

Rhino Knights inspire women's club

Isabel Wolf-Gillespie ran and cycled more than 9 000km through five different southern African countries.

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TO highlight a cause, ordinary people needed to do something extraordinary - like undertaking an extreme journey around southern Africa on foot and by cycle, to raise awareness of the plight of the rhino.

And to tell southern Africans how one of their rhinos was being poached every eight hours.

Talking to guests at the June Tuesday Rostrum lunch, plucky Isabel Wolf-Gillespie explained how this philosophy had inspired a campaign called Rhino Knights and an extraordinary expedition that saw her running and cycling more than 9 000km through five different southern African countries. With a back-up team of her husband, Lloyd Gillespie, her sister, Raphaela Wolf and their ridgeback, Pula, Isabel ran a half marathon of 21km and cycled between 80 and 150km every day, under the Rhino Knights banner.

"I knew I would have to do something pretty spectacular to attract attention to what we were trying to say," Isabel said.

Isabel and Lloyd are not strangers to Tuesday Rostrum. Two years ago they inspired and entertained the women's club with their tales about their travels around South Africa on horseback to raise awareness about African horse sickness.

"It was a journey of highs and lows and encounters with amazing people. It changed us forever and made us what we are today," Isabel said.

She explained how, on the completion of their horse expedition, she and Lloyd had started a non-profit company, Earth Awareness NPC, to encourage environmental awareness and education.

They had also opened a horse trail business on an Eastern Cape reserve and it was the tragic slaughter of 11 of this reserve's resident rhinos that had first given them the idea of doing something for these animals. Later, when they moved back to KwaZulu-Natal, meeting South Africa's great rhino conservationist, the late Dr Ian Player, had made them even more determined to do something.

And so, the Rhino Knights campaign had been born and Isabel and Lloyd had



Lunch date: Relaxing after the Tuesday Rostrum lunch are (from left) guest speaker Lloyd Gillespie, Jean Cole, guest speaker Isabel Wolf-Gillespie and Denise Millar with Pula the much-travelled ridgeback.



Out to lunch: Angela Kruger (left) and Carol Aveyard, at the Tuesday Rostrum meeting.

begun to plan their mainly self-funded epic adventure. Originally, Lloyd had planned to run and cycle as well, but the flare-up of an old injury had put paid to this ambition.

"Sometimes, watching Isabel's struggles, I felt a little guilty relief that my injury had relegated me to the back-up team," he admitted with a smile.

The expedition had taken more than four months. As well as the 9 300km Isabel clocked up on foot and cycle, the team had done side trips in their vehicle, covering a further 10 000km, to speak to as many people as possible.

They had also conducted an informal survey about what people thought was hampering the war against poaching. Isabel said they had handed over the data for experts' evaluation. While the journey had been an awareness campaign, they had received some donations for the Lawrence Anthony Earth Foundation rhino orphanage, she said.

Isabel said that talking to school-children had been a high priority for the team as the future of conservation

was in their hands. They had visited more than 50 schools and had found young people particularly receptive to their message, she said, explaining how she had used simple language and stories to get the message across. As the journey had progressed she had found herself also using the rhino as a symbol to promote broader conservation concepts.

The Rhino Knights' adventure started in Durban from where they travelled up and over the Drakensberg, to the Karoo then the Western Cape, into Namibia then across Botswana, making a side trip into Zimbabwe. The final leg of the journey was back to Durban via Swaziland.

After Isabel concluded her talk, Lloyd took over the podium to point out that Isabel had underplayed her truly heroic feat, describing many hardships she had endured. He and Isabel then answered many questions about their amazing adventure as their listeners were reluctant to say goodbye to their charming young guests.