

DEHORNING BLACK RHINO: THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

A marked increase of poaching in 1989 prompted the decision of dehorning some black rhino populations in Namibia. The most vulnerable populations were identified and dehorned. Amongst the first black rhino to be dehorned were the unique desert-adapted rhino of Namibia's Kunene Province. Subsequently new sanctuaries have been established and stocked with dehorned rhino. Two calves were born in one of these populations three years after it was established.

FACTORS THAT LED TO THE DECISION TO DEHORN

1. The nature of the vast semi-desert area of the northern Kunene Province which is inhabited by pastoralists and nomadic farmers without any formal conservation status. These farmers were armed with rifles and automatic firearms (with very little control) during the war. This led to poaching of the black rhinos, amongst other game.
2. Lack of personnel, funds and equipment, by the conservation body, to effectively protect this vast area. Even with the input of Non-Government Organisations like Save The Rhino Trust Fund.
3. The open terrain would make the rhino visible without a horn and deter the poacher from shooting the animal.
4. The intensity of the monitoring program would make it possible to dehorn all individuals in the population, eliminating the chance of horned and dehorned rhinos interacting.
5. The virtual absence of large predators in the region make potential calf predation an unlikely event.
6. Due to the vegetation strata, very little use is made of the horn for browsing purposes.
7. The strong feeling that re-introducing rhino in that harsh environment will be extremely difficult. *In situ* protection was therefore of cardinal importance.
8. The experience of the capture team made it a minimal risk operation which could be done relatively cheaply.
9. Using the media to inform the public of newly-established sanctuaries with dehorned rhino.

METHODS³

After darting from a helicopter or on foot^{1 2}, the animal is placed in sternal recumbency. The head is placed on a pillow, the eyes are shielded from dust and hot exhaust gases emitted by the power-saw, the dart wound is treated and the vital functions monitored².

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A rhino horn has a concave base where it fits over the nasal bones. This is especially marked with the anterior horn. This necessitates removing the anterior horn 6,5 cm from its base and the posterior horn 5 cm from its base. Using the bow and crosscut saw, excess horn was removed by hoof clippers. It is trimmed to a convex shape with the power-saw, leaving as little horn as possible without touching the quick.

Ear nicks are put in to give a new identity to the animal.

The left hindfoot's nails are nicked. The outer nail as well as the large front nail receive grooves, cut in with a power-saw or file. This acts as an indication to trackers that the animal being followed has already been dehorned, saving a lot of time.

Cows and small calves are both immobilized to prevent separation. Special emphasis is placed on getting the animals to wake up simultaneously, thus preventing their splitting up.

RESULTS

The mean time taken to dehorn a rhino, to assess its age and to put nicks in the ears and nails is 30 minutes. It is important to get the animal down in the shortest possible time. The use of xylazine rather than azaperone and hyaluronidase with etorphine gives rapid immobilization with induction times of 2 minutes 20 seconds to 4 minutes².

No mortalities have occurred during all the dehorning exercises. Normal rhino behaviour, mating and breeding have prevailed since the first dehorning in 1989.

Horn regrowth varies between young and old animals, but allow three to four years between dehornings.

DISCUSSION

In Namibia dehorning has proved to be a management option. No dehorned rhino have been poached in Namibia. The Namibian exercise of giving custodianship of black rhinos to farmers helps to take the potential poaching burden off these farmers' shoulders. The cost under Namibian conditions comes to US\$ 1 500 per animal.

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