

## As rare as Badger's teeth

The Mkomazi Game Reserve is home to eight black rhinos, which were translocated into a fenced sanctuary in two batches in 1997 and 2001. After being kept in holding bomas while they got used to their new surroundings, the rhinos were then released in small groups into separate sections of the sanctuary.

**Lucy Fitzjohn, Mkomazi Game Reserve**

Our hope is that the rhinos will begin to breed, but this has taken time for a number of reasons, namely: the length of time it takes to settle after a translocation; the ages of the males (they were all sub-adult when they arrived); and the lack of real rivalry and competition between the males. We have therefore just taken down sections of the internal fences so that, for the first time, seven of the rhinos can mix together and hopefully get more than friendly!

The eighth rhino, Badger, is being kept separate from the others, as he has been having problems with his teeth. Badger is a five-year-old black rhino. He was born in Addo National Park in South Africa. When very young, his mother was killed by an elephant and he was orphan-raised. He grew up well; he was not a pot-bellied, stunted animal. At about 18 months he was moved to a ten-hectare camp in Karoo National Park. He did well there eating browse and also getting lucerne every day. However, since coming to Mkomazi in 2001, he has struggled. He has been dewormed, treated for tryps, pampered with cubes etc but has steadily gone downhill. As vet Pete Morkel of the Frankfurt Zoological Society reported, "He is in a 100-hectare camp with excellent browse but makes poor use of it.



His dung smells rotten - not that fine butyric smell of good rhino shit. Also from the dung it is clear that he only eats soft herbaceous stuff and even that he struggles to cut and chew - the bits are long and stringy like an old rhino who's teeth are packing up."

In early July Pete visited Mkomazi to examine him. "We did a few things to him including checking his teeth. We had him standing half-drugged - not ideal, but I did not want to anaesthetise him because of his poor condition. Two things were clear. The outer sides of his premolars and molars were abnormally sharp and a maxillary molar on the left side has over grown into a gap in the mandibular

tooth row creating a lock that would prevent proper mastication. At this stage Badger pushed my hand into a piece of round bar sticking out of the boma and proceedings ground to a halt."

So later that month Pete, together with Karl van Lauren, a specialist horse vet from Zimbabwe, returned to Mkomazi to treat Badger. The teeth-filing exercise had not been carried out on a rhino before, so it was fairly tense. Badger was also quite thin, having been unable to gnash his food for some time, so the sedation had to be fairly light. Six of the Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary personnel had to then sit on top of him to keep him down when the electric drill and files hit the nerves.

We were all glad when it was over. A young ex-zoo keeper and "rhino whisperer," Alison Kennedy-Benson from the USA, then stayed to look after him for the following six weeks, increasing the amount of hard browse in his diet. He is slowly getting better, but these things take a long time.

