

Kondobole and Subilo settle in to their new homes

To make space for the arrival of five new rhino in May 2008 to North Luangwa National Park, it was necessary to move two of the more dominant existing bulls from one of the rhino sanctuaries. One of them, Kondobole, would be put into a different sanctuary with two females, while Subilo would be released close to Julila and her sub adult calf living outside the fences - the smell of Julila being too tempting to pass up!

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The capture plan was set in motion with the rhino scout teams out on foot searching for the two selected rhino bulls. The radio call came through that Kondobole had been found and immediately the helicopter and ground teams moved into action. Radio contact from the helicopter kept us updated on what was happening on the ground and once Kondobole was down, vet Pete Morkel was dropped off and the rhino scouts called in to help move Kondobole to shade. The helicopter quickly surveyed a road back to the waiting capture crew and about 2kms of road was cleared through the thick bush so the ground teams and equipment could reach the rhino in good time. Meanwhile the helicopter collected the essentials for fitting a new radio transmitter into Kondobole's horn.

Kondobole and Subilo had been donated from Pilanesberg and Kruger National Parks in South Africa in 2006 and had been given radio transmitters on their first release back then. Two years later, the batteries had died, and now that we were moving them to new areas, it made sense to give them new transmitters. One of the greatest risks of moving these animals was that they would immediately try to return to their former home range, jeopardising the new translocation. Keeping track of their movements in the first few days and weeks after moving them would be essential in this task.

For those not familiar with the process of a radio transmitter implant, here's what happens. Holes are actually drilled into the horn! It sounds horrific and is quite a sight. The hole is made near the base, the thicker part of the horn, for the D-cell sized transmitter to fit in, and then the wire antenna is threaded through a labyrinth of tunnels carefully 'carved' through the tip of the horn. The whole contraption is then cemented in place using a dental acrylic mixture that sets very hard and very quickly. At the same time there is lots of other activity going on, with breathing checked every minute, drugs administered, and measurements and photographs taken of feet, horn profiles, ears and any distinguishing marks to help future identification. A good general overall check on cuts, scrapes, teeth and removal of ticks finishes off the whole process.

The rhinos then needed to be manhandled into the transport crate. Getting a sleeping rhino into a crate is an interesting exercise in courage. Nonchalantly, Pete (in whose hands we are mere mortals and quite probably expendable!) tells us that he's now going to wake up the rhino and we are going to guide him into the crate. It sounds crazy, it is crazy but it is absolutely an A1 plan and can work so nicely.

Kondobole was a dream passenger and didn't push, shove, crash or bang throughout the whole operation. Following a short journey to his new 'home', he was taken out of the crate and placed on the ground. After administering the final antidote, he rose gently, huffed a couple of times and trotted away.

On the other hand, the next day, Subilo caused us all sorts of trouble. After darting him he 'disappeared'. For two hours he was nowhere to be seen and thoughts of him falling into water and drowning, or collapsing in a difficult position and not being able to breathe were not far-fetched. With no radio

transmitter yet implanted, traditional foot tracking was the only method by which we would find him and with rough and rocky terrain that proved to be quite difficult under a pressure situation. Almost three hours after being darted Subilo was spotted. Fortunately the dart had not been well placed and although affected by the drug he was still moving. A second dart immobilised him and the teams moved in to repeat the same operations. Unlike Kondobole, Subilo's day had been more stressful and he hadn't travelled well but those that remained for his release were happy to report that once awake he quietly walked out of the crate, moved away a short distance and took a few bites of browse before wandering off.

Fortunately neither animal broke back into the sanctuaries. Kondobole pottered off and has settled into his new area. Despite all best intentions, his radio transmitter has failed, as sometimes happens, so traditional foot tracking methods will be used to monitor him. Subilo moved further away from his release site and, as the days passed and his

signal failed to be heard from the ground, fears grew that his transmitter too had failed. Aerial tracking revealed his transmitter was working and he had continued to journey over 70km south to the southern boundary of the National Park - far away from roads but close to human settlement and known poacher routes. With five new rhinos arriving less than ten days later, it was decided to leave him to settle, put intense monitoring and law enforcement patrols in his area and wait until we had an opportunity to recapture him.

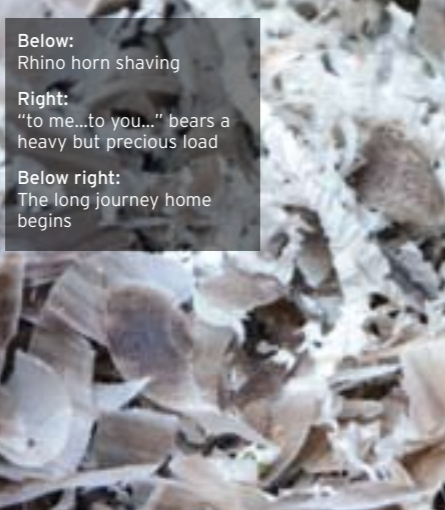
Once the newly arrived rhino were settled into life in North Luangwa, it was time to rescue Subilo. While the new animals had been released over a series of days and nights (with new transmitters) a road team had slashed, dug, chopped and fashioned nearly 40km of new road through to the area Subilo had been utilising. The rhino monitoring patrol teams had stuck with him through his six weeks in the wilderness and been able to track his browsing, drinking, sleeping and resting spots during that time.

The teams set off to Subilo's area and stayed overnight close by. The following morning, the rhino team picked up a signal and Pete went in on foot to dart him. He was out on an open plain and once immobilised it took a while to find him (again!) amongst the long grass and longer still for more road to be cut in to where he lay. Unlike the short trip for his release a few weeks before, he stayed on his feet and had a much better trip. The convoy set off at about 14:00hrs and slowly made their way along the hastily created, bumpy road back. Finally, as dawn broke, fifteen hours on the road and one puncture later, Subilo was woken up inside the top sanctuary to join Kondobole and the two females.

Without that radio transmitter, who knows how long it would have taken us to find Subilo. Fortunately, all we hear now is the regular 'ping' through the receiver from the transmitter embedded inside his horn, to give us an idea of his whereabouts!

Grants

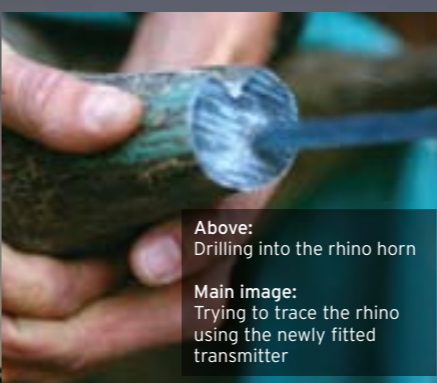
We are very pleased to announce that we were able to send £10,000 from SRI's own core funds for NLCP. £6,100 of this was for the annual ranger training programme, and £3,900 for the construction of new fences and observation posts. We also sent over four large boxes of kit - a mixture of T-shirts, fleeces, thermal mugs, beanie hats etc - that had been donated by Suzuki UK, George Stephenson and others.



Below: Rhino horn shaving
Right: "to me...to you..." bears a heavy but precious load
Below right: The long journey home begins



CLAIRES LEWIS
ED SAVER



Above: Drilling into the rhino horn
Main image: Trying to trace the rhino using the newly fitted transmitter

Thanks

Thanks to NLCP staff, ZAWA scouts, Conservation Foundation, Edmund Farmer, Skytrails, Parsons Aviation, Glenton Combes, Les and Deb Ware, Dr Pete Morkel, Dixon Zimba (the NLCP tractor driver) and everyone who took part and made this operation a success.



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