

Rhinos on the move

Every year, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) reviews Namibia's rhino populations to assess which are under pressure and in need of translocations to other areas, which are then carried out in March / April / May, when weather conditions are most favourable. Accordingly, from 5-22 of April 2005, 31 black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) were caught and translocated as part of the MET's custodianship programme.

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MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM



In 1993, Namibia recognized the need to expand the range for black rhinoceros, as well as to spread risks by creating additional sub-populations. This was achieved by placing small groups of animals on qualifying private land, in a custodianship scheme. Under this scheme, although the animals remain State property, private landowners benefit through tourism, or simply through the prestige of having black rhinoceros on the farm. In return, they become responsible for ensuring their safety and regularly monitoring them.

So earlier this year, four rhino were caught on existing custodian farms where population management required the removal of individuals, in order to prevent inbreeding by sexually mature offspring and fighting amongst potentially dominant rhino bulls. These rhino were translocated to newly established custodian farms as part of the founding population.

All other rhino were captured from the greater Okaukuejo area of Etosha. While two of the farms had already received rhino late last year, this capture and translocation completed the establishment of six new rhino custodian farms.

Where possible, all rhino were fitted with a transmitter and microchips for identification. The transmitter is cemented into the front or back horn using dental acrylic. The back horn is preferred, as it takes less impact and chaffing, but often it was found to be too small for the transmitter and the front horn had to be used.

Implanting a transmitter enables the post-release monitoring to be done more effectively, as the individual rhinos can be found quickly and without much disturbance. This is important, as it is the most critical period in the rhino's release, when the animal is unsettled and unfamiliar with the area. Microchips were implanted into the front and back horns and into the neck.

All rhino were ear-notched for the purpose of identification in the field at a later stage by monitoring teams. Triangular and round notches were used for cows and bulls respectively.

From darting to awake in the crate on average took about 45 minutes per rhino. During this period rhino goes down under the immobilization; the ground team comes in with the equipment and recovery truck; the transmitter and microchips are implanted; ear-notches cut; measurements and vital statistics taken including ID photos; blood, parasite and faeces samples taken; and various drugs administered. When immobilisation is reversed, with the injection of another drug, the ropes and blindfold are removed and the rhino - if all goes according to plan - walks into the crate.

A mobile fire fighter on the back of the Vangkar was made available by Jannie Du Preez (helicopter pilot). This worked extremely well, as enough water could be used to cool the immobilised rhino without the time delay of running with buckets. The capture unit will be investing in one of our own for future purposes.

After transport, which was in some cases in excess of 600 kilometres, the rhino were immediately released into the veld. This is done to minimise the overall stress on the animal. After the rain and subsequent good vegetation, the rhino

are in good condition, as is the veld condition at the destination. The use of Diazepam (Valium) maintains a relaxed and calm animal during transport and release. This method eliminates the long boma training period which is additionally stressful to the animal and is also extremely expensive. Intensive post-release monitoring is done to ascertain that the rhino is settling down and has found water in its new environment.

Unfortunately one adult female died post release. A post mortem concluded that the rhino died as a result of an aborted foetus stuck in the birth canal with fatal results to the cow. The abortion was most likely the result of the capture stress.

Overall the rhino translocation operation was very successful and MET Namibia thanks the assistance and tolerance of the sometimes hectic conditions of the following people: Dr Pete Morkel, Birgit Kötting, Wilferd Versfeld, Sheriff Kaseba and Michael Sibalatani. However most important the following donors and individuals should be thanked as without their support the operation could not have taken place:

Save the Rhino International for sponsoring Dr Pete Morkel, WWF-ARP (Taye Teferi) for sponsoring helicopter time, Andre Swanepoel, Johan Kotze, Wilderness Safaris, Andre Nel and Gerard van Wyk (all custodians)



MIKE HEARN

MET grant

Save the Rhino International's grant of £4,370 to MET, was made possible by Ecko Unlimited, whose donation of US \$75,000 is being used to support a number of black rhino projects in Africa, as well as the post of the EAZA Rhino Campaign Manager.



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