

A magnificent northern white rhinoceros dominates this scene. Standing at an angle in the centre of the photograph, his colossal head, with a small bump in place of a horn, is tilted low and to the left. Its front legs are planted in the parched grass of the Kenyan savanna. To its right, a man wearing military fatigues is crouched on his haunches. The man cradles the matte black barrel of an assault rifle in his left hand. With his right, he scratches the rhino's underbelly between its forelegs.

Two other men in uniform stand – one to the left in front of the rhino's head, the other to the right – each holding rifles of their own and looking out into the distance. Above them, the sky is blue and clear, with wisps of white clouds.

The scene is of a dappled savanna, with golden hues casting a warm and ethereal glow. The rhinoceros is a symbol of primeval grace and resilience. Its massive form, encrusted with armour-like skin, emanates an aura of unyielding dignity. Its eyes are pools of profound darkness within its leathery visage, reflecting the relentless march of time.

He is called Sudan, an animal epic enough to be named after a country and the last male northern white rhino on earth. The men surrounding him are conservation rangers, unsung heroes of the savanna, shielding him.

The rangers encircle him, forming a human shield against poachers and a metaphor for the best kind of human intervention with nature. Their uniforms blend seamlessly with the savanna's verdant tapestry, they exude a quiet resolve.

The men's presence is not of dominion, but of stewardship—a palpable commitment that recognises the northern white rhino as the most fragile emblem of our planet's dwindling biodiversity, in its final hour.

In the heart of Africa's wilderness, the boundaries between man and nature often represent an uneasy coexistence, but this photograph tells a different story: of devotion, determination, and the fragility of our planet's most majestic creatures. It tells a mesmerizing tale of resilience, hope, and tragedy.

None of these men have university degrees, they are not scientists, the word professor does not appear in front of any of their names. Yet their time spent with Sudan has made them experts on him. Indeed, time spent has made them close. The fact they know the northern white rhino is likely doomed adds even more gravity to their role as protectors. There's poignancy in their dedication to guarding the last of something so magnificent.

The rhinoceros is an ancient creature whose evolutionary lineage stretches back through time, it carries within its frame the genetic reservoir of centuries past. The last of his kind, he is a living testament to epochs gone by, a symbol of the profound damage that human apathy inflicts upon the natural world. When you see the lead ranger gently scratch the giant's chest, you see the understanding and respect that could have been.

As the rangers stand in silent vigil, there is reverence, the relationship between these men and this animal, an acknowledgment of the profound connection that is possible between humans and the natural world. The ranger's stance declares humanity's moral obligation to safeguard the fragility of life on this planet.

At the same time, humanity's misguided belief in the curative powers of rhino horn has placed these magnificent creatures on the brink of oblivion. How ignorant and selfish humans can be, while the legacy we leave for future generations hangs in the balance.

The photograph's emotional appeal is heightened by the illusion of timelessness that photography can bring — a moment frozen for eternity. Yet the creature it depicts is out of time, a life at the end of countless lives for as long as northern white rhinos have roamed the earth. Sudan is the last male, and when he goes quietly into the dark night, all that will remain is this photograph and the many others were taken of him. It is a scene that has played out for millennia, as species have risen and fallen, and the planet has borne witness to the inexorable march of a sometimes-flawed evolution.

Perhaps the power of this picture is its ability to provoke contemplation and introspection. It is a testament to the fragile beauty of the natural world and our moral duty to safeguard it. It is an invitation to reflect upon the profound interplay between humanity and nature, and the choices we make as stewards of this fragile planet.

In its silent eloquence, it implores us to rise above our basest instincts and to embrace the mantle of responsibility that our shared existence requires. It demands that we engage with the complexities of conservation, not as passive observers, but as active participants in a global struggle for preservation. We ask these African men to stand guard over global heritage but what do we offer of ourselves in this process?

Sudan was finally euthanized on 19 March 2018. This elder statesman of his species succumbed to degenerative changes in his muscles and bones and, eventually, could no longer stand. He was put down by the dedicated veterinarians at Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya to ease his suffering.

For much of his life, he was surrounded by people who cared greatly for him. In return, he was gentle and kind with them. I'm sure that if he had hopes, it would have been that humanity remembers him as a symbol of our better angels, and what is possible between man and beast, if only we see each other as equals on this frail planet.

Today, there is a program exploring the possibility of restoring the subspecies using sperm and egg samples — 29 northern white rhino embryos exist. If this is a way back, it could be a game-changer, but we cannot allow scientific developments to lower our guard for all that still exists in nature. Nature deserves our support and our protection. In return, she will take care of us.