



WORLD'S RAREST MAMMALS FLY TO SANCTUARY IN KENYA



By BERRY WHITE

Four Northern White Rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) have been flown from an icy Czech zoo to the Ol Pejeta conservancy in Kenya as part of an international effort to get them to breed and save the rarest mammal in the world from extinction.

"They are listed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List of threatened Species and are thought to be almost extinct in the wild. Moving them now is a last bid effort to save them and their gene pool from total extinction," said Rob Brett, Africa Director of Fauna and Flora International (FFI) and a member of the IUCN African Rhino Specialist group. This move has been a joint effort by the Dvur Kralove Zoo, Ol Pejeta

Top: Crated rhino being loaded at Dvur Kralove zoo in Czech Republic in snow

and Lewa Wildlife Conservancies, Kenya Wildlife Service and FFI with support from several donors under the Back to Africa scheme.

I watched them emerge from their crates. The gentle scrape of tough hide against wood, the soft crunch of padded feet on the earth, the scent of fresh grass and a wary awareness of the smells and feel of a big new, warm place. This was how nine-year-old Fatu followed her mother Najin out into a small part of big, wild Africa. They arrived with two males, Sudan and Suni, on December 20th.

Although all the rhinos except Sudan were born and brought up in zoos, they are actually part of a much bigger conservation effort, that for the last 40 years has

focused priority on conservation of Northern White Rhinos in the wild, where, not only do they breed best, but their habitats and the other wildlife sharing the ecosystem are also protected. But throughout years of tough conservation in the face of wars, poaching and politics there has also been the aim of "meta-population management" collaboration with zoos as back-up populations to save the sub-species from extinction. Now it has come to the crunch. None are currently confirmed to exist in the wild although there are indications that some still remain, and despite determined attempts at breeding and artificial insemination, the last Northern White calf born in captivity was nine years ago. That



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was Fatu, a very special Millennium baby. The decision was therefore finally made to bring some of the captive ones back to a secure semi-wild situation to improve breeding and improve chances for any that may still be found in the wild. So far it shows every indication of success and happy rhinos.

For the last two decades, Kenya has led the field in East Africa using fenced sanctuaries large enough for rhinos to live wild, but small enough and electrically fenced to be adequately protected. Some of this has been on private ranches and some in fenced sanctuaries within National Parks. Lewa Wildlife conservancy was one of the early proponents and has taken conservation further to involve local communities in developing communal conservancies on their land, proving that wildlife conservation is compatible with a

pastoral way of life and can profit local communities too, from tourism and fund-raising.

Lewa oversees the security of Ol Pejeta and FFI guides the conservation principles. Its habitat is fairly similar to that found in Northern White ranges and it is not too far from them. Therefore Ol Pejeta was chosen as the home for developing a back up population. Dr Pete Morkel, one of the most experienced wildlife vets in Africa, who has a long history of involvement with the wild Northern Whites was the vet in charge of the transport, with Berry White, an experienced rhino keeper and 'whisperer' doing the day to day caring for them. In November 2009 they went to Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic, which was home to six of the eight Northern White rhinos in captivity to start the process.

Below:

Ol Pejeta boma staff with Nijian & Fatu

Article:

Berry White has been involved with Rhinos since she was 17 years old. Most recently Berry has worked with helping crate train & translocate black rhino back from zoos to Africa, in particular working with Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic. She is currently at Ol Pejeta Conservancy training and settling in the 4 Northern White Rhinos

Working for Back to Africa, an organisation specialising in bringing African animals from zoos back to the wild, Berry's job was to assist with the crate training of the returning quartet and to help settle them into Ol Pejeta. She takes up the story of what was involved in that: "The importance of crate training is the sheer size and power of the rhinos, weighing in at around two tonnes. Nervous rhinos are prone to become very agitated and could injure themselves by thrashing around in their crates.

"To avoid this, the rhinos were to be given as much exposure to the crate as possible in the month leading up to loading. Every day each rhino was walked through the race to the yard and had to go through the crate. Once they were out in the yard, they were again encouraged to come back in to the crate, be fed and given attention and also to be approached from the front and back of crate and generally to become as comfortable as possible with the situation.

"I got them used to the slide gate being closed behind them as they walked through the crate to simulate what would happen on loading day. They also had to get





Based on information from knowledgeable people in the field, we initially came up with an estimate of less than 1,000 Northern Whites, but by 1983, after several ground and aerial surveys this was refined to less than 100.

used to being closed in a confined area for long periods of time in the race. About two weeks before leaving, the rhinos were given standing sedations and had their horns cut back to reduce risk of injury in the crates. When the day came for departure, it was minus nine degrees and the snow was falling. Najin was first. She didn't take too long to go in, but resisted a little when the back bars were put in behind her bottom, pushing against them and showing us the awesome power that rhinos possess. However, she settled quickly. Once the crate

Top:
Najin and Fatu head to the waterhole in the paddock, Ol Pejeta

Right:
Jimmy & David feeding Sudan in his boma

Pictures:
Berry White, Kes Hillman and Fraser Smith

was closed, she was eating hay. Fatu was next and shy to go in but again loaded without incident or injury, as did Suni and Sudan. Pete had given them all tranquilisers, just the right amount to assist the loading but not zonk them out.

Once in the air, we were able to open up the front of the crates for the rhinos and they were incredibly calm. Everyone ate except Fatu. Pete was able to drop into the backs of the crates to brush the rhinos down. They loved this in-flight attention and remained calm throughout. When Suni came out of his crate





Ol Pejeta's habitat is similar to that found in wild Northern White ranges and it is not too far from them

at Ol Pejeta and into his individual boma, I could see the two girls swishing their tails with excitement at the realisation that some more of the Czech gang were with them. Finally, we unloaded Sudan who seemed totally unfazed by his journey.

The journey had taken about 26 hours from European captivity to conservancy in Kenya". For the first few days, they were in the wooden bomas, then the last of the long horns were cut off, including Sudan's very curled one, to avoid them damaging each other and to

remove any temptation to poachers. The rhinos are also protected 24 hours a day by teams of well trained rangers. Radio transmitters were inserted into holes drilled in the horns and filled with acrylic, a technique that had first been invented for their wild Northern White compatriots. Then they were each given time out in a natural paddock fenced with electric wire, to learn to respect the wire.

The two girls went out together and each male separately. On third February, they began to go out into the bigger 400x400 m fenced

Top: Fatu enjoying being brushed by Pete.

Left: Pete cutting off Sudan's front horn to remove temptation to poachers, while Berry protects his eye from flying horn dust

Right: Sudan sleeps in the sun in the fenced enclosure

enclosure as the next stage, before an even bigger sanctuary. Here they love to eat growing grass, wallow in the mud, rub on trees, explore and sleep in the sun. Sudan at 36 years old, is having a first go at going out with the females, but with Najin aged 20 and Fatu 9, hopefully they will have long breeding lives ahead. It is planned to bring in a few Southern White females to encourage breeding and at least produce some extra cross-bred progeny to make maximum use of the gene pool. From the snows of the Czech Republic it has not taken them long to enjoy real Africa". ☺

For more details contact
www.olpejetaconservancy.org