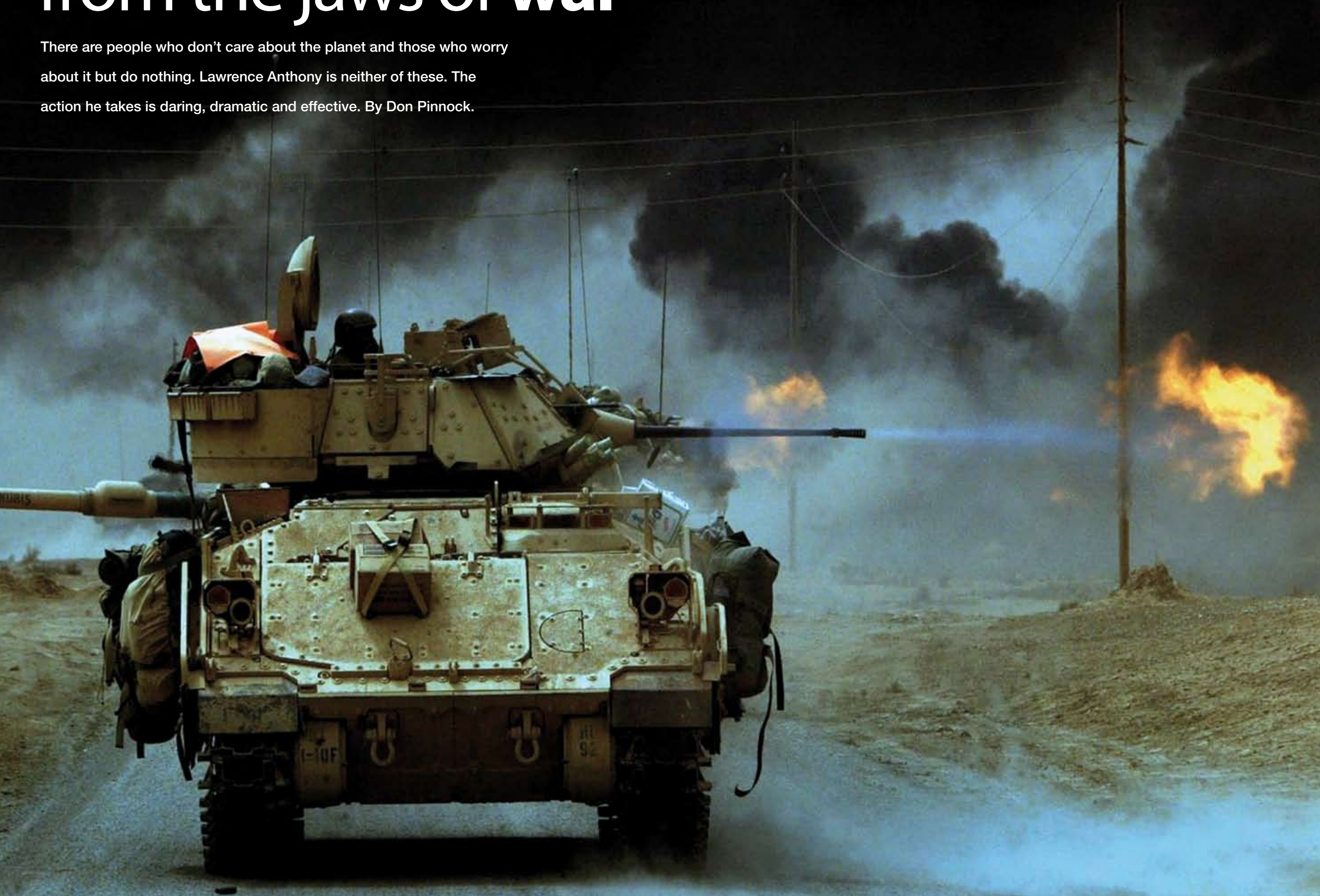


from the jaws of war

Africans at Large Lawrence Anthony

There are people who don't care about the planet and those who worry about it but do nothing. Lawrence Anthony is neither of these. The action he takes is daring, dramatic and effective. By Don Pinnock.



“Come boy,” said Lawrence Anthony. “Come on. It’s okay.”

The wild elephant bull stopped drinking at the water hole, flared his ears briefly and tested the air with his trunk. Then he stepped silently round the churned-up water and walked slowly forwards. “That’s right. Come on. Everything’s fine.”

The tusker stopped a few metres from Lawrence, who kept talking, stroking it with his voice. It was extraordinary to watch: the man looking up at the huge creature, a bond of trust beyond words clearly being established. They gazed at each other for a long, electric moment. Then the elephant plucked some grass, signalling its comfort and approval, and Lawrence bowed slightly. They both turned from each other, the elephant melting into the thick bush of Thula Thula Game Reserve and the man stepping back into a life of passionate protection of the planet’s dwindling wildlife.

Several years ago, deep in the night, a similar encounter took place. Lawrence’s beautiful French wife, Françoise, woke him. There were elephants outside. He stepped out onto the lawn and beneath a giant marula tree was the matriarch of the herd. Ghostly in the moonlight, she stretched out her trunk towards him, then turned slightly, revealing her new calf. Behind her, in the darkness, he could hear the rest of the herd.

“Thank you for bringing your baby to show me,” he said to her. “He’s beautiful.”

Earlier that evening, he’d been watching the American invasion of Iraq on CNN. He knew that, in times of war, animals always suffer horribly. It had happened in Berlin, where 13 000 animals died, and in Dresden, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Kuwait. The images of a lion in Kabul Zoo, blinded by a hand grenade, still haunted him.

Standing there in the African night with the elephants on his lawn, he made a decision. >

William Summer - US Army

A Bradley armoured vehicle scaring animals in Baghdad.

"The place looked as if a tornado had hit it, then reversed and come back through again for good measure."



"I looked at the lions and a feeling of pity and desperation came over me. They were caged in alien surroundings so far from their natural environment, afraid and intimidated."

"I'm going to Baghdad," he told Françoise the next morning.

"When?" she asked.

"As soon as I can."

Within a week, having pulled every string he could find, employing bluff and bamboozlement and with the required permit in his hand, he was at the Kuwait/Iraq border in a hired Toyota packed with medical supplies. Two vets from Kuwait Zoo were on board to help.

The frontier sentry held up the permit, staring at it incredulously. "Don't you know there's a war going on?" he asked, glaring at them as though they'd escaped from an asylum. "We're heading for Baghdad Zoo with supplies," Lawrence told him.

"You're the first civilians in," said the guard. "Just stay close to the convoys. We're getting several hits a day on the road."

From the way the television news covered the invasion in 2003, it had seemed as though the war was practically over. In fact, the nasty stuff was only just beginning. "I didn't know that," Lawrence told me later. "I was

to the zoo. What he saw devastated him. There were dead animals and rotten food in cages, dead animals outside cages. There were bomb craters with corpses lying around their rim, unexploded ordinance, cage doors were open and animals were running about. Clouds of flies buzzed.

"The place looked as if a tornado had hit it, then reversed and come back through again for good measure," he said. "The street battle had gone right through the zoo and nobody had thought about the animals. An M1 tank had blown a hole in the wall of the lion enclosure. There was a bear roaming round that had already killed three looters. In the eucalyptus trees there was the squawking of escaped parrots, falcons and other birds. The bilious-ripe malodour of death and decay clogged the air like a soiled cloud.

"I could picture the horror the animals must have suffered, bullets ricocheting off their cages, turbine-engined tanks roaring with their steel tracks ripping up roads, missiles whistling from the sky and cosmic-clapping bombs shredding buildings..."

The Americans packed huge firepower and were jumpy. If someone suspicious moved, they'd take out half the building. The streets were carpeted in shell casings.

"They'd talk about 'pink misting' somebody and at first I didn't know what it meant. The computerised cannons on the Abrams and Bradley tanks were so accurate that, when they locked on someone, day or night, they couldn't miss. All that remained was pink mist.

"They also had impossible amounts of money and logistical support. The British came out with their little Land Rovers and their ration packs full of horrible treacle pudding. But within weeks the Americans had a Burger King and a Pizza Hut."

Impossible task

Saving the zoo seemed completely beyond a single human with a mission, so Lawrence went one step at a time. Water? The pumps had been looted, so he recruited some former zoo staff and they carried water up from the scum-filled dams of the nearby park, after first scavenging buckets. Food? Using his own money, Lawrence

scoured the ruined city for donkeys, which he fed to the carnivores.

"Ja, it cost a few bob," he recalled, "but they saved the zoo. A group that helped us later was so horrified that we were killing donkeys that they brought in a container of buffalo meat from India at huge cost. I asked them: 'So who killed the buffaloes?' They didn't know what to say."

Lawrence found a room in the Al-Rashid Hotel in the Green Zone which had been built by Saddam Hussein to withstand rocket attacks and was housing the US military. There he discovered a group of Southern African recce who were part of General Jay Garner's personal bodyguard.

"They were scary guys, dressed all in black with bullet belts over their shoulders and weapons everywhere," said Lawrence as we sat on the peaceful veranda of Thula Thula, the war difficult to imagine. "Koevoet, 32 Battalion vets – these chaps were tough, real professionals. But they had an instinctive bond with the animals and, when they were off duty, they'd hang around the zoo to protect me and scare off looters. They'd offer looters they caught a choice: clean the shit out of the cages or get shot. It sure reduced looting. Without those guys, I don't think we'd have pulled it off."

There was a tiger named Moolah in one of the cages which had been dull-coated and listless when Lawrence arrived. But with water, a clean cage and a supply of donkey meat, it began to fill out again. Each day Lawrence would sit and talk to it, calming the predator and himself in the process. In a way, the tiger became his muse, a still, calm being in all the madness.

Friends and favours

Lawrence is both a survivor and masterful operator. He gradually won over key people in the US military, ordinary soldiers and local Iraqis to his cause to save the zoo. He traded favours from troopies by allowing them to make calls to their families on his cell-phone, running up a whopping bill. Water pumps and a freezer for animal food arrived mysteriously, no questions asked. Former zoo staff helped clean up the mess. Ordinary off-duty soldiers would rock up to donate

their ration packs and the occasional scrounged donkey or chicken. Television crews looking for another angle on the war got the word out to the world that Baghdad had a zoo in dire need of help.

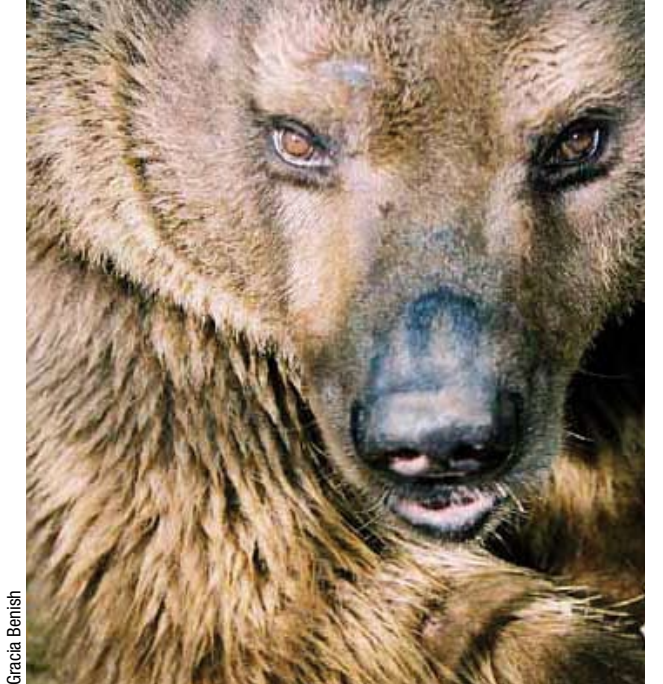
There were bizarre scenes. Saddam's son, Uday, had a palace with a lion's enclosure into which he reportedly threw his enemies and the suitors of his female conquests. The den contained several lions, cubs and some dogs, which were evidently part of the pride. At another of Uday's 'love nests', Lawrence and his team found ostriches. They crammed one into a Humvee, but decided to 'run' the others to the zoo, with a man hanging onto each wing. On the way, they hit a roadblock. All that the young soldier manning it saw was three ostriches running full tilt at him with men hanging onto them and an armoured vehicle behind them with an ostrich neck sticking out the top.

"The poor guy didn't know what to do," Lawrence chuckled. "He cocked his gun and shouted 'Halt!' But there was no chance of that. I yelled that it was okay and we were from the zoo. He just gaped as we whizzed past."

There were ruthless animal traders in the city and Lawrence discovered a private holding facility where the animals were in an appalling condition. With the help of troops in Humvees, he and his helpers began to move its creatures to the zoo. But no matter how much sedative they prodded into a large brown bear, it refused to go to sleep and was named Last Man Standing.

Another time, amid the bullets, troop carriers and chaos of the city, Lawrence created an instant carnival by walking an imperious camel to the zoo. Saddam had collected some of the world's finest Arab horses – creatures that could trace their bloodline back to before the Crusades, valuable beyond imagining. A national treasure, they had all disappeared in the invasion. They were tracked down to the tatty Abu Garaib race track in a dangerous Red Zone where they were hidden. The Americans supported the zoo in a raid which saved some 200 of the world's finest thoroughbreds.

Not long after arriving in Baghdad, it was clear to Lawrence that he needed



Gracia Benish

"When I first entered the zoo, a huge brown bear was roaming around uncaged. It had already killed three looters and my first priority was to get it back behind bars."

"Koevoet, 32 Battalion vets – these guys were tough, real professionals. They'd hang around the zoo to protect me and offer looters they caught a choice: clean the shit out of the cages or get shot"

professional help. He was working hard and not sleeping well because of the nightly *whump* of explosions and a sky constantly lit up by tracer bullets. He called for a man he knew he could rely on, his ranger back at Thula Thula, Brendan Whittington-Jones, who joined the team. Another heaven-sent helper was a young Iraqi vet, Farah Murrani, who pitched up at the zoo one day speaking excellent English.

With a team gradually expanding to include local zoo keepers, vets, volunteers from foreign foundations and construction by the American Engineering Corps, the zoo was gradually being put back together. With Farah, Brendan and an American captain, Lawrence started Iraq's first Society for the Protection of Animals.

Line in the sand

"For me this was more than just about saving a zoo," said Lawrence. "It was about making a moral and ethical stand, about saying we cannot do this to our planet anymore. It was to be my line in the sand. This far and no more."

Leaving Brendan to carry on the work, Lawrence returned to his beloved Thula Thula. One evening the elephants



Brendan Whittington-Jones

entering a hornet's nest. The atmosphere in Iraq hung like a pall. When we got to Baghdad, there was constant gunfire."

Having got over the shock of seeing a foreign civilian in Baghdad, an American lieutenant escorted Lawrence

*Today the zoo's doing fine.
It's run by the Baghdad
Municipality with US funding
and an excellent director*



gathered again on his lawn. Lawrence went down to greet them and, as they stood there watching him, the phone rang. Françoise called him: "It's Brendan from Baghdad." He rushed back inside and took the phone.

"They've killed the tiger. Moolah is dead," Brendan shouted on the crackly line. "Some American soldiers got drunk at the zoo. One stuck his hand into the cage and Moolah bit it, so another one shot the tiger."

Lawrence put down the phone, remembering his hours with the majestic cat. When it came to wild animals, people were so ignorant, so arrogant. The fight for the planet was not over, he thought. Not by a long way.

"The Baghdad experience confirmed something bigger for me," he said. "The plant and animal kingdoms are in grave crisis and people don't seem to be aware of it. They just don't understand how connected we are to nature. I tried to get the Baghdad Zoo closed. Zoos are really animal prisons. My duty was to the animals, not the institution. But I couldn't."

Today the zoo's doing fine. It's run by the Baghdad Municipality with US funding and an excellent director. Lawrence was awarded the prestigious Earth Trustee Humanitarian Award at the United Nations in 2004 and a film is being made about his work.

His experience in Iraq, however, sparked something bigger: a conservation initiative called the Earth Organisation, which he runs with branches in South Africa, the United States, Canada, Cameroon, France, Hungary and the United Kingdom. "There are people who know nothing about the crisis of the natural world," he said, "and there are those who talk a lot about it and do nothing. The Earth Organisation takes concrete action."

The next day I hitched a ride back to Durban with Françoise, who was taking Lawrence to the airport.

"Where are you going?" I asked him. "Southern Sudan."

"It's a war zone," I said, "why there?"

"I'm helping with the peace talks between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government. I went up there to try to save the northern white rhino, which is critically endangered, and made contact with the LRA because they control its range in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. They discovered I'd been part of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, so we made a deal: I'll help with the negotiations if they protect the rhinos. It turned out it was their tribal totem and they agreed."

"But you know, that's what conservation has come to in Africa. It's got serious and nobody seems to notice. It's no longer George Adamson rehabilitating his beloved lions or Ian Player breeding up rhinos. It's not hearts or heads anymore, it's guns."

"In the last 10 years in that area, around 10 000 elephants have been shot in Garamba National Park in the DRC, the forest buffalo population has fallen from 100 000 to 8 000, hippo are down from 32 000 to about 1 500. Now we have 200 soldiers from a terrorist organisation which recruits child soldiers occupying the southern part of a game reserve in another country (Congo) protecting creatures from

poachers from a third country (Sudan) because the rhino is their totem.

"I've also asked the LRA to help stop the killing of mountain gorillas in Rwanda by a breakaway DRC general. If they agree, we'll have a terrorist army based in a game reserve doing deals with a renegade general who is shooting gorillas to secure his independence from the Congo. Africa's a pretty crazy place."

In the car, Lawrence looked out over the endless fields of alien sugar cane and sighed. "There is unfortunately no magic wand to conservation, no easy way out. We're going to have to face up to this and do it ourselves, each of us playing his or her part, each setting an example for others to follow and demanding our leaders do the same. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"We're probably the only species whose removal from the planet would improve it. Unless there's a swift and marked change in our attitudes and actions towards the natural world, we could well be on our way to becoming a critically endangered species ourselves." ■

Lawrence has written about his experiences in Babylon's Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo (St Martin's Press, R195). For information on the Earth Organisation, web www.earthorganisation.org. - See the feature about Thula Thula on page 96.

"The cheetahs were far weaker than the lions and, despite putting on a snarling show, were relatively easily rounded up. They seemed relieved at their new, less-caged surroundings."



Brendan Whittington-Jones