

TOURISM

Chinese actors campaign against poaching

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By Ginger Mauney

WORKING with WWF in Namibia to raise awareness for the protection of rhinos, Ginger Mauney accompanied a team from Condé Nast China Traveler magazine to share Namibia's conservation story and to forge a partnership for change that can help to stop the illegal trade in wildlife products.

September 2019 marked two years without a single rhino poaching incident in north-western Namibia, but while Save the Rhino Trust Namibia, Conservancy Rhino Rangers and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism continue their efforts, the demand for rhino horn still exists in Asia.

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, said Mark Twain, the American author and humorist. This point was beautifully demonstrated to me recently, not through travel to a far-off place to explore an exotic culture, but by travelling with people from a distant land in the country I call home – Namibia.

Over a four-day period with a crew from Condé Nast China Traveler magazine any stereotypes I had loosely held about Chinese travellers, and particularly Chinese in Africa, were challenged on day one, withered by day two and were destroyed by day four.

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were in Namibia to do a cover story for the October issue of *Confidante Traveler*, a glossy, high-end magazine, published in nine countries, that was launched in China in March 2013.

When I met Shawn, and the photographer and videographer at Eros Airport, there was one problem. They didn't have cameras. Their flights had been delayed, their luggage lost and they arrived in Namibia ready to capture stunning images but with no equipment that would allow them to do so.

Leaving the airlines to sort out the luggage debacle, we flew to Damaraland Camp – Wilderness Safaris Namibia and the Torra Conservancy's joint venture property in the northwest of Namibia – to begin scouting for the shoot.

With expert advice from Eunice Wang and her company, Eunique Travel, the team had chosen to go to Damaraland, not just because of the stunning landscapes and warm, friendly people, but also because they were interested in rhino conservation.

Their plan was to do the cover shoot, a video to promote it and a separate story and video on rhino conservation. That was the plan. But there was another problem. The rest of the production team's flight had been delayed in Beijing and they would be a day late, which meant that what was already a tight schedule, became even tighter.

When the entire production schedule was blown, Shawn laughed. We went to Fonteinpos village and he laughed with the children there. He laughed as he sang along with the staff at Damaraland Camp and he laughed when he saw a giraffe for the first time.

It wasn't the laughter of a crazy person, but that of a seasoned professional who understands that when you travel there are certain things – like the weather and checked luggage – that are simply out of your control. It was the laughter of a kind man who connected with local children and camp staff and saw the spectacular beauty of the land and its wildlife.

When the rest of the crew finally arrived the laughter continued, and at the centre of it all was a quiet, charismatic young man, Zhu Yilong, a well-known actor, as well as a spokesman for brands such as Chopard, Coca Cola and L'Oreal. He has over 18 million followers on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, and his digital magazine sold 410,000 copies in 1 second.

At Damaraland Camp he was one of the team, yet it was his interest in rhino conservation that had prompted this trip. Through interpreters we talked about the challenges faced by Save the Rhino Trust Namibia (SRT) trackers and Conservancy Rhino Rangers as they work to protect the last free-roaming population of black rhinos left on earth.

On September 22, World Rhino Day, Yilong became a Global Ambassador for WWF China with a mission to encourage responsible travel and to STOP the illegal trade in endangered wildlife products, with a strong emphasis on rhino horn.

Yilong, Shawn, Eunice and the rest of this spirited team from China are part of the solution. With their belief in using the power of China for the common good, they will make a difference to the conservation of endangered species and, as they travel, they will break down prejudice, while spreading hope and laughter. I'd be happy to travel with them anytime.

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