Live and let live - Anton Rupert

Anton Rupert is one of the most successful businessmen this country has ever seen. But his real passion is nature, writes Chris Barron

21 December 2004 Print friendly Send to a friend

‘Man always dreamed about having power. Now he had power, but it was the power to destroy himself. I came to the conclusion that we would be like scorpions in a bottle’

WHEN Anton Rupert was a student at Pretoria University he studied under a physics professor who had studied under Albert Einstein in Germany. Rupert, therefore, knew all about Einstein’s famous formula and the power in the atom.

So when he heard in 1945 that the Americans had dropped an atom bomb on Japan, he recalls: “It really shook me to the core.”

We’re sitting in the office in Stellenbosch from where he runs the Peace Parks Foundation he started more than 10 years ago. Rupert is 88 and bent and buckled. He speaks slowly, with deliberation and long pauses to collect his thoughts. His mind is alert, his memory astonishing.

On the day of the bomb he didn’t go into the office, the only time in his career that anything other than illness kept him away.

“I felt I just wanted to think. So that day I stayed at home and thought about the future. Because I knew it would never be the same again. Man always dreamed about having power. Now he had power, but it was the power to destroy himself. I came to the conclusion that we would be like scorpions in a bottle.”

IN THESE grim deliberations lay the seeds of Rupert’s passion for nature, and his concept of transborder peace parks, which he has done more than any other person in the world to transform into reality.

The demands of building his liquor and tobacco business into an international empire meant that Rupert spent a considerable amount of time in trains and planes.

He remembers that in the year of the atom bomb he spent 63 days and nights in trains. For more than 40 years he spent one out of every five days on planes.

What a waste of life, I remark. “Not at all,” he says quickly. “It’s a good place to think.”

He did a lot of thinking. Gradually, he shaped a philosophy of coexistence and partnership between man and man, to counter the direction in which he saw the post-war world moving.

In the 1950s and 1960s, he spelt this out in many speeches and put it to work in his business. When he started an enterprise in a new country, it was on the basis of 50-50 partnership with the locals.

Back then this was revolutionary, and there were plenty of people who thought he had lost the plot and would lose his empire too. “He who covets all will lose all,” Rupert told them.

Rupert’s philosophy of coexistence caused such a stir in government circles that it was even debated in parliament.

The powerful boss of the SA Broadcasting Corporation, Piet Meyer, called him a “kaffirboetie”.

HIS philosophy evolved into one of coexistence between man and nature. If man did not coexist with nature, both man and nature would be doomed.

He became involved in conservation issues and was a member of the National Parks board when Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, founder president of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), asked him to start a branch in South Africa.

Rupert saw this would limit his activities to South Africa, whereas his philosophy was all about interdependence between the countries of southern Africa. He felt it was the region’s only hope.

He believed, as the champions of white separatism were heartily sick of hearing him intone in speech after speech, that “if your neighbour doesn’t eat, you can’t sleep peacefully”.

So, instead of forming WWF SA, in 1968 Rupert started the Southern African Nature Foundation, which would be active up to and including Malawi.

His noble words about interdependence were quickly put to the test by a scientist at Rhodes University, Professor Tony Ribbink, who alerted him to the devastating depletion of fish in Lake Malawi.

Rupert funded a wildlife research unit to monitor the situation. It produced a report exposing the destructive role of Japanese and European commercial trawlers and proposing a management plan to save the fish on which more than a million Malawians depended for protein.

Malawian officials were too scared to hand the report over to Malawi's autocratic president, Hastings Banda, because of its implications. They asked Rupert to do the honours. "Due to that contact I think we saved that lake," he says.

Swaziland's first game park, Mlilwane, was started and, for the first time in 100 years, elephant and lion were introduced into the country.

Lesotho's first national park, Seshlabatele, was proclaimed in 1971.

SINCE 1968, 42 nature reserves or national parks have been established or enlarged in southern Africa under the direct influence of Rupert.

It wasn't only in the area of wildlife that Rupert practised his philosophy. He started a flying doctor service in Lesotho, flying thousands of doctors from SA at his own cost to provide medical services where there were none.

"Even today I'm better known and far more appreciated in Lesotho than anywhere else," remarks Rupert.

THE friendships Rupert created by practising his coexistence philosophy proved invaluable when he tried to enlist the support of southern African governments for his peace parks. Because, after all, what he proposed was radical: that they collapse their national boundaries.

Today, all southern African presidents are patrons of his Peace Parks Foundation.

When the Berlin Wall came down, South Africa withdrew from Angola and Namibia and the ANC was unbanned, and Rupert felt the time had come to realise his great vision.

The first African leader he approached was Joachim Chissano, the Mozambican president, in 1990.

Chissano agreed to a merger of the Kruger Park with Mozambique's Limpopo Park but, for six years, nothing happened because of the civil war between Frelimo and Renamo. Now, the transborder park is a reality. Part of the fence between the parks has come down and the idea is to drop them all.

When Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe heard about this he asked Rupert to include Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou national park.

The result is the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park straddling all three countries.

Rupert's concept of peace parks as an instrument of coexistence is recognised internationally, and there has even been talk about using peace parks to create harmony in Kashmir, Korea and Jerusalem.

Hopelessly pie-in-the-sky stuff, one might think. What, after all, has the Great Limpopo park done for peace in Zimbabwe?

Rupert considers this point briefly. There is a lot of goodwill in the Zimbabwean government for peace parks, he says. "And Mugabe's not young."

Rupert's greatest ally has been Nelson Mandela, a man for whom he has profound respect and affection.

Before Mandela became president he requested a meeting with Rupert and they had made an appointment for breakfast. They were still talking at lunchtime.

Rupert has devoted the best part of the last 20 years to nature which, he admits, has given his life more meaning than his career as a business leader ever did.

The South African business legend is determined to do his bit to create a future world where man and beast will live in peace.