

Badger, bunker and breeding in Mkomazi

The Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary currently holds a total of seven rhino. We are endeavouring to bring the founder population up to 12 rhino, which will give a good genetic base for breeding. Up until now there have been no births, and the reasons behind this have been pondered endlessly by our Trust and rhino experts. Age, dynamics between the males and females, the time needed to establish themselves into the new environment and time have no doubt all played parts in this. But we have not given up hope. The vegetation is excellent, the conditions are ideal for black rhino and the area was recorded in the 1960s as holding the largest - ever recorded number of breeding rhino in East Africa.



So we have now decided to swap one of our males for a male with proven breeding history from the Ngorongoro Crater. We hope this will stimulate the breeding in Mkomazi, as well as providing genetic diversity for the Ngorongoro / Serengeti area. Discussions have taken place with all the relevant authorities in Government, and we hope to welcome this Ngorongoro rhino - John - before the long rains. A translocation of rhino from Kenya to Tanzania to boost the rhino populations, not just in Mkomazi but also throughout established areas in northern Tanzania, is still a priority and will assist the management of these animals as a meta-population in northern Tanzania.

The internal fence within the Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary has given us an introduction / separation area which we can use for incoming rhino and now outgoing rhino. With the anticipated arrival of John, we will move two of our males

into the separated area, allowing John to settle into his new territory with the resident females, yet without any potentially fatal fights. Our third resident male will be temporarily moved into a third separation area, which was originally fenced off for Badger.

Badger ... our gentle mascot, who gave so many Tanzanians (and anyone else who visited) a chance to see, learn about and even touch a rhino. In 2004, we tragically lost Badger, whose condition had deteriorated over the past year. All we could do was to care for him as his condition was beyond anyone's powers to fix. And it is a tribute to our rhino sanctuary personnel that he survived for so long. He had been struggling since his arrival in Mkomazi and was closely monitored and continuously treated under the supervision of Dr Piet Morkel. He was injected for tryps, regularly sprayed for ticks, dewormed, even his teeth were rasped (a first in the rhino

world). Despite the abundance of preferred browse, imported lucerne and game cubes, his condition did not improve. He became increasingly ataxic in his back legs. Sometimes he would fall and could only get up with great difficulty, often with our guys pulling him up with ropes. Eventually he collapsed and died. Under Dr Morkel's post mortem, the main problem seems to have been a central nervous system lesion with related complications. It is not clear what the cause was, but it is almost certain that the condition was with him before his arrival in Tanzania.

Thanks to Chester Zoo, we received funding to build an underground observation bunker at a watering pan. This has enabled the sanctuary personnel and veterinary officers to monitor the health and behaviour patterns of the rhino on a regular basis, significantly so in the dry season. It has also enabled us to provide an educational destination for schoolchildren when they come to visit the project.

Although rhinos have excellent hearing and can detect movement at incredible distances, they are not great at defining what or who is moving. As a result, they can detect limited movement in the small, ground level windows of the bunker, but it doesn't really bother them. This gives everyone a good opportunity to fully check the condition of each animal.

Bringing a species back from the brink of extinction takes time, money, commitment, security, management of the population - and faith. We are incredibly grateful to Save the Rhino and Chester Zoo, who have supported us in the construction, stocking and day-to-day management of Tanzania's first (and currently only) rhino sanctuary. It is a flagship conservation project for the Government of Tanzania and forms part of their policy to restore the numbers of this incredible species.

Lucy Fitzjohn, Mkomazi Game Reserve



Safari to Mkomazi

Join travel specialists Discovery Initiatives in March 2006 for a unique opportunity to go behind the scenes at Mkomazi. Led by award-winning wildlife photographer and author Nick Garbutt, you will gain an insight into the daily lives of Tony Fitzjohn and his rangers. You'll see how the black rhino reintroduction programme operates and learn about how the rhino and wild dog sanctuaries were set up. A percentage of the cost of the trip will be donated to Save the Rhino for the Mkomazi Game Reserve.

For more information, please visit
www.discoveryinitiatives.com

