

## THE NATAL PARKS BOARD: A CONSERVATION ADVENTURE

by GEORGE HUGHES

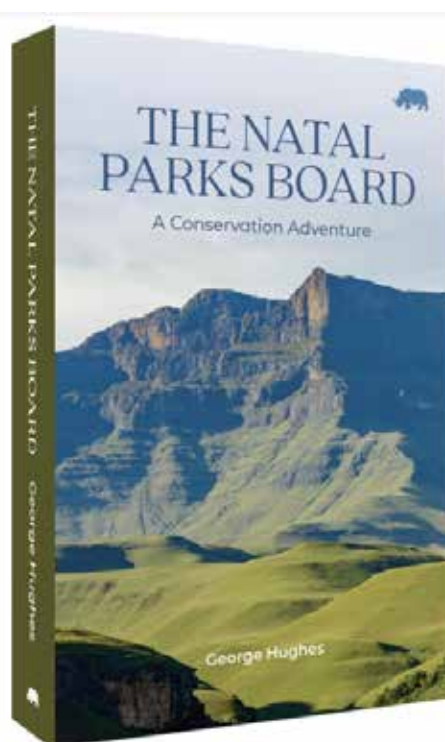
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Africa is home to some of the world's most iconic and threatened species. Despite its incredible richness and diversity in wildlife, a combination of sport and market hunting had decimated much of its vast herds by the end of the nineteenth century. It was only thanks to the efforts of a few far-sighted individuals and organisations that this disastrous decline was slowed and then gradually reversed.

In South Africa, the colony and then province of Natal early on recognised the importance of wildlife conservation. It was the first part of South Africa to establish formal areas with the specific purpose of protecting individual large mammal species. It was also the first area in Africa to declare a national park. In 1947, the Natal Parks Board (NPB) was established and over the next fifty years, it would go on to earn a well-deserved, international reputation for its important work in safeguarding nature and creating a healthier, sustainable future for both wildlife and people.

George Hughes spent over forty years in conservation, rising through the ranks and eventually becoming the CEO of the NPB in 1988. His close association and long history with the organisation has placed him in an ideal situation to provide a broad-brush picture of its establishment and subsequent evolution; and in this chunky, thought-provoking, nourishing soup of a book he has done just that.

A highly professional outfit with a dedicated staff, one of the NPB's greatest success stories was, undoubtedly, Operation Rhino which saw hundreds of white rhino reintroduced to their former habitats in southern Africa, including Kruger National Park. The NPB also pioneered various game capture and darting techniques that were later applied elsewhere. Despite some initial resistance from a few of the old hands, the NPB also came to realise the importance of employing an increasing complement of trained scientists who, in the author's words, 'could provide thorough and clear research to support the confident management of



Natal's protected areas as well as provide trusted information to staff operating in the extension field.'

This meant that they could, in turn, share their knowledge and expertise with the increasing number of farmers and private game reserves now stocking game. Many of these animals were purchased from NPB game auctions, a win-win situation. Over time, the NPB also came to engage increasingly with local communities so that they, too, derive financial benefits from protected areas; while, at the same time, advancing environmental awareness.

Despite the many plaudits and accolades that have come the NPB's way, its story has not been without crisis, controversy or con-

tested approaches to nature conservation. One of the more notorious episodes, which attracted a fair amount of negative publicity at the time, was the Petition, a revolt by a faction of Zululand rangers, led by Ian Player and Nick Steele (two figures who had been closely associated with Operation Rhino) who took issue with the way head office was handling its mandate. Although he was closely involved in the conflict, Hughes endeavours to be as fair and as even-handed as possible in describing how the saga unfolded and was eventually resolved, albeit with some lingering hostility. It is clear, though, that the issue still rankles and that he feels many of the charges were based on an incomplete understanding of the facts.

Hughes also unwittingly found himself engulfed in another storm when he invited President Nelson Mandela to an international gathering in Zululand to celebrate the centenary of three of the first protected areas in Africa, the Hluhluwe, Umfolosi and St Lucia game reserves, without clearing it first with the Inkatha Freedom Party, who, at that stage, were in charge of the province. It took some skilful diplomacy and smoothing of bruised political egos, plus a bit of Madiba magic, to calm matters down.

Spiced with many other similar anecdotes and reminiscences, which add a great deal of colour to the

text, Hughes also devotes much space to describing the structures, functioning and operational aspects of the NPB. As such, this book provides an authoritative overview of the subject and should prove invaluable to future historians, archivists and interested members of the public alike.

It also fulfils another important function. With many species still hovering on the edge of extinction and faced with an ever-expanding human population that is placing huge pressure on the environment, the suc-

cess of wildlife conservation depends, to an extent, on our understanding of the failures, as well as the achievements, of the past. By highlighting the goals and objectives of an organisation with the impressive track record of the NPB, as well as showing how it dealt with the various problems and challenges it faced along the way (it was disbanded in 1998), this extensively researched and wide-ranging book makes a meaningful contribution to that understanding as well.

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