

WILDERNESS RHINO TRUST

NEWSLETTER

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- New rhinos continue to establish themselves
- Lots of rhino interactions!
- Artwork to raise funds for Wilderness Rhino Trust
- An appeal for your support.

PHASE 2

In late October 2002 we initiated the second phase of the rhino re-introduction project in the Mombo area. As part of the "roan for rhino" swop with South Africa, ten subadult white rhinos were brought in from various parks and reserves in South Africa. This allowed us at a stroke to treble the number of rhinos in the Okavango Delta.

The road journey from South Africa would be excessively long for the rhinos, but this time we were able to call on the services of the Botswana Defence Air Wing and their C-130B Hercules transport aircraft to drastically reduce the journey times and consequently the degree of stress felt by the rhinos.

We had hoped that the Hercules would be able to land on Mombo airstrip but that plan was defeated by the high October temperatures. However we were able to fly the rhinos to Maun and then truck them into Mombo through the night, much as we did the previous year.

The Hercules first droned into sight in the clear blue skies above Maun on October 21st, carrying its precious cargo of two white rhinos. With dozens of willing volunteers from OWS, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, and the BDF, we soon had the two crates manoeuvred onto flatbed trucks for the journey to Mombo.

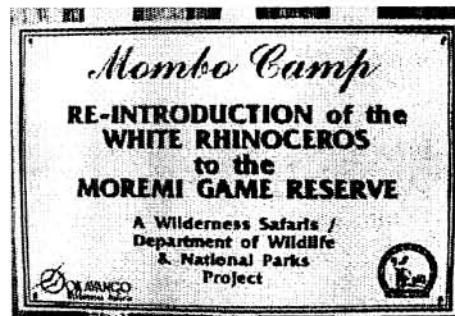
An uneventful night's drive north up Chief's Island, which the rhinos seemed to endure very well. We arrived at Mombo in the early hours of the morning, and as soon as the sun rose over the Delta we unloaded the rhinos into the bomas. Over the next week or so, eight more rhinos made the air and road journey from Pretoria.

BOMA DAYS

The ten rhinos were kept in two separate boma locations, approximately 10km apart to help with staggering the releases. Being subadults, they were very playful and kept us entertained for hours while we waited for the day of release.

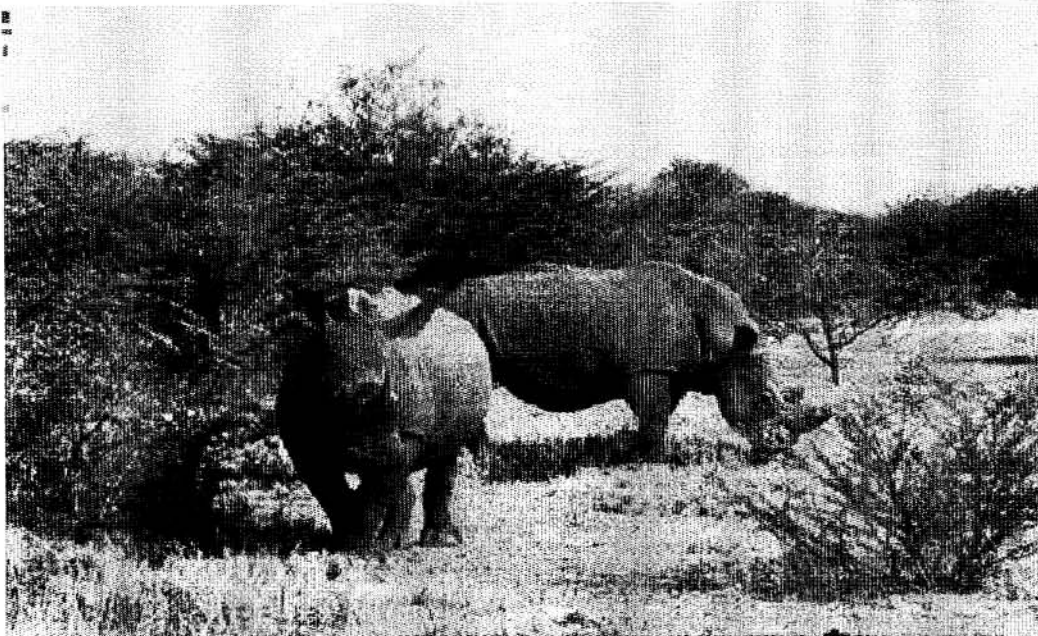
To combat the heat, we occasionally sprayed the rhinos with water from a hosepipe which they greatly enjoyed. In the bomas, they were kept in the same groups they had been as in the holding pens in South Africa.

We planned two release days in early November, and at the same time celebrated the first anniversary of the release of Kabelo, Mmamati, Sergeant, and Kgosi. The first twelve months of the project have been an unqualified success, with all the original rhinos adapting extremely well to their new environment, the males establishing territories and at least one mating taking place. However we don't yet know if this was successful and as the gestation period for a rhino is 16 months, it will still be some months before we know. When the first calf does make its long-awaited arrival, it will be the first white rhino calf to have been born in the Okavango for at least 15 years, so definitely a historic occasion.



RELEASE!

We planned a staggered release on three days in early November, releasing the rhinos in their groups to make the transition to liberty in the Delta as easy as possible. The fact that we had all seen releases before did nothing to diminish our excitement on each day – the sound of the sliding doors being pulled out is a beautiful one to hear, and it is fascinating to watch the rhinos' curiosity about this sudden opening in the boma wall, their initial hesitancy and first few tentative steps into freedom.



Serondela (right) and Kabelo grazing peacefully; Kabelo demonstrating the very endearing curiosity often shown by younger rhinos in their surroundings.

Quite often after this they set off at a trot as if keen to get on with the business of exploring their new home... A great day too for our guests who got up especially early to see another chapter of Delta history unfolding.

Over the first few days we tracked the rhinos (who, as with the original rhinos, were all fitted with radio transmitters in their anterior horns) using the DWNP helicopter. The rhinos we have released here at the northern tip of Chief's Island have often headed north until they encountered water, then turned and gone quite a long way south, before gradually returning to the Mombo area.

MONITORING

Once the helicopter had given us a good idea of the locations of the new rhinos we resumed monitoring by vehicle. As expected, the new rhinos were at first quite nervous and we had to be very cautious in how we approached them. The group of three we released on the last day however gave us a memorable experience by acting in an entirely different way. Just a few hours after the release, we came across the three of them – Maun, Mombo & Lonetree – grazing and walking along slowly. We stopped the vehicle some 200m from them to watch. They walked in a beeline directly towards us, led by Maun, the largest female in the group. They approached to within 10m of our stationary vehicle (and its breathless occupants!) and stood and stared at us for a minute or so before, curiosity satisfied, they turned and walked slowly away...

With two exceptions, the rhinos have remained in the groups they were released in, the exceptions being the two groups of three which have each had one member go off independently. Some of the new rhinos covered great distances, reaching the mopane forest belt much further south down Chief's Island before turning back.

It is now three months since the second phase of releases and the new rhinos seem to be settling down in their chosen areas. The fact that there are now so many more rhinos in the area means that we have been seeing larger groups on occasions, the current record being four!

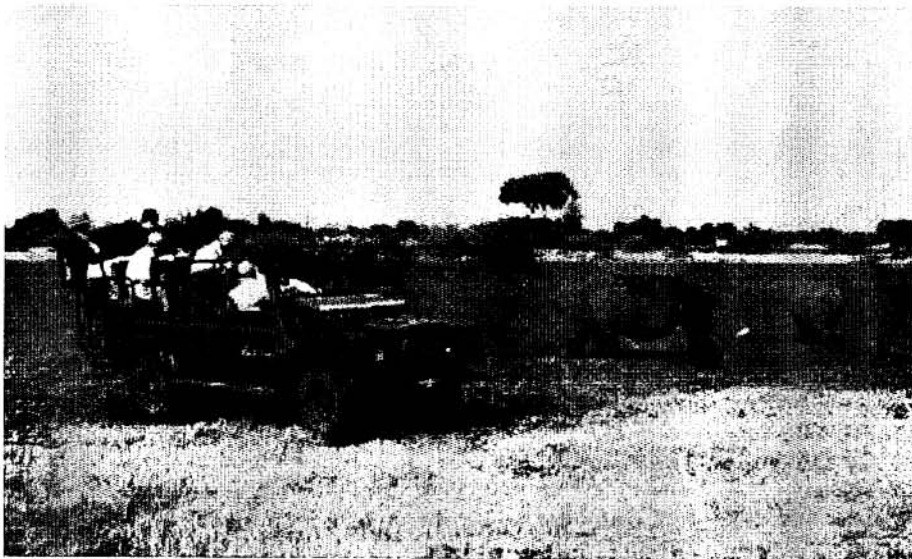
Of course the new rhinos have bumped into our original rhinos with some interesting results. On their first day in the Delta, Moremi & Jack encountered Kgosi – the size difference between these two subadults and this grizzled old bull probably accounted for the nervousness of the young rhinos.

Also Kgosi has been seen chasing Maun, possibly with a view to mating with her but she was having none of it! The new rhinos at first seemed to avoid the territories of our resident dominant males, but recently there has been much more interaction between "old" and "new" rhinos.

As the flood of 2002 was quite a low one, it is likely that the rhinos will be able to move further afield (by crossing channels) earlier than they did last year and we've already seen some evidence of this. Early indications are that this year should see a much better flood, which may well confine the rhinos to Chief's Island.

THE FUTURE

No definite word yet on when the next batch (of ten) rhinos will be arriving but we are hoping that they will make the journey from South Africa in April or May. By then the temperatures will be lower so it may even be possible to fly the rhinos direct to Mombo, which would be outstanding. If this happens, the Hercules will be by far the biggest aircraft to have landed on our bush airstrip (although a C-47 Dakota was used during the building of Mombo).



Serondela (left) and Kabelo completely unfazed by a Mombo game drive vehicle, feeding on lush floodplain grass after wallowing in mud.

As for the long awaited first birth, with each new batch of rhinos delivered, we are releasing more and more females of breeding age, so it can only be a matter of time before we can celebrate a new arrival...

ARTWORK TO RAISE FUNDS FOR WILDERNESS RHINO TRUST


Brad Besterlink and Andy Crawford, understudies to the legendary filmmakers Keith and Beverley Joubert were involved in filming the whole rhino reintroduction. Brad is also an accomplished artist and has painted the four rhinos (three paintings) in their natural surroundings within the Delta. The results of his efforts are superb and he has generously donated the proceeds from the auction of the original paintings to Mokolodi Nature Reserve, to assist in their efforts of buying a female rhino to replace the three rhinos sold to Wilderness Safaris last year.

We have had prints produced of the three paintings which we are selling to raise funds for the project – the proceeds of each sale come directly to the rhino project.

AN APPEAL FOR YOUR SUPPORT

The costs involved in running this project are expected to escalate dramatically within the next two months, with the arrival of a further 30 rhinos. Wilderness Safaris has funded most of the project this far, besides a few generous personal donations and a generous donation from the TUSK TRUST in the UK. We are appealing for local and international support, in terms of financial assistance, to help us carry this project into the future. Contributions will assist in the logistics of transporting the rhinos from South Africa to Mombo, building more holding pens, feeding the animals in the pens, as well as security and monitoring of the animals after release. We would like to encourage you to help us successfully implement the second phase of the project. All funds will be administered through the Wilderness Trust Fund ensuring that all monies are allocated to the Rhino Project.

Thanks to a generous donation of time and expertise, we now have a website through which donations can be made direct to the Mombo Rhino Project. This will be tax deductible for US citizens. Additionally the most important rhino conservation umbrella organisation, the International Rhino Foundation, will collect money on behalf of the project – all of which means that we will be able to maintain the monitoring programme into the future, and be able to guarantee the safety and welfare of Botswana's white rhinos.



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