

Operation rhino rescue

By Dave Cormack

"She came steadily on, followed by her calf. Taking her just behind the shoulder, I fired, on which she broke into a gallop, snorting loudly; but, after running a couple of hundred yards, she pulled up and sank down on to her knees stone dead, and I despatched the calf with another bullet. On examination they proved to be the common black rhinoceros of the interior." The words of Frederick Courteney Selous.

In his book "A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa", Selous claims to have shot fifteen black rhinoceros between 1874 and 1880; the cow and calf mentioned above were shot on the banks of the Chobe river in 1874. During the same period he shot six white rhinoceros and expresses concern for their declining numbers:

"In 1877, during several months' hunting in the country to the south of Linyanti, on the river Chobe, I only saw the spoor (tracks) of two square-mouthed (white) rhinoceroses, though in 1874 I found them fairly plentiful in the same district; whilst in 1879, during eight months spent in hunting on and between the Botletlie, Mababe, Machabe, Sunta, and upper Chobe rivers, I never even saw the spoor of one of these animals, and all the Bushmen I met with said they were finished."

Finished they were indeed, but one hundred years later they were formally brought back from extinc-

tion in Botswana with the reintroduction of seventy-one animals to the Chobe National Park and nineteen to Moremi between the years 1974 and 1981. These animals were provided by the Natal Parks Board (saviours of the white rhino) with the Okavango Wildlife Society and the Frankfurt Zoological Society providing the necessary funding to translocate them.

The population should have increased naturally to about two hundred and forty since the reintroduction. In 1989 this population would have been worth R13.3 million to Botswana's economy (the average price paid for a live white rhino in 1989 by bidders at game auctions in South Africa was R55 400). However an aerial census conducted in September last year by a team comprising experienced personnel drawn from the Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism, Namibia, the Natal Parks Board, the National Parks Board of South Africa, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks in Botswana and the Rhino and Elephant Foundation, revealed a total of seven white rhinos. No black were found.

After the survey, at least another three rhinos were poached, so with the proverbial clock ticking for the remaining rhino, the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks, acting on advice from previous consultations and reports from Peter Hitchins (acknowledged expert on black rhino) and Dr Anthony Hall-Martin (Director Special Services National Parks Board S.A.) approached the Natal Parks Board's crack rhino capture team.

A few days after the official "go-ahead" from Botswana officials, two rhinos, a cow and a calf, had been located in the Chobe National Park, captured and transported seven hundred kilometres to the Khama Rhino Sanctuary, established by an enthusiastic community of Botswana citizens in Serowe. A week later another two rhino followed, one wounded after a close shave with poachers. These smoothly executed operations in which the President of Botswana was actively involved, were an outstanding achievement, clearly demonstrating the potential of regional cooperation between the different state authorities and conservation organisations.

Like a cancer, the scourge of poaching has spread southwards in Africa, decimating wildlife populations. Hardest hit has been the black rhino, the world population being reduced in the last three decades by 97%. As far back as 1977 we tried to stop it when the black and southern white rhinos were placed on CITES Appendix 1 and all legal commer-



cial trade in the animals' products was stopped. We believed then that this would destroy the markets and therefore stop the poaching. How wrong we were, as today's figures bear testimony. Men have been, and are still killing rhino and each other in a tragic mockery of the CITES ban as the "Rhino War" in Zimbabwe rages on with one rhino being killed every week in 1992 and possibly twice as many poachers losing their lives.

In June 1992, the standing committee of CITES, recognised "the critical problem of rhino conservation despite the almost 20 years of Appendix 1 listing", and resolved to make trade related aspects of rhinoceros a project of special interest leading up to the next Conference of the Parties, scheduled for 1994.

In a desperate effort to create some reprieve from the poachers' onslaught new legislation in Zimbabwe came into effect last year providing for every black rhino in the country to be dehorned. A massive dehorning programme is now in progress, but fewer rhinos have been located than expected and some fear the effort is too late.

There has been an upsurge in poaching in the last twenty-four months. This is possibly because speculators in the Far East are stockpiling horn in anticipation of the commodity becoming unobtainable as wild rhino near extinction, which would rocket rhino horn prices to astronomical new levels: a desperate situation which requires urgent action. TRAFFIC, a trade monitoring group supported by the World Wildlife Fund, has urged the international community "to move beyond the narrow scope of orthodox conservation strategies and consider the full spectrum of available options to enhance rhino conservation throughout the world."

Clearly, the conservation of wild rhino requires a dynamic approach. As in nature, the "adapt or die" scenario applies. Many conservationists are calling out to reopen the legal trade in horn so that present legal stocks could be sold off through controlled markets and the revenue generated could be used to finance many important wildlife conservation projects for which there is currently a lack of funding. With the cost of dehorning each black rhino in Zimbabwe standing at about US\$1 000, wildlife officials there have approved a number of unconventional methods to generate funding for the programme. One such concept is the "Darting Safari", where a hunter would pay to immobilise a rhino for dehorning. The removed horn could be marketed through a controlled system. Dissent exists over the implications of such a move, but the inevitable fall in horn prices as legal and illegal stockpiles flood the market is the strongest attraction. Economists can predict the outcome using the laws of supply and demand, but surely only time will tell. Perhaps the idea of rhino horn farming is not too far fetched?

So while the debate continues, precious rhino are being killed. No monetary value can be given to the genetic pool taken forever by a poacher's bullet.

People need to be shown that their rhino populations have incalculable economic potential. They need to be given incentives to conserve their wildlife populations. Most often, poaching has taken place in the past with the connivance of local communities, but if these same people can be shown tangible economic benefits from their wildlife, their attitude towards poachers will become unsympathetic. The lure of "Big Five" (elephant, lion, buffalo, leopard and RHINO) safaris is a huge draw card to tourists and rural communities in southern Africa are only just starting to realise the potential of the tourist industry.

South Africa has thriving populations of white and black rhinoceros. The progressive philosophies adopted by the likes of the Natal Parks Board, the Bophuthatswana Parks Board and the National Parks Board have ensured a high commercial value on the animals. Last year a record price of R2,3 million was paid for five black rhino, sold as a single breeding unit, to Dale Parker for his private reserve, Lapalala Wilderness, in the Waterberg of the north-western Transvaal. In buying the five animals, it was a repeat performance for Mr Parker who, two years ago, bought the first group of black rhino ever offered by the Natal Parks Board for sale to private landowners. He paid R2,2 million then, a figure considered astonishing at the time. When a businessman makes a heavy financial investment in wild animal breeding stock, he will obviously have a very strong personal interest in managing those animals properly.

Dr Ian Player, Patron of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation, says of South Africa: "I predict that this country is going to have to be the one which will restock the whole of Africa again and it won't be the first time."

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