

The rhino whisperer

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Alison Kennedy-Benson

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Alison Kennedy-Benson has the unusual job of being a "rhino whisperer", or, less romantically, in charge of boma training, so that the rhinos suffer minimum stress during the translocation process. Alison describes her work below:

"We had the privilege of looking after five black rhino in the bomas at Kaross, Etosha this year. Four of the animals, two males

and two females, went to Uukwaluudhi Conservancy. Before their translocation, they spent several weeks with us at Kaross. They settled nicely and, after a short time, a couple of them enjoyed coming over for a scratch on the horn or the face. Twice a day the rhino were fed, with browse hung from the boma poles, and lucerne and pellets placed on a concrete trough to reduce the risk of the rhino ingesting too much sand with their food, which could cause colic.

"The actual translocation went very smoothly. Uukwaluudhi is the first communal conservancy to receive black rhino under the successful Namibian black rhino conservancy programme. All the other custodian populations are on private farms. At Uukwaluudhi, the rhino are monitored as a combined effort by MET staff and the conservancy game guards. The people were very excited to receive the first four rhino. The rhinos have settled and are reportedly doing very well.

"Our fifth boma tenant was a little bull, about a year and a half old. His mom died, having a very large cancerous growth on her face, and he was alone in the bush for eight days before we caught him. He was drinking and eating, but he didn't stray

far from his mother. When we got to him, we could see he had managed to defend himself from what may have been a lion, as he had multiple scratches along his back. He settled into boma life quickly (I think probably very relieved not to have to fight off any more predators) and became a fat and happy little man by the time of his release in Erindi Game Reserve, one of the private black rhino custodian farms.

"There was a young female already in the bomas at Erindi. She had been released with her mother a short time before and after they separated, the youngster escaped through the fence to a neighbouring farm and had to be captured again and brought back to Erindi. It took a while for the young female to get used to having the little bull around, but she eventually warmed up to him and they got along well. After three weeks in the Erindi bomas, we moved the two animals into a 40-hectare camp. They will stay there until the fence is finished around a much larger area where they will have more room to browse and run around. Erindi staff report the two rhino have been exploring their camp and spending some of their time together."



In January 2004, Save the Rhino made a grant of £4,760 to the MET for the costs of Dr Pete Morkel's and Alison Kennedy-Benson's work. In addition, Save Foundation (Australia) made a grant of £5,225 to pay for Sirtrack horn transmitters, so that the animals could be monitored after release in their new locations.