

Tanzania:

Water wars

The first time I ever saw a rhino was at 3am in the morning sitting in the hide at The Ark with the great Bill Woodley for company.

Tony Fitzjohn
Mkomazi Game Reserve

Bill was one of the original Kenya Game Wardens and in charge of the Aberdares and Mt. Kenya National parks at that time. There was a perfectly tranquil scene outside as elephants, buffalo, bongo and wart hog quietly drank at the beautifully lit water hole. Then, suddenly, they all became very alert and anxious and we felt that predators must be advancing. Then, into the light, came a lone bull rhino huffing and puffing in a most self-important manner. All the other animals moved out of the way so the rhino could avail himself of the water and the salt. These different species looked at each other, and you could see them shaking their heads and saying... "It's that rhino again, what a job!"

And it is common that, as long as they make the right snuffling and whining noises they can drink at water sources within the territories and home ranges of other rhinos and indeed other species, in dry or threatened times.

But why this year has Elvis been picked on by James and now Jonah and beaten up quite badly? We just do not know. There is

IMAGES: TONY FITZJOHN

Above:
The original waterhole provides plenty of opportunities for monitoring Mkomazil rhinos

Below left:
Rose and Suzi

plenty of space in the Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary and injurious fights have been uncommon previously. But it is a problem that persists.

On another level, Charley, our older original female, seemed to take exception to Rose's female calf, Suzi. When they were all in close proximity at the dry season water hole Charley would take to chasing, tossing and trying to impale the tiny calf until the mother, another rhino, or usually the Rhino Sanctuary staff would chase Charley off. It had taken us over seven years to have our first calf and this was a nightmare scenario.

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Pete Morkel, one of Africa's top rhino veterinarians, who brought the first rhinos to our Sanctuary, decided that it was a water thing and that we should put in alternate sources. Fine, but none of the rhinos really used them!

Should Charley and Suzi's paths cross, their behaviour continued to be the same, to our great worry. But, thankfully, after several months of anxiety, Rose actually worked out herself that, if she avoided Charley at the water hole, her calf wouldn't get chased and tossed! We had to help by

putting water out more regularly, an expensive item for us, but Rose did seem to choose her drinking moments more carefully and we breathed what we hoped was not a temporary sigh of relief!

We still need to increase our population here (now 8), hopefully from Kenyan reserves and parks, and are waiting to hear from the government whether they will allow this, or not.

The underground bunker has been a huge success for both behavioural and medical observation and creates minimal interference with the rhinos. You also get some great views of them. Elvis comes up to have his nose rubbed as well! We are very grateful to Chester Zoo who funded this and we were very pleased to have Mark Pilgrim and Roger Wilkinson from the Zoo visit this year with the indefatigable and unique Dave Stirling, one of SRI's Founder Directors, to check on their donation.

They seemed pleased enough to offer to help on our next project - a 4WD bus to bring schoolchildren in to see both the rhinos and the Reserve. We feel that this will do far more than a "wildlife unit" moving slowly around the many scores of schools. Time is short and the sharing of experience seems a much better way to create empathy and a new generation of people who appreciate wildlife and who will make sympathetic decisions regarding the future of wildlife when they become the decision makers.

Rhinos, and all wildlife, live because we give them a break. Thanks to SRI and Chester Zoo for giving us one. We're pretty sure it's made a difference, and we look forward to many more years of working together. Even if rhinos are a bit odd sometimes... they have a very special, historical and prehistoric place in all our hearts!

