

Darting of Chinaimoyo

by Pia Maria Weinberger

At the end of November 2002, one of our 12-year-old rhino bulls needed to be darted, after having been wounded in a fight with another bull. As usual we asked vet Dr. Chris Foggin to do the darting, as he knows our area as well as the rhino. For me, it was the first time that I had experienced a darting operation. I was curious and excited at the same time and wanted to know and see every detail.

As there was no chopper available, we had to use a fixed wing aircraft to achieve proper air surveillance. After Chris had concluded all preparations, the three groups – 1 aircraft + 2 on foot, started to look for Chinai. As this rhino was already highly alert it took us 5 hours to get into shooting range, as he was always hiding in thick bush.

The air surveillance was a big help. Unfortunately the Zimbabwe Air Force was of the wrong impression that we were operating in a no fly area and forced us to return to our airstrip 10 Km from the operational area. After almost 6 hours we lost the rhino and had to give up for the day.



The next morning we had to restart our search without air support. Luckily we found Chinai after a short walk and Chris was able to dart him. We were in very thick bush and had to follow the rhino which moved on for quite a distance after having being darted, Suddenly Ferdie, our Conservator, pushed me under a bush – we could hear the rhino breathing but could not see it. Then it moved on.

We had to crawl through thorny acacia bush for another several 100 meters until we spotted it in a dry riverbed, It was already fast asleep – the front legs under its belly and the head slightly sideways with its lips touching the sand. For me it looked like a sweet puppy.



First we covered its eyes, moved it to a more practical position and then covered its body with branches and sprayed it with water to keep it cool from the heat of the summer sun.

There were at least 4 or 5 wounds on the neck, behind the front legs and around the backside. Chris was busy cleaning these 4-inch deep wounds which were infected and inhabited by larvae and worms.

I was busy counting the seconds between each breath as well as checking the oxygen counter fixed to Chinai's ear. Every fourth or fifth breath resulted in a small cloud of dust from the sand. After about 20 minutes we started to run out of time.

Ferdie quickly made a sketch of the ear notches. Chris took some blood samples, injected the antidote, and then we had to run. Each of us chose a suitable tree and less than a minute later the rhino was already on the move. Satisfied after a successful operation we walked back to our vehicles.

It was incredibly exciting and a wonderful experience getting so close to one of our 60 black rhino, being able to touch it and especially to help it recover from its injuries.

