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ECOLOGY OF BLACK AND WHITE RHINO IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA

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Since 2001, when Botswana's Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) with the help of Wilderness Safaris and the Trust successfully reintroduced a number of black and white rhino into the Moremi Game Reserve, both species dispersed widely. In an attempt to better understand the ecology of the two species, this project has been investigating the wet and dry season range and feeding preferences of the reintroduced animals in the Moremi and surrounds. Identifying key factors influencing the movement of the rhino out of the habitat they were reintroduced into is essential from a management perspective.

Field work commenced in April 2008, making use of GPS data recorded by the Anti-Poaching Unit during regular monitoring patrols, by using spoor or visual identification. Dry season data was collected for two weeks per month from April through October, tracking 14 individual animals. This will be combined with data collected in the wet season to establish whether there is any preference for a particular habitat type per season.

In the dry season, it was found that rhino distributions were influenced by water availability and that the rhino foraged on seven primary grass species, namely: *Cynodon dactylon*, *Urochloa spp*, *Chloris virgata*, *Digitaria eriantha*, *Brancychne spp*, *Panicum maximum* and *Eragrostis spp*.

Movement-wise, nine rhino had left the study area, five of which were captured and returned to the safety of

Moremi Game Reserve. There are currently two territorial adult male rhinos with well defended territories that overlap slightly. The dominant adult male is defending a large territory and has a number of females and five calves therein. The second male is defending a smaller territory with only two females present.

The white rhino population in this study are free-ranging animals that therefore display an unrestricted, natural dispersal, better allowing an understanding of home range size, habitat use and feeding preference in the wild. Additionally, the long-term benefits of establishing a successful breeding nucleus of white rhino in an area they once occupied will allow for future reintroductions into other suitable areas.

