
Namibia Dehorns Damaraland Rhinos to Thwart Poachers

The Namibian Directorate of Nature Conservation (NDNC) decided to dehorn black rhinos that roam the remote, parched, red-gravel desert region known as Damaraland. The dehorning, which Mr. Brian Jones, a NDNC official, describes as “drastic”, was done to discourage poachers who early this year killed five of the 100 or so Damaraland rhinos and 11 in Etosha National Park.” “There seems to be a new wave of poaching and we decided, because of the desperate situation, that this action had to be taken” Mr Jones added.

In addition to concern about poaching simply for money, conservationists said dehorning was also prompted by fear that, as Namibia gains independence from South Africa, white farmers resentful of black majority government would leave the country and poach rhinos as a last defiant gesture. But Blythe Loutit, founder of Save the Rhino Trust in Namibia, describes dehorning as a last resort after her organization failed to raise funds to hire more guards and to purchase a new plane for anti-poaching activities.

Dehorning has been widely debated and this is the first time it has been used as a measure to protect rhinos. Can a rhino without horns live as a rhino? The horns are used in courtship and for defence. Unlike the social elephant, a species in which the young enjoy the protection of all the adults in the family group, the solitary rhino has only its horn to shield a calf from predators; the black rhino uses its horn to pull or break branches to gain access to browse and also to clear a way through thick bush.

Except in Damaraland black rhinos live in thick bush-land. In that kind of vegetation a poacher is unlikely to be able to see the whole animal and one would not expect him to waste time, or risk entering a thicket, to check whether the quarry has horns or not. One may argue that, being a desert, Damaraland allows the poacher to see easily that a rhino has no horn. But Damaraland has riverbeds, conical hills, rocky outcrops, gulleys, etc.

It is no wonder then that, in order to increase the chances of success of dehorning, Namibian authorities have tried to create the impression that all the 100 or so rhinos were dealt with. The number of rhinos that were operated on has not been disclosed officially, but conservationists involved said that about 12 animals had been dehorned. The sawn-off horns have been cached in an undisclosed place for fear of theft.

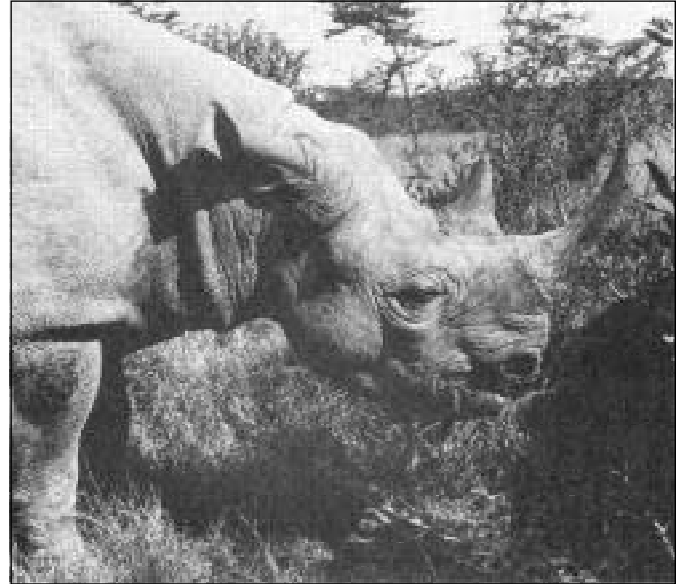
There is also the problem of horn regrowth. The need to remove newly grown horn every two or three years would mean repeatedly subjecting the rhinos to all the hazards of the operation. Besides that, it could lead to a race with poachers to see who removes the horn first.

Another facet which has been ignored is that rhinos' hide, bones and nails also can be sold. Presently their value is minimal compared to that of the horn but can we be sure the poacher will not kill rhinos to get these other products?

Blythe Loutit is confident that the hornless rhinos will fare well. But Brian Jones says “We are going to have to monitor, to see what effects there are on their social life”.

Information and ideas from the monitoring of the dehorned rhinos should be made available to facilitate future active rhino management in other parts of Africa.

New York Times C.G. Gakahu



Black rhino browsing

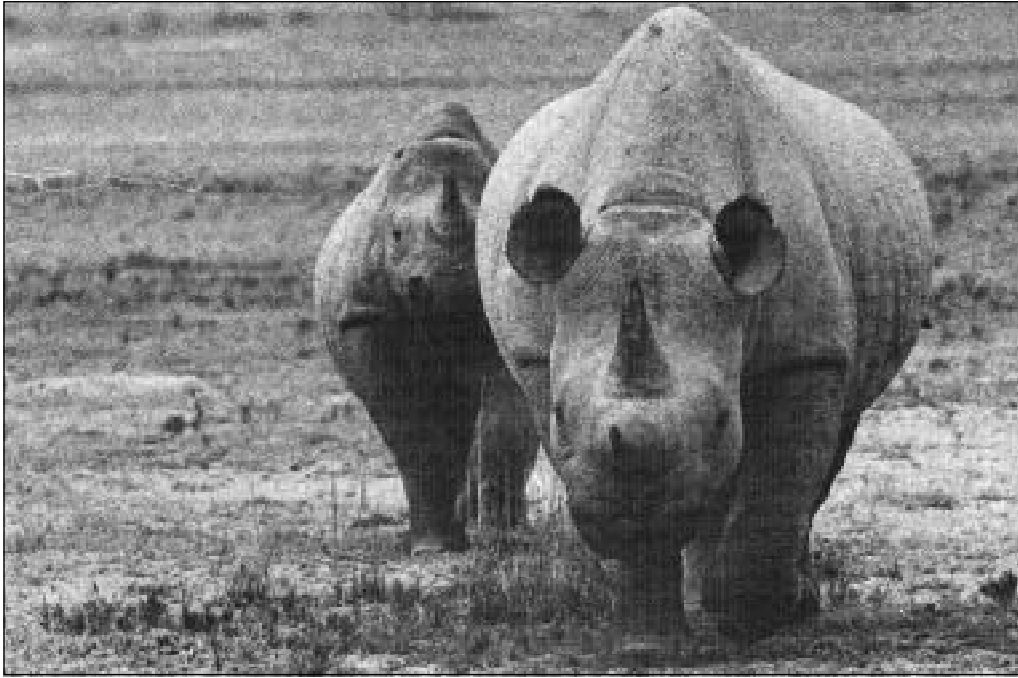
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Dehorning Rhinos in Damaraland - A Controversial Issue

Earlier this year poachers killed five of the rare desert black rhinos in Damaraland. After much discussion and deliberation we decided to undertake the drastic step of dehorning some rhinos, not as an experiment, but as an urgent necessity. We believe they have more chances of survival without their horns than with them - until we obtain enough funds to have an effective anti-poaching operation.

The first rhino dehorned was Tammy, a pregnant cow; she has been re-sighted a number of times and her behaviour is normal. Another cow, Petra, also dehorned, has a small calf known as Little Richard; they have been seen again three times and are doing very well. A cow and a bull, Hilda and Zak, together for the last three weeks, had their horns removed, and are still with each other. The project will continue along with careful monitoring.

Dehorning causes no pain because no nerves or blood vessels are cut. The horns take a long time to grow back, and, hopefully, this period will provide opportunity to raise the funds to pay for men on the ground and buy the radios and aircraft which we so desperately need.



Black rhino with calf

Aberdare Rhino Sanctuary

This is one of the five rhino sanctuaries proposed by the Government of Kenya to be fenced and given special protection and management. The government requested the Rhino Ark to act as co-ordinator of this project and we are pleased to be able to report that the clearing of the fence line around the Salient of the Aberdare National Park is now complete and that fencing has commenced.

We have been monitoring rhinos in Damaraland for nearly ten years, and believe that we know enough of their habits to warrant the results of removing their horns. For example, past observations on rhinos in this arid habitat show the chance of harm from a confrontation is very slim; we have only one report of two young bulls sparring with horn clashes, and no intensive fighting or maiming has yet been recorded. Thus, if a dehorned rhino meets a horned one it is probable that the encounter will prove innocuous and, in any case, such an encounter is most unlikely as great care is taken that an entire group, with very limited interaction with other animals, be dehorned. Predators are few in Damaraland, and we hope that sheer bulk and the offensive attitude of, and noise made by, a rhino under attack would act as defence enough.

Concerning feeding habits, the vegetation in Damaraland is unusually short and within reach of rhinos at about shoulder height or less. In times of drought, it may be desirable to break branches, but short vegetation is always available.

Tourists have arrived already to see the dehorned rhinos; filmmakers can still take their pictures and, in fact, convey more effectively the desperate situation of the rhino by showing a dehorned animal. Rhino hide is worth little in comparison with the horn and certainly poachers, bearing in mind that the fines for poaching are extremely high, would not risk killing a hornless rhino for the skin alone.

If poachers cannot be prevented from killing for rhino horn, we believe that dehorning the animals, wherever and whenever necessary, will give a better chance of survival to the rhino.

Excerpts from Blythe Loutit's Save the Rhino Trust Fund Newsletter, June 1989, number 53. **Lucy Vigne**

The Rhino Ark, established some 18 months ago as a project of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, was only able to do this due to the encouraging financial assistance to the Project from various persons and companies in and outside Kenya as well as from major conservation organizations throughout the world. The major Conservation Donors have been WCI through the New York Zoological Society, WWF, the Eden Trust, Care for the Wild, United States AID and Friends of Africa in the United States. The pledges and donations to date are KShs. 6,000,000 (US\$ 300,000) and will be sufficient for the first phase which is a distance of 37 km around the Salient in which is located Treetops and The Ark, famous for their night game viewing facilities. The ambition is to fence the entire Aberdare National Park, a distance of some 220 km, and to enable us to assist the Kenya Government in realizing this many more funds are needed.

The establishment of a rhino sanctuary automatically protects elephants and any other wildlife and ecosystems which are included within the sanctuary.

The President of Kenya is determined to save the country's natural heritage for the benefit of future generations. The recent burning of millions of shillings worth of ivory which would have generated a vast amount of much needed foreign exchange is an example of their determination to rid the world of ivory and thus eliminate the selfish desires of poachers and their masters.

C.G.K. Kuhle