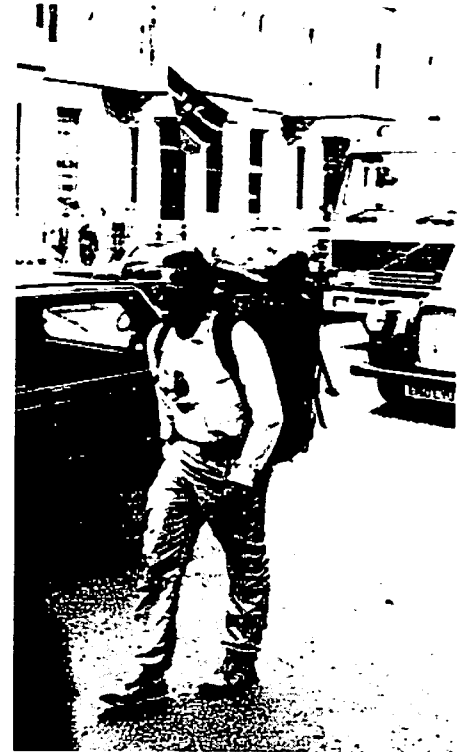




The welcome home.



Walking down a London street.

Michael Werikhe - Rhino Man

compiled by Fleur Ng'weno

After five months of walking through Europe, drawing attention to the plight of Africa's rhinos and raising money for rhino conservation programmes, Kenya's Michael Werikhe arrives back home.

'Rhino Man Gets a Hero's Welcome', said the headline in the *Daily Nation*, Kenya's largest circulation newspaper, on 26 September. 'Kenyan conservationist Michael Werikhe was given a hero's welcome yesterday on arrival in Nairobi from a 2,800-kilometre walk across Europe to save the rhino,' the story continued. 'His relatives, officials of wildlife conservation organisations and the Minister for Tourism and Wildlife, Mr George Muhoho, were at the airport to receive him . . . His aunt, Mama Hannah Amani Werikhe, dashed forward and hugged him, shouting *'Mwanangu, karibu nyumbani* (My child, welcome back home).'

Outside, hundreds of wildlife club members cheered as Werikhe stepped out of the airport lounge. They had gathered since early morning to wait for him. 'The future is in your hands,' the Minister told them, 'and we hope you will walk in the footsteps of people like Michael Werikhe.'

For five months, through five European countries, Michael Werikhe had held Kenya's flag high. He had walked from south to north, through rain and snow and summer sun, up to 50 kilometres a day, with interviews in the evening. He had reached more than 50 million people

through radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and personal appearances.

Struck by the damage to the environment of Europe, in the summer trees withered in the forests and rubbish lapped the beaches with the waves, Werikhe called for global co-operation to protect all nature. He discussed the dangers facing wildlife in Africa, what the people of Africa are doing to conserve it, and how the people of Europe can help. And he began to change the world's perception of the face of conservation in Africa.

The final part of Werikhe's walk was through the Netherlands and Great Britain. The flat farmland of the Netherlands, some of it reclaimed from the sea, was 'like walking on a pancake,' he said. 'The Dutch people are very warm, and I enjoyed meeting people when I stayed in private homes, youth hostels, and even a convent! I visited zoos breeding endangered animals, and saw some of the sights I had read about: windmills and canals, Anne Frank's house and Rembrandt's *Night Watch* at the museum in Amsterdam.' Werikhe also saw the mean streets of the cities, and tropical hardwoods piled on the wharves of the great trading centre of Rotterdam.

Kenya's Ambassador to the Nether-

.... rhino man

lands, Mr Kefa Onyoni, hosted a colourful African-style barbecue at his residence in Werikhe's honour, which was attended by prominent conservationists. Werikhe was the Ambassador's guest during his stay in The Hague, and members of the Embassy staff met him at the borders of the Netherlands. The East African Wild Life Society's representative in the Netherlands, Mr Johan Elzenga, gave a dinner reception for Werikhe to meet EAWLS members in Holland, arranged interviews with the media – and was also the 'candid cameraman' who recorded highlights of the walk. The day to day organisation was done by the World Wide Fund for Nature Netherlands.

Flying by private plane over the English channel, Werikhe landed on British soil at Ipswich for the last lap of his epic trek. It was an emotional moment, for among the people welcoming him at the airport were friends from Britain – including Bill and Will Travers of Zoo Check – friends from Kenya – among them Kuki Gallmann of the Gallmann Memorial Foundation, Rose Chemweno of the East African Wild Life Society, David Njau of the Kenya Tourist Office, and Yvonne Malcolm-Coe – and also his stepmother and sisters.

With a happy heart, Werikhe set off on his route across south-eastern England, designed in the shape of a rhino head, with horn and ears and snout. This final section – Rhino Walk UK – was sponsored by five co-operating organisations: the East African Wild Life Society, World Wide Fund for Nature UK, the David Shepherd Charitable Foundation, the World Society for the Protection of Animals, and Zoo Check Charitable Trust, with the assistance of a public relations firm, Portico.

The journey, like the route, was to have its ups and downs. Some high points were visits to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds at Sandy where Rhino Walk T-shirts and cards sold out, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in Cambridge where Werikhe met scientists doing research on rhinos and elephants, a joint talk with wildlife artist David Shepherd, and walking for one mile with the Army band in Aldershot. Werikhe also met the mayors of more than a dozen towns, and gave countless press interviews. A low point was a break-in and robbery in the support car, which was clearly marked as a charity vehicle.

Meanwhile, back in Kenya, a baby girl was born to Helen and Michael Werikhe on 6 September in Mombasa. The delighted father received the news as he was about to set off for a day's walking. He and his wife had already chosen the baby's name: Acacia Deborah, because 'the acacia is a beautiful African tree'.

Now Werikhe could begin to turn his thoughts homeward: to his wife and child, to the real trees he had planted at his place of work, Associated Vehicle Assemblers in Mombasa, to the debate going on in Kenya over the poaching of elephants. In an



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Emerging from the VIP lounge at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport with (front row from left) Mr Nehemiah arap Rotich, Executive Director of the EAWLS, Mr Josiah Sang, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, Mr Hilary Ng'weno, a trustee of the EAWLS, and the Hon George Muhoho, Kenya's Minister for Tourism and Wildlife.

editorial about poaching titled 'Werikhe's Walk Points the Way,' the *Sunday Nation* stated: 'What Kenya really needs is a population that appreciates the full benefits of a thriving wildlife population, people who are sensitive enough to spend time and money on conservation efforts. We have such a Kenyan in the person of Rhino Man Michael Werikhe.'

On 14 September, Michael Werikhe took the last few steps of his walk and reached the British Museum of Natural History. He was met by actress Virginia McKenna, the executive director of the East African Wild Life Society, Nehemiah arap Rotich, and others involved in the conservation of the environment. Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, who is president of World Wide Fund for Nature International, sent a personal letter of congratulations:

'Dear Mr. Werikhe,

'Hearty congratulations on reaching the end of your marathon walk across Europe to draw attention to the plight of the black

rhinos. Millions of Europeans are now much more aware of the nature and the seriousness of the threat to the survival of this splendid species.

'Equally important is that your efforts have been responsible for raising a very substantial sum of money towards the cost of conservation projects designed to stem the decline in the number of rhinos throughout Africa.

'It is easy enough to analyse the threats to the future of the black rhino, and it is not very difficult to suggest what needs to be done to prevent it becoming extinct. The real problem is to generate the human will and commitment. Your magnificent walk is just the sort of gesture that provides the spark of inspiration which makes people respond to a crisis.

'Welcome to London at the end of a memorable walk. It will go down in the record as a major contribution to the conservation of nature.

'Yours sincerely,
Philip'



Surrounded by school children on the steps of the British Museum of Natural History.

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Cover photo:
Elephant feeding on an acacia
Dave Richards

The impala antelope is the symbol of the East African Wild Life Society. Swara (sometimes pronounced Swala) is the Swahili word for antelope.

