

Zimbabwe:

“Rhino op” in Matusadona

The term “rhino op” refers to a rhino immobilisation project carried out in the field.

Duncan Purchase
Director (Projects) Zambezi Society

During an “op”, rhinos are tranquillised, given a unique identity and released back into the wild. Some rhinos also either have a radio transmitter fitted into their horn, or are de-horned and fitted with a collar containing a radio transmitter. In Matusadona National Park, Zimbabwe, we study the movements of rhinos in great detail.

Having just completed a rhino op in Matusadona, I can give you a first-hand impression of what happens during one of these ops. Let me first describe the approach we adopt when locating and finally immobilising the rhino.

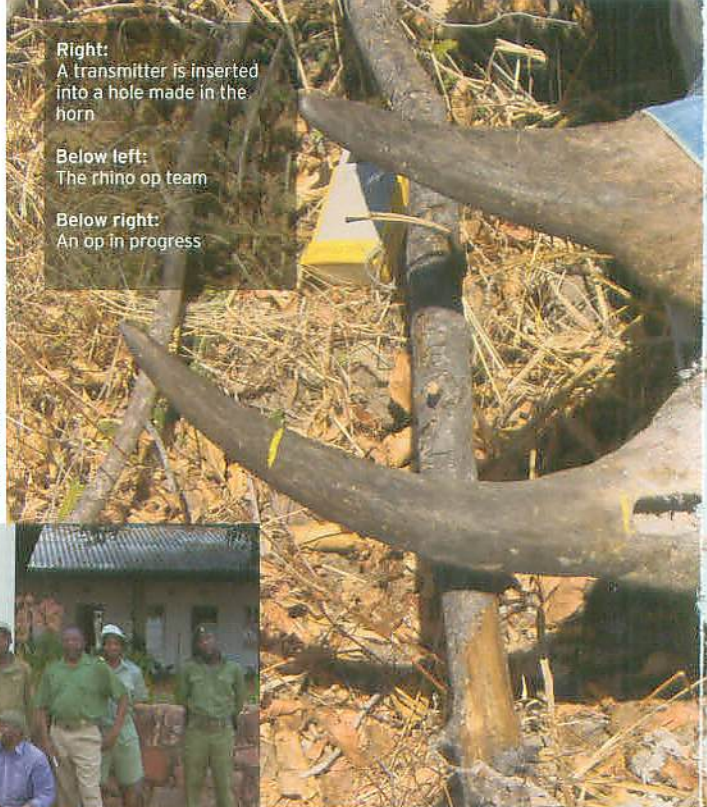
Rangers from the National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority and

Right:
A transmitter is inserted into a hole made in the horn

Below left:
The rhino op team

Below right:
An op in progress

IMAGES: DUNCAN PURCHASE



“
The most effective way of being seen from the air is to hold a map upside down and wave it above your head
”

guided onto the rhino using instructions from the aircraft pilot. Once the rhino is darted and immobilised, the vet supervises its condition closely while the ground crew is guided to the rhino by the plane, which maintains a birds-eye view of all involved.

Unfortunately, there is an increasing cost associated with each element of locating the rhino. As the cost of running a helicopter is so high, we try to have it airborne for as short a period as possible.

It is Tuesday 8 August. All necessary staff and logistics are in place. We are at Tashinga, Matusadona National Park headquarters. It's 7:40am, and the base radio comes to life...

“403...3 Kilo.” 3 Kilo is the call sign of two rangers in the field.

“3 Kilo this is 403, go ahead.”

“We have a rhino visual, copy.”

“Copy that. What is your locstat?”

3 Kilo relay their six-digit geographic location and we pinpoint their position on the map. The pulse of radio communications continues with more details about the rhino, and the vet and helicopter pilot are asked to stand by. The aircraft pilot and I head for the airstrip and are airborne within minutes. After locating the field crew, we soon find the rhino.

Zambezi Society trackers are deployed into the field at least a day or two in advance of the op to locate and familiarise themselves with the actual location of rhino on the ground. When this field crew sights a rhino, a small fixed-wing aircraft (a Super Piper Cub in our case) is made airborne with two crew: a pilot and a spotter. The aircraft locates the field crew by communicating over the radio system and then looking for a visual clue. The most effective way of being seen from the air is to hold a map upside down and wave it above your head, which creates a distinct white marker.

The field crew point the pilot and spotter in the direction of the rhino. While this happens the vet prepares the necessary cocktail of drugs required to immobilise the animal. Once the aircraft has sighted the rhino, we call in the helicopter, which is

Below:
The team works quickly once the rhino is tranquillised





He is standing in an open patch of ground, not too far from the lakeshore. Once the drug cocktail has been prepared, the vet and helicopter are airborne. Rapid communication between the aircraft pilot and the helicopter pilot mean that the helicopter and vet reach the rhino within minutes. With the helicopter and plane working together, the trigger is pulled and the rhino is darted. It's been only three minutes since the helicopter took off.

This rhino is called Pfumbe. He is a large male bull. He will be de-horned and have a radio collar fitted so that we can continue to monitor his movements - and thus afford him maximum protection.

Although we return to the airstrip, the vet and field crew work on Pfumbe for another 45 minutes. At 9:50 a second report comes in, this time from a different call sign, 3 Romeo; they also have a rhino visual. At 10:15 another call sign, 3 Mike, reports a rhino and during our response to 3 Romeo we spot a fourth rhino from the air! It has been a very busy, but extremely successful first day of the Matusadona rhino ops.

A lot of work over the last nine months has led us to this point. With funding from Save the Rhino International, the Zambezi Society has carried out an intensive

monitoring project - going into the field with experienced trackers and visually locating as many rhino as we can. We use this information during the ops, so we know in which areas we need to look for the rhino.

Once the ops have been completed, our task is to continue the monitoring. Rhino with radio transmitters either in their horn or on a collar can be located quickly and easily, which means we can contribute to their protection with great efficiency. We also have to locate and monitor the rhino that haven't been immobilised, so that we can organise a follow-up operation to further improve the monitoring.

It is thanks to the financial support from organisations like Save the Rhino that the Zambezi Society and its dedicated field staff (Godwin - Field Coordinator, Daniel, Twoboy and Bekithemba - trackers) can carry out the essential pre- and post-op monitoring required for a comprehensive protection strategy.

£10,000

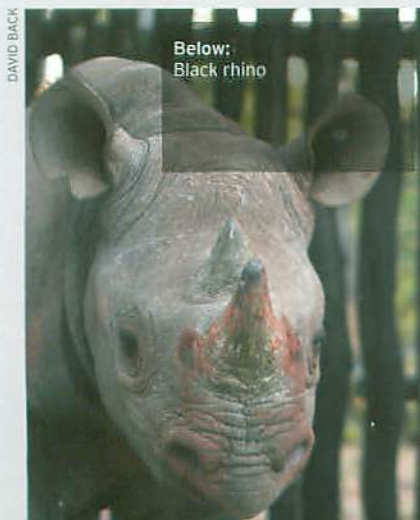
Save the Rhino International gave £10,000 to help fund the recently ended immobilisation operation, and is also funding the post-op monitoring.



Zambia:

Relocating rhinos

David Back



Below:
Black rhino

David is one of a group aiming to raise £300,000 for rhino projects in three years

I have been in love with Africa since I was a photographic guide in Zambia during the 80s, and encountering black rhino there left a lasting legacy. They became my favourite animal. Saddened and horrified, I watched these once abundant creatures disappear as they were poached to extinction here over a four-year period.

With my 50th birthday looming on the horizon, I decided that it was time to put something back. Targeting one species a year, we plan to raise £100,000 a year. Three projects will benefit from this money. The first is a programme to reintroduce black rhino into the North Luangwa in Zambia. The second is a similar reintroduction programme but with Indian rhino, possibly moving rhino between Kaziranga and Manas National Parks in Assam, India. And lastly, we will select a yet to be identified project to support one of the two rarest rhinoceros species, either the Javan or Sumatran.

This June I witnessed the fantastic sight of ten South African rhinos arriving (by a huge Hercules aircraft!) in North Luangwa National Park, knowing that funds raised by us had helped to pay for their air transport to the Park. A gift from South Africa, the rhinos were destined for a 147km² sanctuary adjacent to the already successful 55km² area home to five rhinos brought to Zambia in May 2003. Swelling the rhino population to fifteen, with further possibility to bring five more animals, I felt immensely proud to be part of such an exciting project. I am so glad to see the animals back in their natural home, and to have raised a significant part of this year's total fund is a dream come true.

€16,000

North Luangwa National Park's rhino reintroduction programme will also benefit from the EAZA Rhino Campaign, which aims to raise €16,800 for enhanced security and an expansion of the environmental education programme.