity under the horns where the bone pushes in, especially the front horn. So I worked out that that horns could not be taken off at the base but

at about 7cms up the front horn and 5cms up on the back horn. At first we used cross cut wood saws but that was a slow and lengthy process so we soon learnt the benefits of using a chainsaw. Once the horn has been removed we use a pair of horse hoove clippers to trim the sharp edges before using a rasp to smooth off the job before covering the exposed stump with Stockholm tar”.

“Initially we dehorned about 20 black rhino and then subsequently quite a few more. There were people who were saying at the time, rather a dead rhino than one without its horn. But in fact, if properly done, dehorning doesn’t do rhinos much harm. They still live well, they interact socially, they are able to gather their food and to look after their calves effectively”.

Even after moving to Etosha Pete continued to work extensively with the game capture unit. As Pete recounts, *“The early 90’s was also a time when new techniques were developed. They enabled the large scale capture of giraffe and after a period in quarantine, testing for foot and mouth disease and then after being vaccinated for anthrax. The animals were sold, mostly to the developing wildlife farming sector. Today thousands of giraffe have been done using the techniques that were developed and perfected in those early years”.* *“Roan antelope, quite a rare animal at the time, was another that we captured extensively. Our efforts in those years helped to stock roan on private land in Namibia”.*

The real joy of the two years at Etosha was having a more normal family life again. In the four years with the game capture team, living at home for two to three months a year was about the norm. *“Those years in Etosha were great for family life. We had a house right next to the waterhole and at night you could hear all the animals clattering down over the hard surface to the waterhole and back. It was awesome having the sounds of the animals so close by”.*

In the early 1990’s Dr Mike Knight got Pete across to support rhino capture and dehorning efforts in Zimbabwe. He operated with Mike and his Zimbabwe colleagues in Hwange National Park and in the Matopos. *“We were darting both black and white rhino, taking off their horns, developing and improving our immobilising techniques and looking at different drug combinations. We learnt a lot and I think that we did a good job but, sadly, although we dehorned many animals the overall security situation was not as good as it might have been and some of the dehorned animals were poached”.*

Mike Knight and Pete subsequently worked together to establish a new game capture unit in Kimberly for SANParks, responsible for all game capture in South Africa, outside of the Kruger National Park. Mike had first met Pete when he came to the Kalahari Gemsbok Park to catch some Red Hartebeest. Later, in 1991, Mike had flown up to Etosha in company with that legend in South African conservation, the late Dr. Anthony Hall-Martin. It was for Pete the start of a very special professional and personal relationship with Anthony, one that would last till 2014 when he very sadly passed on.

Going Private

By the end of 1991 Pete decided to resign his post at Etosha National Park and became self- employed. *“It was pretty tough going. Now the wildlife business is a huge industry but back in the early 90’s it wasn’t like that at all. I think that I was, at that stage, the only private wild life vet in Namibia and I think that Richard Burrows was the*

only full time private wildlife vet in South Africa. It seems incredible now but that's how it was then. Now you shake a bush and ten vets fall out".

For the next two years home was to be at Twefelspark, situated between Windhoek and Okohanje where the growing Morkel family were able rent a small house. Work was where it was available and money in the household was exceptionally tight. Pete's gardener at Etosha, an Ovambo, Jeremiah Makoki, doing the garden and housework eventually became Pete's capture assistant. For the first job that came through Pete hired in some guys from his previous capture team. The capture of the giraffe at Garribo was successful but as Pete says, *"All the money I made on that job was used to pay the extra guys I had hired so I said bugger that, for the next job its just Jeremiah and myself. Working in the private sector sharpens you up pretty smartly. When the phone went, I ran like hell. I learnt to grab any opportunity"*.

"One day a call came through from a farmer who wanted to take some of his excess wildebeest off his farm to sell. Of course we didn't have money to hire a helicopter so Jeremiah and I built a boma and we closed off access to all the other water points on the farm, except one and then we spent a solid week hiding under a piece of canvas in that sweltering heat of Namibia waiting. Finally the wildebeest entered into the boma one night". "We were struggling to get those wildebeest loaded. They were galloping around us, over us and through us. I was getting hot and bothered as you can imagine. Eventually Jeremiah's cousin who had come along, suggested that we cut a hole in the boma and drive the animals through the space. It worked like a dream and the animals climbed straight on the truck".

"SANParks were short of a veterinarian in the southern parks, so Anthony Hall-Martin, who was a Director for the National Parks Board at the time used to get me down to South Africa to do both veterinary and capture work. That was great for me as it brought in some much needed income...those were really hand to mouth times".

Establishing a Game Capture Unit for SANParks

At the end of 1993 Anthony Hall-Martin offered Pete a full time position to be the vet for SANParks (outside of Kruger), based out of Kimberley.

"Most of the work at Kimberley was linked with the restocking of those areas Anthony Hall- Martin was busy acquiring and adding onto our various national parks. Anthony was wonderful at finding money from all over the world. Once the land had been bought, the fences were brought down, houses and installations were demolished to create functional ecosystems. We then brought back the wildlife to these areas, and reintroducing the predators; we were a very busy capture team".

Pete focused on building an effective capture team. He selected and trained hardworking and willing workers and was an effective team leader. Dr Mike Knight commented: *"his effectiveness was due to his driven character, his passion for animals and his desire to get the job done"*. But as Mike also points out, *"Anthony was a very very supportive boss and he made sure that the capture unit had a fair budget to do its work. Pete didn't necessarily stick to all the rules, but when it came to wildlife and veterinary things there was never ever short changing. The animals were always given preference. That was a measure of the high ethical standard that Pete had"*.

Darting Rhinos in Cameroon

Anthony Hall-Martin allowed Pete to do additional work outside of South Africa, and especially where it involved trying to save endangered rhino populations. During the mid-1990s a French vet Hubert Planton, was working in Cameroon to save their highly endangered rhinos. Having never darted rhino before, Hubert called on Pete. He says, *“I was used to experts, but the ones I knew liked air-conditioned offices, comforts, nice cars and they never walk. From the very outset Pete seemed to be very serious about his work and very competent, and at the same time very uncomplicated.”*

Hubert continues, *“We went into the bush and walked for about a week when we saw our first spoor. Pete was walking all day, very fast, as he is tall and in good condition. We ate the same food every day, some bread and some sardines. Nothing else. That was not a problem for him. We had an important job to do and he wanted to get it done. It was the day before Pete was due to fly back to South Africa that we caught up with the rhino and Pete darted him and fitted the radio transmitter, embedded in the horn. At the time in 1996 it was estimated that there were only 12 remaining rhino left in Cameroon. It took only six or seven years for all of them to be killed and for the sub-species to be wiped out.”*

Oranges for the Rhino

Hubert shared another engaging story *“Pete was moving a couple of rhinos to Germany in a hired Russian Antonov cargo plane. Pete knew one of the rhinos liked oranges. As they were flying over Tanzania the animal became distressed but Pete didn't want to inject any drugs. So he asked the pilot to make an emergency landing. The pilot spoke to the control tower in Nairobi and indicated that they had an emergency and he requested permission to land. The control tower enquired as to the nature of the emergency and Pete said to the pilot, “Just tell him we need oranges”. The guy on the radio thought that we were joking. So Pete told him, “No no, we need oranges waiting for us on the tarmac when we land the plane”. So they landed the plane and Pete jumped out grabbed the sacks of oranges that were waiting and the rhino became quiet again and they could take off once more. That's, I think, the most expensive oranges in the world!”*

Taking Rhinos to Cleveland

During the latter years of Pete's tenure with SANParks he became involved with taking rhinos to zoos overseas. The Cleveland Zoo in Ohio in the United States was one of these.

'Back to Africa'

As observed by Dr Mike Knight, it was during the time when Pete was taking animals to zoos outside of South Africa that the germ of a new idea was born. As Mike explains, *“Zoo's have a stock of wildlife and these animals are kept not to be bred but rather used for display and educational purposes. Consequently once animals get old they are either euthanased or fed to the predators as just another meal. So Pete identified that there was important genetic material that could be brought back to Africa to strengthen declining populations, and more importantly, with the need to enrich, at every possible opportunity, the gene stock thus creating a win-win situation for both the animals concerned and conservation as a whole”*.

The idea of Back to Africa was born in conversation between Pete and his old university pal, Dr Hamish Curry. As Hamish explains, he and Pete were moving zebra to the Mountain Zebra National Park and the idea crystallised, as is so often the case, *“On the road, as we got chatting. There I was taking black rhinos that been running wild through the bush of Africa, with unlimited freedom to range and then taking them halfway across the world and putting them in some crappy pen in a zoo in North America, in Germany or wherever. You go to a lot of trouble to catch animals, you get them to trust you, you almost make friends with them only to shaft them, to take them to some far off place that they will never come back from and almost certainly live a miserable life and then possibly die there. I remember discussing things over with Hamish, that I thought that it would be great to bring animals back. Hamish could immediately see its value. He grabbed it and ran with it”*.

Very soon an NPO [not for profit organisation] was formed with Pete, Hamish and Mike as the three directors. As Mike notes, *“There is no financial compensation and no financial reward involved: Pete and I give the advice and Hamish does all the work. But jokes aside, we have done a lot and we have achieved and made an impact”*.

“Over the years we have been able to bring back quite a few animals: sable from various zoos in Europe to a national park close to Kimberley; roan antelope back to Swaziland; black rhino to Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary in Tanzania; northern white rhino back to Kenya and so on. Back to Africa’s own resources have been limited and thus we have partnered with other fellow travellers in the conservation space to get things done. We knew that we wouldn’t change the world but every little bit helps. It also gives one great satisfaction too”. *“Back to Africa is still going... and even though Mike, Hamish and myself have time, financial and personal constraints, whenever an opportunity comes along, and one which is worth following through on, we will take it”*.

The range of projects Back to Africa has been involved with is most impressive, particularly bearing in mind that it is driven by three committed individuals all with full time professional jobs and given that it is entirely donor funded with funds being raised on a project by project basis, as funding may be required. Projects have included for example:

- Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary, Tanzania;
- Northern White Rhino Project, Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya;
- Operation Grevy’s Zebra, Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya;
- Sable Reintroduction in the Balule Conservancy, Limpopo Province, South Africa.
Ngorogoro Crater, Tanzania

After seven years Pete left SANParks. Anthony Hall-Martin had retired and while Pete enjoyed his time there, it was time to leave. Pete joined a commercial group specialising in capturing and transporting wildlife. He enjoyed working with the team but felt uneasy. *“At the core of my discomfort was the commercialisation of the animal business. It broke my heart having to move animals knowing that in a weeks time they were going to be potted as someone’s trophy”*.

“Then an offer came along from Marcus Warner of the Frankfurt Zoological Society [FZS] to move up to the Ngorogoro Crater in Tanzania and run the rhino project. I departed north with Estelle at the beginning of 2002 and we began a new phase of our lives for just over six years in East Africa”. *“At Ngorogoro we had a comfortable house, nothing grand*

I must add, on the edge of the crater and a view that stretched forever. If you take a 60-100km radius from Ngorongoro it really is some of the most spectacular places you will ever visit. The topography, the people, the wildlife; just everything”.

“Running the rhino project for the FZS, and thankfully I was given a great deal of freedom to get on with the job, involved providing logistical support and advice in relation to the rhino in the crater. I think that we achieved some good stuff with the rhinos plus the ecological work that we did in the crater like the burning program, the whole water management issue after the impact of el Nino, alien plant control in the area and generally getting things back to how they should be. I did some veterinary work but this was quite limited really”.

There was a Cessna small plane at FZS and Pete took the opportunity to learn to fly, despite apprehensions of his colleagues. Flying conditions at the Crater was not easy, with strong winds and roaming animals. Ian Michler shared some of his memories about special times that he had experienced at Ngorongoro with Pete and Estelle.

“I remember how we used to sit out on the veranda in the evenings looking out over the crater and then later in the evenings sitting around the fire discussing wildlife issues, wildlife conservation... He’s a great thinker your brother. My interactions with him were quite serious in a way, wonderfully serious, poetically joyously serious, uplifting and positively serious. We also laughed a lot as well”.

Chased by a Rhino

“But one story I must share with you was one day when Pete said he wanted to show me a really special thing involving the Masai. You know Pete was very intrigued by the Masai. It was one of the big market days and it involved a dusty drive of about two hours to get there. We had this awesome day with all the Masai. He knew many of them personally. He was a just a natural, he was just in there and amongst all these people. You could see that they loved him. You could see that they knew he was a special man, that he had treated them well and with respect. Thousands of Masai came together that day from all over the crater. That was a special day for me too”.

Masai spectators watched Pete escaping a charging Rhino. They were awed how Pete handled the fierce animal. He clearly knew how. Pete relates that the reality was quite different.

“One day we got a call that there was a black rhino behind the Old Ndinani mountain. It turned out it was Chause, a Sub-Alcor, who had wandered out of the crater during the previous night”. “Anyway we got our kit together, got the truck out, the dart gun, all the bits and pieces we were going to need and got going. But by this stage there were a few hundred Masai collected on the slopes who had come to watch the action. I didn’t have access to a helicopter so I had to dart on foot. I would have to do my best sneaking up job although that wasn’t easy as it was very open grassland with no tree covering. I got within darting distance, about thirty meters and I darted Chause. Then the action started. He chased me down the mountain slope with all the Masai shouting and clapping their encouragement. And then he stopped and I stopped. And then he chased me again and I ran for all I was worth. This happened two or three times more until he finally fell down. The dart had done its work”.

“We loaded Chause onto a sledge and then took him down the steep road into the crater. We made it safely down and placed him into one of the rhino holding bomas. After the antidote was administered, he stood up and you could see where he had knocked his knee when he had fallen earlier. We assumed that he had damaged the nerve activating the muscles of his leg so that he would have partial paralysis in the damaged leg. But even though he was basically operating on three legs he was easily strong enough to go up to the wall of the boma and after a few swipes of his head he was able to crash through the wall and disappeared off to one side”.

“We spent the whole night getting extra poles and strengthening the boma. Again I went out to dart Chause, again on foot. He had wandered off about a kilometre and a half and he was just lying there sleeping. So I thought this is going to be easy this time and also he won't be able to run very fast with his sore leg. I'll sort of walk up to him and give him a shot. Which is exactly what I did”.

“But whatever damage had occurred to his one leg that had sorted itself out and he came at me like a rocket. I was sprinting as fast as my legs would carry me with the rhino literally two or three meters behind me. I glanced back and there he was with that bloody great horn of his about to poke me in the backside. At that very moment, if you can believe it, I tripped. I must have stepped in a hole in the ground while looking back. I lost my footing and fell. The rhino nearly ran right over me. He ran slightly to one side and then he ran past me and on for another thirty meters or so before he realised that he was no longer chasing me. He turned in my direction again but in the meantime I had regained my feet and I ran a further twenty meters or so away from the turning rhino. Fortunately I was far enough away that he didn't chase me a second time. And then down he went after the tranquiliser dart had done its thing and Chause was finally moved into the boma once more”. “Well can you believe it but after administering the antidote to Chause he simply walked through the strengthened wall of the boma a second time. By then we just decided to leave him be and he wandered off to go and browse”.

“Thinking back on the sequence of events that day I think that the lads [the Masai] were quite impressed by all the action that had played out before them. They were sitting on top of a Land Rover, about eighty meters away. They had watched me walk up to sleeping Chause and dart him Then off the boss dashes with the rhino right behind him and just at the right time he dives down on the ground and let the rhino dash past him. They were impressed — an old hand at work — but it really wasn't like that at all. It was a mighty close shave that day. It was by the grace of God that I survived that one.

Suddenly the Engine of the Cessna died on me ...

“In 2006 a batch of rhino had been taken to the valley. After their release they concentrated themselves in the south west corner of the so-called middle sanctuary. We were naturally quite concerned as there was not much water for them in the area and although there was a small stream it might have dried up”.

“In order to check up on the rhinos I decided that I would fly along the course of the stream to see if I could spot any pools of water. I was in the Cessna 185 of the FZS and Emile Smith was flying with me. We were flying low and slow that day at about 200ft or so trying to get a good look at the stream. It wasn't an easy task as tall and substantial trees along the course of the stream continually obscured our view. We were proceeding well and according to plan, low and slow, when suddenly the plane engine died on me. I tried changing petrol tanks, I tried to restart and while I was frantically trying to get some life out of the plane's engine I had to put the nose of the plane down to maintain forward air speed. Without sufficient speed I knew that we would simply fall out of the sky. I had literally a couple of seconds before we would plough into some really tall Cathedral Mopani trees. And then it happened — the crash. We had ploughed into a particularly big and tall Mopani tree and then it was just blank for me for maybe 15 or 20 minutes. The next recollection that I have is walking away from the wrecked plane. Lucky the plane had not caught alight”.

“Anyway we must have clambered out and then after moving away from the crash site we lay down for a short while before we started walking. We made it to the fence line where I again lay down while Emile worked his way up the fence to the ranger post. The only person at the station at the time was Jessica Groenendyk and she came down immediately in the Land Cruiser to collect Emile and I”. “I was evacuated to a hospital in South Africa. It turned out that I had fractured my skull quite badly on the left hand side and I also had a significant amount of haemorrhage in the brain. But luckily, I think, because of the way I had fractured my skull much of the blood had escaped thus limiting the pressure on the brain itself”.

Leaving Ngorogoro

Pete left Ngorongoro after six years and continued to work for them part time for about two years. However, changes in leadership and conservation policies made a break inevitable. Sadly, eventually FZS abandoned their involvement with the crater.

In 2004, Pete and his family settled in Kakamas on the Orange River in the Northern Cape, from where he continued to travel into Africa on a regular basis. Sadly, more and more of Pete's work has been to protect endangered populations from machetes, bullets or snares of the poachers.

Mentoring Prince Harry

While at Kakamas in 2014, Pete received a request to mentor Prince Harry in conservation projects. Simon Perry quotes the Prince: *‘For me it is three months of hard grafting, working with animals. To actually get the chance to embed myself with the top vet in southern Africa, travel with him for three weeks and every job he is called up to do. That’s like a dream’*. According to the media report, ‘Morkel is said to be an expert at using humane techniques to safely capture and relocate animals, often by helicopter, as well as being known for his anti-poaching strategies. Prince Harry spent time during 2015 with Pete, learning and participating with conservation projects involving mainly rhinos.

Finally

Pete recently acquired and settled on an extensive property in southern Namibia, bordering the Orange River. It is rocky mountainous terrain, unsuited to most farming, but with active antelope herds. Another conservation project for Pete.

Today, in 2017, as I edit this story that André Morkel has crafted from a partially complete version of his biography, Pete is still working extensively in Africa. I am nearing the completion of Pete's story, due to be published in 2017. André and I have so enjoyed sharing some of the stories of Pete and his commitment to wildlife management and conservation.

Mike Morkel, December 2016.

Polokwane, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Please contact me, mike@sdynamics.co.za to tell me of a story you might know about Pete. It will probably be one I need to include in Pete's biography.

Pete in Print

Pete has featured in a number of articles and reports on wildlife conservation in Africa. Extracts from some examples are as follows:

Translocating Black Rhino from the Czech Republic

by Tony Fitzjohn Field Director, George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust. Published in "The Horn"

In May 2009, we took delivery of three black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) from the Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic. A translocation such as this takes at least two years to organise and prepare for. Logistics, practical preparations, bureaucracy, transport and funding have to run simultaneously with preparation of the rhino to undertake the journey. The rule of thumb is that nothing can be left to chance at any stage of the game. We were fortunate enough to work with arguably the best rhino vet in the world and his team, Dr Pete Morkel.

When the Czech rhinos arrived at Mkomazi, their keepers Berry White and Honza settled them into their new lives and trained Emmanuel, Evans and Penieli in zoo techniques on caring for them in the compounds. They were then introduced into ever-increasing-sized paddocks until they settled into their own large sections. Pete Morkel returned to fit telemetry transmitters into their horns.

The three rhinos have been at Mkomazi for nearly a year now and they have adapted to their new lives well. We supplemented their feed with lucerne, horse-nuts and carrots during the prolonged dry season, whilst they adapted to the conditions and the vegetation. We now only give them carrots and they are thriving on the browse.

The Rarest Rhinos Travel Back to Africa

Media release: Ol Pejeta Conservancy www.olpejetaconservancy.org

Four of the world's last known remaining eight northern white rhinos will be relocated from captivity back to the wild on Sunday 20th December 2009, thanks to the collaborative efforts of a consortium of conservation organisations. The rhinos will be moved from Dvůr Králové Zoo in the Czech Republic to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Laikipia, Kenya.

The cause for the move is to induce normal social and territorial behaviour that is essential for the rhinos to breed routinely. The rhinos were accompanied by experts, including their keeper Jan Zdarek and veterinarian Dr Jiri Vahala, from Dvůr Králové Zoo, rhino veterinarian Dr Pete Morkel, an expert veterinarian dedicated to rhino translocation, and 'rhino whisperer' Berry White.

Operation Grevy's Zebra

[From the Back to Africa website]

Back to Africa's latest project has started with the capture of Grevy's Zebra (*Equus grevyi*) at Ol Pejeta Ranch. Back to Africa director Dr Peter Morkel was present at the capture. These animals will be offered special protection in this area and it will be possible to monitor them intensively.

Elephant Collaring in Zakouma National Park (Chad)

by Jean Labuschagne

The fifteenth of March 2012 marked the beginning of the fourth elephant collaring operation in Zakouma National Park and the second since African Parks took over management of the park in October 2010.

Once the aircraft had guided the vehicles to within 400m of the herd, Dr Pete Morkel our very able veterinarian and some of the ground crew set off on foot to what would be the first elephant to be collared in 2012. This being the second operation with the same team, everyone was relaxed and familiar with the procedure. Pete's shoes were off; stalk, aim, fire dart, arrive at elephant, water, measure up, fit collar, monitor, more water, photos, roll him over, remove dart, wake him up....it was a smooth, albeit hot morning and the return to base yielded three Land Cruisers full of tired but smiling faces.

Angola Palanca Report 2016, Collaring Giant Sable

by Pedro Vaz Pinto

Between July and August, with the support of the Angolan Army, we carried out an ambitious aerial census and capture operation in Luando and Cangandala.

As usual Dr Peter Morkel was the vet chosen, and of course we (including the sable!) couldn't have been in better hands. The objective for the 2016 capture operation would be, over the course of three weeks, to make an updated sable population census in Luando Reserve and place up to 16 GPS collars and 5 VHF collars on giant sable, both in Cangandala and Luando.

In Cangandala we came across a young male forest buffalo which was well seen and photographed. However, a later inspection of the photographs revealed a shocking fact: the poor buffalo had a steel wire snare around his neck! Apart from the obvious poaching proof and the animal suffering, this event brought in two novel elements: it was the first time that we recorded steel fencing wire as material for snare traps (mostly used are steel cables from motor bikes), and the first time we faced neck snares instead of foot snares. The interrupted and temporarily abandoned fencing work around the park boundary, using steel wire instead of bonnox-type mesh, provided an unlimited supply of this type of wire for snare traps.

One of the first animals darted in Luando this year was poor Nadia, the young female (born in 2011) that we had tried to dart on foot in October 2015 when, based on the GPS data, we suspected she was injured and must have fallen in a snare trap. Unfortunately this suspicion was now vividly confirmed: she was limping and in poor condition, and carried a nasty wound in her right front foot. Dr Morkel had to improvise a surgical intervention to be able to remove a steel cable snare that was constraining blood flow in her foot and threatening gangrene and amputation. She must have gone through unspeakable suffering over the last few months. At least we may have at least mitigated her suffering and giving her now a reasonable chance for recovery. Miraculously she was lactating, meaning that she had had a calf recently. This could only be possible because she must have been impregnated just a few days before falling into the trap. It is doubtful if the calf will make it giving Nadia's poor condition, but at least she has maintained her normal breeding cycle even during her worst year.

Lycaon Award presented by the South African Veterinary Association

In July 2017, Pete was awarded the Lycaon award, presented by the Wild Life Group of the South African Veterinary Association (SAVA) in Johannesburg. The award is made in recognition of an exceptional contribution to wild life conservation. When introducing Pete the President of SAVA, Dr Johann Marais noted that Pete had worked in over 20 countries in Africa and that his specialties were rhino, elephant and giraffe. When closing his address about Pete he acknowledged that we have tonight the best black rhino vet in the world in our presence. What an accolade.

Estelle and his daughter were with Pete for the special evening. I (Mike Morkel) was also honoured by SAVA when I was asked to make a presentation of the first written copy of Pete's autobiography to him. I had only completed the final edit a few days earlier. What an honour for me.



Pete at the Lycaon Award Ceremony

Post Script

Pete is continuing his work in conservation. Pete writes about a recent (March 2017) visit to Gabon. His style is easy to read and it invites the reader into the adventure of tracking and collaring elephant in the Gabon jungle. I (André Morkel) felt I was there with him, albeit in comfort at home, without the heat and humidity of the African jungle, blood sucking flies (and leeches in the water), physical exhaustion, and the danger of being so close to large, lovely but dangerous creatures.

“The big bull we collared yesterday we called Kali – Swahili for angry. After a good slog we got close to him. How it works is the pygmies stay about 25 meters ahead of me and Michel leads as he’s a better tracker. The rest of the gang with collars etc are about 30 meters behind me strung out in a line. The forest is very quiet so it’s really is important to walk quietly”.

“When the pygmies give the nod I take off my rucksack and shoes and check the pressure setting on the gun and switch on the red-dot scope. I leave rucksack and shoes behind for the others to pick up. It’s so much quieter going barefoot and if you have to run it’s a lot better as well. Luckily there are very few thorns in the forest. Anyway we go in very carefully and the last bit I leave Michel behind and I get as close as I can. I usually dart at about 15 to 30 meters”.

“Yesterday on our first attempt, we very close and Kali was walking straight towards me and eating but it was not a clear shot. Michel tossed a pod at me to get my attention and indicated that it would probably be better to go around behind him. We did this but in the process he wandered off again and we kept following. It is remarkable how these huge animals can quietly disappear in the forest. We followed him for another kilometre or two (me still barefoot) before we got another opportunity. He was about 25 meters away trying to get some bark off a tree. It wasn’t a perfect situation as it was pretty dark and there were quite a lot of bushes and creepers in the way – but it wasn’t going to get much better and I took a chance for his back leg. Unfortunately the dart hit a little branch and tumbled and all we got was a spirited chase by him. We came back and found the dart and after a 10 minute breather we decided to keep on going on his track”.

“An hour or two later we got up to him again in some thick stuff. Shoes and backpack off again and I snuck up and darted him in the back. He was off like a shot with Michel and Bebe in hot pursuit. The stopwatch was going and I waited for the rest of the team to come up and bring my shoes and pack and then using pygmy No 3 we followed. About 7 minutes on the tracks I gave a bellow and in the distance we could hear Michel and Bebe. As they respond we knew he was down and we upped the pace. He was on his brisket (potentially lethal) so we quickly backed the area clear on his right and with a lot of heave- ho managed to topple him over on his side and get to work. Some serious flies which hang around the elephants were eating us and I had to top him up with a bit more drugs to keep him down. When all was done I gave the antidote and we legged it. Michel and Bebe were up in trees near him to check he got up OK. As it often happens he came running past us after waking up and we had a big tree to dive behind if necessary. We were chuffed with our efforts and after an hour and a half slog were back at the boat and an hour later back at base”.

During 2018 he was back again, collaring elephant in Gabon. Soon after he also trained a team of local wardens in the Pendjari National Park in Benin to collar and protect their elephant herd. They have about 1700 elephants in the Park, which is one of the highest density of pachyderms in West Africa.

<http://www.africanews.com/2018/01/30/pendjari-national-park-in-benin-bounces-back-to-life/>



One more photo: Pete collaring an elephant in Gabon in 2017

PETER VAN DER BYL MORKEL BV.Sc.

1984-86 Namibian Directorate of Veterinary Sciences

1986-92 Namibian Directorate of Wildlife Conservation

1992-93 Self-employed Wildlife Veterinarian in Namibia

1994-01 General Manager, Game Capture Kimberley, National Parks Board of South Africa 2001-2002 Private wildlife veterinarian

2002-2003 Rhino Co-ordinator, Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania. (Frankfurt Zoological Society) 2004 Wildlife Consultant

Since June 1986, Dr Peter Morkel has been working full time as a wildlife veterinarian. He has extensive experience with the physical and chemical capture and the translocation of African wildlife. He has worked with wildlife in eleven African countries, much of his time being spent working with rare species, especially the Black Rhinoceros, on which he is a world expert. He is currently a member of the African Rhino Specialist Group of the IUCN SSC, and has twelve publications to his name.

Pete is recognized as one of the leaders in rhinoceros capture and translocation around the world and it is here that he has made his greatest contributions. Always thinking about ways to improve the process and outcomes of rhinoceros anesthesia, Pete is currently leading explorations into effects of the capture process on muscle function, respiration and posture.

Aside from animals, Pete and his wife Estelle have two children that also embrace the natural world. Daughter, Cheri, is a qualified veterinary nurse while son, Benoit, is exploring biology and the humanities. He has just returned from a year on Marion Island in the South Atlantic contributing to work of the South African research expedition there. He has also spent several months working with Malaysian sun bears in Vietnam. The Morkel family share a deep love for the rugged and beautiful landscapes of Africa. They recently purchased a large farmstead along the rugged and remote Orange River in southern Namibia that will become a future refuge for family and wild animals alike.

Pete Morkel Family Tree

