

A sixth sense for rhinos

I'm just about to leave Namibia, where I have been assisting the Ministry of Environment and Tourism with the latest batch of translocations.

Alison Kennedy-Benson

On the eve of a black rhino release, I am filled with many conflicting emotions. I am extremely excited to open the gate and watch the beautiful beast walk out, browsing as she dissolves into the bush, the sounds of her munching fading away. I am terribly saddened to be saying goodbye to one of my friends; my 'children' even, as I have seen her through good times and bad every second of every day for the past two months. My special girl, who has come to greet me at the fence every morning for a scratch and

a cuddle and then again in the afternoon to bounce and spin and run and play, is venturing back out into the wild where she belongs. I am nervous for her as she now has to adjust to a new environment. I am relieved that the baby she carries will see the world for the first time in the bush, as it should be, and a birth in the holding pens (bomas) is extremely risky. I am happy too, because I know that even though she has been content for most of the past two months, I can tell she is tired of being held in captivity and wants to be back where she belongs.

How can I tell that she is ready to go? Is it a sixth 'rhino sense' that alerts me to her frustration? Do I have some special way of communicating with these rhino? I don't believe so. What I do have is a passion for rhino, and the patience to sit with them every second of every day from the moment they are caught and brought into the bomas. By spending so much time observing and interacting with them, one begins to pick up on and tune into individual characteristics and behaviours. Wild-caught rhinos are extremely stressed and agitated. They have been forced into a completely unnatural situation with foreign sounds, smells and sights that they have spent their lives avoiding. By spending so much time with them, they begin to get accustomed to and identify my voice and my smell. They begin to realise that I am not a threat and it takes a surprisingly short amount of time for them to trust me enough to take food from my hand, offer their cheek for a scratch, or start to bounce around if they are feeling playful.

With time and experience, I have learned how to approach and handle rhinos, but each one is unique and I must constantly change and adapt to each individual rhino just as much as they must learn to adapt to me. Though I spend a lot of time talking to rhinos, I believe they respond more to how I say what I say, than the words that I choose. There is no doubt in my mind that they can also pick up on my energy when I am nervous or excited. On a loading or release day, I try to keep their routine as normal as possible to minimise stress on the animal, but they often get restless or agitated beforehand, when my state of mind is the only thing that is different from an average day at the bomas.

There are times however, when I wish a rhino could understand my words. As my best girl wanders out of the boma for the last time, I wish her well and thank her for being a very special part of my life for the past two months.

ALISON KENNEDY-BENSON



Below: Rhino held in Boma before release.

Thanks

We would like to thank Opel Zoo and the Ruth Smart Foundation very much indeed for their support, which enabled us to make a donation of £2,649 to pay for Alison's fees and costs. We're holding a bit more cash for the next round of translocations in Namibia!

Wax in' lyrical for potential funders...

A report published this year by New Philanthropy Capital said that environmental NGOs, which could well include SRI, use too much jargon when approaching potential funders. It also claimed that NGOs are not clear in stating what they really do and how conservation and sustainability actions fit into the larger picture of saving the planet.

Petra Fleischer
Fundraising Manager

Those working in the field know that the symbiotic relationships occurring in nature break down if you remove or pollute one element. We also know that this will have an effect on human populations' ability to use natural resources, the so-called ecosystem services. Think acid rain. But how do we communicate these issues to funders and, maybe more importantly, how do we convey the link between asking someone to pay for new boots for a field ranger and the long-term benefits for the planet that practical conservation actions bring?

The key is recognising that communication means that both sender and receiver understand the message that is being conveyed. We cannot use the same language for all audiences, but must adapt our terminology to suit those reading our funding applications and proposals, visiting our website, hearing our presentations or raising funds for us.

For example, the Body Shop Foundation, a supporter of Save the Rhino, is active in the development arena and thus our proposals need to reflect that we too know what we are talking about, words like "project outcomes" and "conservation impact monitoring" are essential to show our credibility. On the other hand, when we pitch to corporate partners such as Victor Stationery, who are not specialists in the field, such phrases might be off-putting or over-dry.

The problem is further complicated by changes in policy priorities and in the resulting buzz-words. We want to show that we are up-to-date and understand the current jargon, but there's a danger that we might lose some people along the way (including ourselves!). The UNEP Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992 launched the expression of "ecosystem approach", a phrase very relevant to SRI's work; the Trade-offs in Conservation conference at ZSL in 2007 brought "ecosystem services" to our attention for the first time. And conservation, like many other professions, is riddled with acronyms (I've managed to get three into this paragraph alone!)

For anyone who'd like to learn a bit more conservation jargon and acronyms, check these out:

RENAUD FULCONIS



| JARGON | WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS |
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| Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) | CITES is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that the international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. |
| Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) | Signed by 150 government leaders at the 1992 Rio Summit, the CBD is dedicated to promoting sustainable development. CBD recognises that biological diversity is about more than plants, animals and micro organisms and their ecosystems, it is about people and their need for food security, medicines, fresh air and water, shelter, and a clean and healthy environment in which to live. |
| Ecosystem services | The benefits people obtain from ecosystems. These include: Products obtained from an ecosystem (food, fresh water, genetic resources) Benefits obtained from ecosystem processes (i.e. the regulation of climate and water) Non-material benefits from ecosystem such as aesthetic and social values Services that support the services listed above, like biomass and oxygen production, soil formation and prevention of soil erosion, nutrient and water cycling, habitats, pollination, shade and shelter etc. |
| Ecosystem approach | An ecosystem approach ensures that management decisions don't adversely affect the health of an ecosystem and its services. It ensures that natural resources are used within their limits both on a small and large scale, and for the long term. |
| Account for true value | Monetary valuation of an ecosystem that takes into consideration its services and goods, not just the commodity value of extracted goods. |