

black rhino

RETURN TO SWAZILAND

TED REILLY

Swaziland is one of the world's smallest countries. At 6 704 square miles, it is smaller than the Kruger National Park and many other large parks in Africa. It is the Kingdom of His Majesty King Mswati III, whose father, King Sobhuza II, was instrumental in the 1960s in helping to bring nature conservation to reality by actively supporting the establishment of Swaziland's first game reserve, Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary.

So strong is the conservation commitment by His Majesty and the Swazi leadership that four per cent of the kingdom is already under protection. This may not seem impressive when compared with some countries, but when one considers the size of this country and its productive potential in agriculture and industry, then this is a very impressive statistic indeed.

Over the years, Swaziland has built a sound international conservation reputation with an impressive track record. The acquisition and re-introduction of black rhino, elephant, roan antelope and tsessebe to Swaziland would not have been possible under lesser circumstances.

Black rhino (*Diceros bicornis minor*) disappeared from Swaziland at about the close of the 19th century. Since the early 1960s, we have been trying to acquire black rhino to re-establish the species in Swaziland. In those early years, Swaziland had not yet fully established its bona fides in the conservation arena, and more latterly was not considered a priority area for the species, which was in rapid decline generally throughout its range. However, as the situation deteriorated elsewhere in Africa and the plight of the rhino worsened to critical levels, Swaziland became an attractive possibility for

establishing another nucleus of rhino to decrease the risk of extinction.

In 1977 plans to re-introduce 12 black rhino from Zimbabwe broke down because the South African veterinary authorities would not grant "in transit" permits for the animals, as the war of independence had caused the collapse of veterinary control. Following the return of stability to Zimbabwe after the war, efforts were immediately renewed to acquire black rhino.

Enter WWF

The cost of capture and translocations was also a problem and the project came together when the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) came in to sponsor and help negotiate the translocation. Chances of obtaining black rhino were enhanced by the 1987 rescue operation which was being heavily sponsored by WWF in the Zambezi Valley, where rhino were falling prey to poachers at the average rate of one per day, and where approximately 30 poachers had already been shot dead in anti-poaching skirmishes. As negotiations progressed, our allocation was dropped from 12 to six animals.

A prerequisite for the translocation was a site inspection, and WWF generously sponsored a visit by a rhino expert from Zimbabwe.

The expert was shown Hlane and Mkhaya; Mlawula was ruled out because of its proximity to Mozambique. Of the two parks, the experts insisted that Mkhaya was where the rhino should be placed because of its more suitable habitat and higher security facilities; Hlane could be stocked later. He felt it would be wrong to weaken the initial introduction by dividing it (as



had been intended with 12 animals). Mkhaya also had superior management and expertise.

The operation was purposely kept quiet to prevent anything from happening to spoil it, and so as not to attract the attention of poachers. We wanted the rhino to settle in with as little commotion as possible until they were accustomed to their new environment. We can now report that this has indeed happened.

On 28 December 1987, our team of rangers met the Zimbabwean officials at Beit Bridge and led them through the night to Swaziland, where they crossed the border on the morning of the 29th. That afternoon the six black rhinos (two males and four females) arrived at Mkhaya – safely but very aggressively.

Each was named by our Swazi rangers who were thoroughly absorbed by the whole operation. The larger bull got dubbed Mayaluka – the one who cannot stand still. Then there was Kakayi – the hard-headed one; Fecela – the scorpion, named for his tail which curls back like a

scorpion's every time he sees you; Manyovu – the hornet, a very aggressive and active female and the smallest of the six; Mbabatane – stinging nettle, another small heifer with a belligerent nature; and finally there was Lungile – the all right one because, compared to the others, she is very placid.

Confinement and release

We kept the rhinos confined in bomas, each separately compartmented, for two months before releasing the first two animals, Mayaluka and Kakayi. Mayaluka began browsing immediately he left the pens. He walked slowly down the fence line and touched it. The 4 000-volt shock sent him snorting into the bush.

Kakayi was then released. She walked up to the fence as though she could not see it. Her face, held high, went beyond the bracket supporting the insulated strand of electrified barbed wire and she pushed through the veldspan mesh, snapping the wire before the 4 000 volts hit her.



She was well earthed at the time, with her face enmeshed in the veldspan. The shock sent her back on her haunches, and she bellowed and took off into the bush. It is unlikely she has ever touched the fence again.

We let only the two out that day. The first night one of the gates was damaged by Mayaluka; it was buckled and bent, but it held long enough to deliver what must have been a terrible shock, for it had rained that night and the ground was wet. His tracks, which showed that the bull had fled away from the gate into the bush and run for at least two kilometres, were imprinted deep in the earth. It is unlikely that Mayaluka has ever made contact with the fence again either.

Meanwhile, following the experience gained from the release of the first two animals, an intermediate paddock was built and electrified.

The next two rhino were released individually into this paddock to teach them about electricity. Without exception, on contact each one rushed back and sought the shelter of the boma. They quickly learned not to make contact with

electrified wire, and when finally released, they too respected the fence entirely.

There followed a daily patrol of the fence for two weeks thereafter, and spoor showed the rhino to be giving the fence a wide berth.

Finally the bull Fecle and the remaining heifer Mbabatane were released into the cabled paddock and exposed to electricity. They too rushed for the shelter of their pen after contact with the 4 000 volts. Two contacts were enough for them to acknowledge the fence and they skirted the wire religiously from then on.

Mayaluka returned to the boma often, where he demolished bushes and churned up the soil in a territorial display against Fecle, who was in an adjacent area separated by electrified wire. The two bulls frequently display along this fenceline and square up to each other, but to date have not made contact. This territorial behaviour has given us confidence in their acceptance of their new home.





On the rhino's arrival, we experimented with different browse offerings and among the favourite foods were the fruit of the sausage tree *Kigelia africana*, various combretum species and *Securinega virosa* (white berry bush). On release, *Euphorbia ingens* was found to be a special favourite and is heavily utilised. Other trees browsed with considerable pressure are *Dicbrostachys cinerea*, *Spirostachy africana*, *Pterocarpus rotundifolius* and the acacia species, particularly *A. borleae*.

Security

The costs of introduction – quite apart from those of translocation which were borne by WWF – were heavy. Confinement was purposefully long to accustom the rhino to their new home and to reduce the chances of wanderlust. A tractor and trailer and a gang of six were employed full-time gathering food and cleaning pens. Extra rangers were employed to step up the security and a special additional

strand of electrified wire was strung at black rhino level on the fenceline. Concentrates to supplement their food were consumed at the rate of over 20 bags a month. Regular horse cubes were also used with great success.

Two observation towers have been erected in strategic locations as an additional safeguard against poaching. The towers are equipped with solar panels, 12-volt batteries and radios. From these, a ground force of rangers can be guided to any trouble spot, and the towers themselves can be controlled by radio from headquarters.

All this has been done in anticipation of increased poaching pressure, which will undoubtedly result from the presence of rhino and elephant at Mkhaya. The same measures are being taken at Hlane National Park.

The operation has so far been totally successful, and we record our deep appreciation to the SA Nature Foundation and the WWF, the Zimbabwean Government, our Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Natural Resources and Agriculture and the Department of Veterinary Services for their roles in making possible the return of black rhino to Swaziland.

We hope that a further six rhino will join the foundation group soon. On a recent visit to Swaziland, Peter Jenkins, rhino consultant to the Kenyan government, assessed Mkhaya as providing some of the best black rhino habitat he had ever seen. He estimated that this 6 200 hectare reserve was capable of supporting up to 100 black rhino, which lifts Mkhaya's scope for contributing to the conservation of this species to very meaningful proportions.

Mr Jenkins expressed the view that Mkhaya should be considered a priority black rhino reserve. Because of its prime habitat and high level of security, his view was that it should be immediately stocked to near capacity in order that it could begin producing a surplus for redistribution to other areas. 

