

LEGENDARY *conservation* LEADER



The objective of Thaba Tholo is not merely to leave a legacy of bio-diverse fauna and flora for generations to come, but also a legacy of business trust, client service par excellence, and a sound, sustainable conservation heritage. Wildlife Ranching magazines' Dr Peter Oberem and Erika Alberts had the privilege to have a conversation with Rubin Els about the Thaba Tholo success story.

W: What is it that drew you to the wildlife ranching industry?

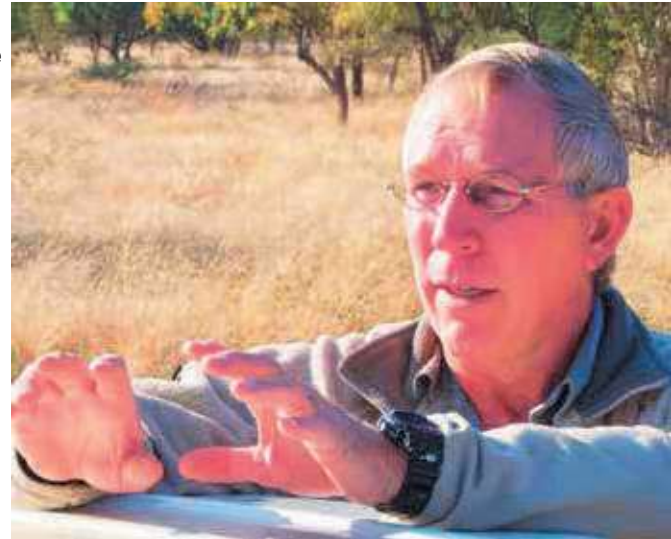
Rubin: I studied Nature Conservation, completing my National Diploma practical year as a Cadet Ranger at the Natal Parks Board. During my military service, I was seconded to the Intelligence Department where I was involved in conservation projects on the border. Following this, I worked as a reptile research technician in Manyeleti Game Reserve for the next three years, and then filled the post of section ranger on the same reserve. The transition from being a traditional conservationist for about eight years to the game ranching industry (private), was a challenge, but I realised that the two must complement one another.

I also saw the real potential and value of wildlife in South Africa and therefore see my involvement in the nature industry as somewhat of a calling.

W: How did you become involved with the birth of Thaba Tholo?

Rubin: Tilman Ludin, the founding director of Thaba Tholo, responded to a letter of mine in 1991 by visiting me on Manyeleti, where, being a Gazankulu government reserve at that time, things were politically unstable. He had a vision for a type of conservancy in the Bushveld. His idea resonated with me, so when he offered me employment a new and remarkable chapter in my life began. >>

Our slogan, 'WE BREED TRUST', fits our business model in that it constantly reminds my team and I of the promise/guarantee we strive to provide to all our clients, service providers and anyone with whom we come into contact.



▲ Rubin Els

◀ Rubin Els and Samuel Sekoboane during the capturing of East African black rhino (*Diceros bicornis ssp. michaeli*) for the Rwanda translocation project.

Scan the QR code or visit <https://vimeo.com/179034087> to watch the video: 'About Thaba Tholo'.





WR: Thaba Tholo's slogan is 'WE BREED TRUST'. Please give us an overview of Thaba Tholo and how you've managed to grow and build trust over the years?

Rubin: To give some credit where it is due, the slogan was coined by the renowned photographer Horst Klemm. We shortened his version to arrive at the present slogan.

It can be quite a contentious logo, in that people may interpret it as being arrogant. To the contrary, our slogan, 'WE BREED TRUST', fits our business model, in that it constantly reminds my team and I of the promise/guarantee we strive to afford to all our clients, service providers and anyone with whom we come into contact.

It originated by means of the quality of animals we breed and distribute, but it is a principle that permeates all our dealings with people, not only those in the business world, but also our own personnel. Furthermore, it also incorporates the promise of consistent welfare and respect, to the animals in our care. It is a promise to strive to give of ourselves beyond normal expectations, to satisfy the needs of man and beast within the realms of our influence. It is an insurmountable task and we often fail, but it is something we will strive to do for as long as Thaba Tholo exists.



In 1997, when Thaba Tholo got involved with breeding East African black rhino, there were approximately only 500 left in the world. During February and March 2017, a founder population of East African black rhinos was carefully selected, captured and translocated to Rwanda.

Scan the QR code or visit <https://vimeo.com/214849544> to watch a short video on the black rhino capture at Thaba Tholo: 'African Parks – Rhinos Return to Rwanda'.



▼ Rubin's daughter Ros-Amy has been instrumental in the East Africa black rhino relocation project and developed special relationships with individual rhinos.
Photo by Robynne Els.

“Having the privilege of being involved in, and seeing come to fruition the long-term conservation projects such as repopulating the rare East African black rhino, in meaningful numbers, to other range countries, like Rwanda and Tanzania, has been a personal highlight achievement.”

WR: What do you believe are the highlight achievements of:

a. Thaba Tholo?

Rubin: Having created a conservation project that can sustain itself financially and ecologically. At the inception of the project, it was believed to be impossible, in that external donor funding would always be needed.

b. Yourself at Thaba Tholo?

Rubin: Having the privilege of being involved in, and seeing come to fruition the long-term conservation projects such as repopulating the rare East African black rhino, in meaningful numbers, to other range countries, like Rwanda and Tanzania, has been a highlight achievement. It is immensely rewarding to have a shot at making a difference in the survival of such an iconic species during such dire times when the odds are stacked against such endeavours.

WR: Your team is very important to you.

Tell us about loyalty, trust, caring for each other and fostering good long-term relationships.

Rubin: The greatest asset of any ranch, reserve, business (or country for that matter), is its people. They have the greatest ability to build or destroy.

We have managed to assemble an exceptional team over the years. Some have been with us from the start of the project nearly 30 years ago. Some of the team have come and gone, but without exception, all have made contributions to building and maintaining a very special place.

The Thaba Tholo team has truly invested their lives into this project, and a reflection of this pride is the fact that our guys on the ground refer to “our animals”.

Our responsibility as leaders are to grow people and to invest in people's lives. The more you put into people (and animals for that matter), the more you receive in return from them. Loyalty is one of the most underrated and discarded principles in modern day life/business.

It is however, one of the most powerful concepts. When people work and live for each other and become un-self-centred, anything can be achieved. Buying into the brand and ranching activities is a natural progression of events, which has become the norm within our personnel corps. >>



◀ African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) breeding bull 'MYSTERY'.

WR: You have a long history of successful auctions with record prices. How did the auctions evolve over the years?

Rubin: All ranches need a sales point for their production game surpluses and some have exclusive animals to market. Game auctions possibly attracted more 'ceremony' than domestic livestock auctions, because of the ability to own game in this country and the prestige and potential attached to this. Some auctions have drawn so much attention that they became exciting calendar events. From sport stars and celebrities to top business people would be there. Modes of transport varied from some of the largest helicopters and fixed-wing planes to luxury motor vehicles. It was the norm to have an attendance of between 1 500 to 2 000 visitors per renowned auction. This created a special atmosphere in the auction halls, which led to record prices.

Auction houses stepped up to meet the demand and new auction houses were formed to cater for this specific market. It was a grand time, which led to multitudes of new wildlife sales innovations.

At the peak, it may have become a bit too glitzy and plastic (artificial), but the upside of it is that it channelled some much-needed capital into the industry, which in turn uplifted a lot of rural communities and improved living conditions amongst poor farm labourers.

The pendulum has swung back and with lower prices for game, the sellers are cutting back on expenses. The game auction organisers adjusted downwards in



▲ African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) breeding bull 'INALA'.



▲ African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) breeding bull 'MANDLA'.



▲ Sable (*Hippotragus niger*) breeding bull 'TILMAN'.

Our aim at Thaba Tholo is to offer a true 'Bushveld farm' auction that can cater for the top buyer looking for exceptional animals as well as the small game rancher starting out and looking for solid quality founder stock at an affordable price.

► 'TILMAN' has officially been recognised as the largest sable bull in South Africa in 2018 when he measured 54½" in May 2018 at the age of seven years and five months.

order to at least still sell the majority of the animals presented. A few elevated auctions still remain, which are well attended and generate large turnovers. Our aim at Thaba Tholo is to offer a true 'Bushveld farm' auction that can cater for the top buyer looking for exceptional animals and the small game farmer starting out and looking for solid quality founder stock at an affordable price.

WR: How do you see the future of wildlife ranching as an industry in SA and in Africa as a whole?

Rubin: I see it as a bright and sustainable entity, providing that politicians see it as a unique asset and not as a threat or political tool.

We have so much to offer, which the rest of Africa and the world need and want. Our people can truly benefit from a farming enterprise, which is conducted on mostly marginal or agriculturally unproductive land. We can contribute significantly to the GNP and ensure the welfare of thousands of rural people. >>





◀ White rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) breeding bull 'THE BOSS' in the process of being moved to a breeding camp by Rubin and Fanie Ntsole, one of the Thaba Tholo rangers.

WR: What are the contributions you believe wildlife ranching can make to the 'New South Africa'?

Rubin: Wildlife ranching is a unique business model in which South Africans are the pioneers and world leaders. We have so much to offer by way of creating not just good liveable conditions, but to have this product enrich people's lives. And to ensure decent and prosperous living conditions and education. It can be more sustainable than most businesses in SA, and it offers a product, by way of the whole natural chain (from tourism to breeding and repopulation of wildlife, hunting, meat, skins and a multitude of by-products, and associated knock-on industries like lodge building, bush clearing and habitat management, fencing and infrastructure building and maintenance).

WR: What do you believe are the biggest challenges the industry will face?

Rubin: **MONEY!**

In the beginning, the challenge was to create a model and income stream to alleviate the lack of sufficient or substantial finances. With the astonishing success of auctions and live sales, money became even more of a challenge, which in my view, can be far more destructive than the lack of it.

The abundance of money can lead to a change in focus, which creates unnatural expectations. When money becomes the main focal point, it automatically excludes adequate investment in people and animals. It becomes a superficial chasing after the wind, which can lead to complete ruin.

The unusual and massive influx of money into the industry, especially over the last 10 years, ensured a massive kick-start, which made acquiring new land, fencing, infrastructure erection, bush clearing and habitat management projects and a multitude of other activities possible. Previous owners of agricultural land often battled financially, but those incorporating game farming experienced the value and returns realised by good live sales and hunting prices. Suddenly there was sufficient money to invest in people and higher salaries, decent housing and better wages, as well as educational projects.

The cycle then completed its turn by causing the present condition, whereby live game prices have fallen/stabilised/panned out and where the lack of finances has become pressing. I see this phase as



▼ Roan antelope (*Hippotragus equinus*) breeding bull 'THUMELO'.



Nyala (*Tragelaphus angasi*) breeding bull 'JACK'.

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far less of a threat than the abundant phase. It will force us to become inventive and caring again, and it will force us back to basics again.

I believe the industry will re-invent itself and I am excited to see the next level of resourcefulness. The youngsters that have entered will be better equipped to the new conditions than we are, and I believe they will attain the seemingly impossible again.

WR: What advice do you have for game ranchers to enable them to continue their good work?

Rubin: *Vasbyt!* Be resilient and resourceful and never give up, irrespective of how difficult circumstances, the weather or politics may seem. Remain humble and focussed and invest time in your people.

Diversify where possible, without losing sight of the original core business. >>



▲ Rubin and Rosalynd Els, with their three children, Robynne, Markus and Ros-Amy.

My wife, Rosalynd, who has been my soulmate, voice of reason and conscience for 31 years. My three children, Markus, Robynne and Ros-Amy. They have enriched my life beyond my wildest dreams and remain a refuge of support during sunny days and rough storms.

W: Do you have any game ranchers/scientists/service providers that you feel you would like to recognise as having a major impact on your and Thaba Tholo's success and on the industry as a whole?

Rubin: There are so many. I would never have achieved anything if someone had not given me a chance. I do not refer to any one big chance in my life, but the thousands of times when someone took a chance on my words and allowed me to try something.

The three consistent mentors in my life: Johan Manson, Andrew Lowry and Dave Reynolds.

Tilman Ludin for drawing me into Thaba Tholo and the business world. The present owners of Thaba Tholo (Esther, Twing, Francois, Mike and Jurie), who have all influenced my decisions along the way.

Moyan van der Merwe, the first GM of Thaba Tholo, who laid the foundation of high standard development and maintenance, which has been key in my life.

My dear late friend Gerald Haagner, who was my supervisor as a reptile research technician on Manyeleti Game Reserve. He taught me a great deal about record-keeping and husbandry techniques, which we used for breeding reptiles and mice in captivity. He managed to merge science and management into a single practical entity. My subsequent successes with breeding sable, roan, buffalo, nyala and other herbivores in captivity were directly linked to the foundation Gerald established in my life during our reptile research days.

My dear friends from varsity days (the Bittereinders group), who remain a constant source of mirth and encouragement: Simon, Matthew, Anne, Rynette, Johan, Helen, Andrew, Linda, Anita, Dave, (Gerald and Johan M. who have gone before us), Marguerite and Jan. They all know who they are, but do not always realise the importance of their influence in my life.

Dr Peter Oberem, for his continued belief. ■

The special Thaba Tholo team of personnel, colleagues and work friends. They shape my life daily and constantly challenge me to be better and ensure that I remain accountable. It is not possible to name all 141 people here, but my heart and words include every single individual. They have ALL enriched my life.



Thaba Tholo team members during a project in the veld.