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Old enemies join forces in Namibia's war against poaching

IN THE ARID, remote hill country of northwest Namibia, where sparse thornbrush and poisonous euphorbia shrubs break the monotony of rocks and sand, lives Africa's largest population of truly wild black rhino. Finding them is far from easy. It demands an exhausting day with expert trackers, many of whom are quite literally poachers turned gamekeepers.

Working with local conservationists, the trackers use their old poaching skills to keep tabs on the rhinos, trailing them for hours, sometimes days, across the barren landscape of Damaraland and Kaokoveld. The slightest clues—an upturned stone, a broken twig or sand scattered across a bare rock—are all they have to go on.

Their painstaking efforts have revealed that over 100 rhinos now live in the area, compared to less than 60 a decade ago. The figures are part of a broader success story: the fact that rhino poaching is being halted all over Namibia. A range of innovative anti-poaching strategies, backed by the World Wide Fund for Nature, has helped Namibia's rhino population first to stabilise, and then slowly to recover. At present the population stands at around 500 animals.

The rhinos of Damaraland are particularly vulnerable to poachers. The vast areas over which they roam mean that more traditional methods of protection such as anti-poaching patrols are all but useless. Instead, Namibian government conservationists have relied on one of the more imaginative, not to say controversial, methods of deterring poachers: removing the horns from selected rhinos, thereby cheating the poacher of his prize.

"Dehorning" in Damaraland started in 1989 (*New Scientist*, Science, 18 November 1989) when conservationists were at a loss to know how to deal with an upsurge in poaching. The upsurge coincided with the last months of the bush war preceding Namibia's independence in April 1990, during which high-powered weapons became widely available to the local people. Around 25 rhinos were killed in northern Namibia then, and the population of Damaraland was particularly badly hit.

Martin Wright

Namibia's special Anti-poaching Unit includes former SWAPO fighters

The idea for dehorning evolved from conservationists' experiences of moving rhinos, sedated, away from vulnerable areas. Removing the ends of horns, or "tipping", became the main way to avoid damage to the horns during the journey. The ease of the operation encouraged the Game Capture Unit, based at Etosha National Park, to attempt to remove a whole horn. So far a total of 12 rhinos have been dehorned.

Worthless prey

Fortunately, the open nature of the terrain makes the absence of horn on a rhino conspicuous from a distance: poachers can see it is a worthless catch before they fire. Whether the same would be true in thick grassland or bush is unclear, though we may soon find out. Zimbabwean conservationists have recently embarked on a dehorning experiment in the comparatively lush grounds of Hwange National Park.

Another factor which makes dehorning practicable in Damaraland is the scarcity of potential predators. There are only a few lions and hyena, which have been known to take rhino babies. Nor do the rhinos seem to need their horn for feeding purposes such as bulldozing down small trees to reach the foliage.

Since the experiment began two years ago, the dehorned animals have been closely monitored for ill-effects. Zoologists had predicted that dehorned animals would have problems, ranging from defending their young, to relating to—and indeed mating with—rhinos with horns. The Game Capture Unit insists, however, that the operation has worked like a dream. Dehorned females have mated with normal males, producing at least three calves which the mothers have successfully defended against predators. In every respect they appear to behave as normal.

Certainly, dehorning seems to do nothing to still the animal's notoriously unpredictable temper. One rhino recently gave emphatic proof of this when it charged a team filming it for a documentary. After scattering the crew, the rhino unceremoniously smashed their equipment with its hornless, but still lethal, snout.

Conservationists may have allayed the worst fears about dehorning, but does the approach work? The fact that no dehorned rhino has yet been shot suggests it does. And although the operation will need repeating every few years (rhino horns regrow at an annual rate of roughly 8 centimetres for the front horn, and 5 centimetres for the rear) dehorning is relatively inexpensive compared with the costs of employing teams of armed wardens.

We may not, however, have seen the last of the controversy. At present all horns that are removed are added to a growing pile in government bank vaults. The ban on trade in rhino horn, made by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), means that countries like Namibia cannot sell their stocks to raise money for ploughing back into conservation schemes. The policy of selling stocks

Dehorning a rhino, the Namibian way . . .

Trackers pick out a suitable animal, preferably a calf about to leave its mother, and then tranquillise it with a dart fired from a helicopter. After treatment with anaesthetics, the two horns (a smaller one lies behind the main horn) are sawn off and the stumps painted with tar to protect against infection. The whole procedure takes less than half an hour

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is fiercely supported by every conservationist I met in Namibia, but strongly opposed by international groups such as the WWF. To legalise even a limited amount of trading in rhino horn, the WWF argues, is to risk triggering an upsurge in poaching worldwide.

But this argument is unlikely to stop Namibia pressing for the right to sell some of its horns. Recent techniques for tracing the geographical origin of horn samples, which Colin Tudge describes in the main part of this article, could strengthen Namibia's hand. If it does prove possible to trace horn origins to within a few kilometres, then in theory one could restrict trade to horns obtained by dehorning.

Elsewhere in Namibia other anti-poaching strategies are also recording surprising victories. A new 21-strong Anti-Poaching Unit has been set up in Etosha with funding from the WWF. In its first two years, the unit has slashed the number of rhinos poached from 22 in 1989, to just one in 1990 and none so far in 1991. The unit has been forged, surprisingly, from a mixture of ex-fighters from SWAPO (South-West Africa People's Organisation) and their former opponents in South Africa's elite *koevert* force. The fearsome reputation of the latter in particular may partly explain the unit's success.

In contrast to neighbouring Zimbabwe, fire fights between poachers and the unit are rare—the majority surrender on sight. But Etosha's chief warden, Allan Cilliers, gives much of the credit to the "hearts and minds" work which the unit carries on in the villages of Ovamboland near the park's perimeter. "They go into the villages and talk to the headmen, building up relationships with them. This way they can warn people, not only of the penalties for poaching, but also of the fact that less wildlife means less tourism in the area, and less income for the locals. "It's about showing people that they have a long-term investment in rhinos and other game, which will earn them much more than the few hundred rands they get from poaching." This concept is also being developed to good effect in the Kaokoveld and northern Damaraland, where a system of "community game guards" has been set up, again with WWF backing, after talks between local development workers and leaders of the local peoples, the Damara, Herero and Himba. In return for a small monthly stipend, the guards keep an eye on the rhinos and other wildlife in their home area and report any suspected poachings. For the most part, local villagers seem pleased to cooperate with the scheme. Many identify a thriving population of game with times of plenty. "It's God's farming," said one local chief. "If the wild animals go, it means times are hard."

This ecologically sound whimsy is fleshed out with a new government scheme in which meat from carefully controlled culls of game such as giraffe, wildebeest and buck is given to the local community in return for its cooperation with stamping out poaching.

Development workers with the Himba people have won the cooperation of safari operators to charge a small levy on each tourist coming into the area. The money is shared among Himba villagers and helps to fund craft marketing.

"We used to get food and money from shooting animals," said one old man, "and now we get it from people coming to look at them. It's better that way." With their numbers having almost doubled over the last eight years, the rhinos probably think so too.

Martin Wright

Anthony Bannister