



RHINOS – RECOLLECTIONS AND REVELATIONS

*For the past ten years two
Danish researchers – surely
more used to Scandinavian
winters than African summers –
have studied the Black Rhino
of the Pilanesberg. They have
learned much, but the great
pachyderms still remain
an enigma . . .*

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We have a vision: on a dusty road in the Pilanesberg National Park in North West Province, a car drives slowly towards our vehicle. The passengers wave at us to stop. "Do you require any help?" we ask politely. "Oh yes, could you please tell us where we can find a Black Rhino?"

What is so visionary about that, you ask? After all, our 4x4 vehicle supplied by the Mazda Wildlife Fund carries a sign across the bonnet saying 'Black Rhino Monitoring', so the question seems quite natural.

But the problem is that we have never been asked that question!

Many people stop and ask for advice or directions, but to our chagrin the most frequent question is, "Where do we find the lions?" Amazingly, these large, lazy cats, which only now and then live up to their lion-hearted reputation, seem to be the highlight for most visitors to game parks.

Let us here and now try to change this state of affairs, so that our vision may soon come true – a new millennium vision, if you wish. After all, the more interest everyone shows in this endangered and exciting species, the better are its chances of actually surviving into the next millennium, along with our vision.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND

From a hill called 'Poachers Look-out' in Tsavo West, Kenya, there is a fantastic view. Here, at the beginning of the seventies, standing on top of a magnificent part of Africa, one could find at least four or five Black Rhino standing in the shade of the trees far below. The hill with its view is still there, but the rhinos have gone, shot out by poachers.

Apart from the odd free-ranging Black Rhino in remote parts of the continent and the 800 living on strictly protected private or State land in Kenya or Zimbabwe, most Black Rhino now live south of the Kunene or the Limpopo Rivers, with 700 in Namibia and 1 000 in South Africa. In recognition of the serious situation that had developed – when rhino numbers suddenly dwindled in Zimbabwe, which was then considered a stronghold for Black Rhino – a regional conservation plan for South Africa and Namibia was proposed in 1988. An important target was set: to build up as rapidly as possible and conserve in the long term a population of 2 000 animals of the two subspecies in the region, *Diceros bicornis bicornis* in Namibia and *D. b. minor*



in South Africa. As you can work out from the previously mentioned numbers – 700 and 1 000 – we are not yet there. But populations are slowly increasing. And in the Pilanesberg we think that our Black Rhino have made quite a contribution.

THE PILANESBERG PROJECT

The Pilanesberg National Park was founded in 1979 with Operation Genesis, when more than 5 000 animals were introduced. A few years later, between 1981 and 1983, 19 Black Rhino arrived in the park from Natal. The rhino were followed closely by Kes Hillman in the introduction phase. In 1989, Bophuthatswana National Parks or Bop Parks, as it was then called, decided to adopt the regional strategy. It was soon realised that, although the Black Rhino had been monitored during the yearly aerial game counts, there were gaps in the information about the population. With support from the Endangered Wildlife Trust, two Danish wildlife consultants were commissioned to carry out an

accurate census of the population based on photographs and individual recognition. That was us.

Within two years a file was collated, containing pictures and characteristics of the then 31 Black Rhino in the park. Natural markings, such as scars and horn shape, were, however, not in the long run sufficient to identify each individual, so an ear-notching programme was started. Today the complete file is compiled, with pictures and drawings of more than 60 rhino. Some have died over the years and nine have been translocated to Madikwe Game Reserve in North West Province. Still, the population now stands at 47.

MOVING TO MADIKWE

In 1995 the Pilanesberg population had reached 42, with 23 females and 19 males. This was an 'improved' sex ratio in relation to the original introduction, of which 11 were males and eight females. Over the years, however, the project had shown that too many males were detrimental to

A Black Rhino cow and calf, softly framed by their beloved Acacia browse.

(PHOTO: HANS BJARNE HANSEN)



ABOVE: A White Rhino in the Pilanesberg, being remarkably co-operative.

ABOVE RIGHT: Sergeant Ranger George Phiri steps out.

(PHOTOS: HANNE LINDEMANN)



to settle down completely. As mentioned earlier, surplus males may be disadvantageous to a population's breeding performance. Also, in other connections males can cause problems in rhino society.

breeding success. It was therefore decided to move nine animals to Madikwe Game Reserve, which later that same year was to receive more Black Rhino from Natal. Nine specific animals, six young males and three females, were selected for the translocation. Surprisingly, the first on the list to be captured was a young female which had not been seen for two years. Then a territorial bull took the trip by mistake. Otherwise the whole operation went smoothly. After three days the nine rhinos were in Madikwe, each getting acquainted with the new area, where they were released in the evenings. Today they are all doing well and some have established a territory, although it takes time for them to settle down in unfamiliar surroundings.

All the males that an area can carry should preferably be introduced at the beginning. Males, especially young ones, released later risk being killed by the more or less established males in the population. In the Pilanesberg three young males died soon after an introduction in 1989. And fighting among males does not wane with age – at least three old males have been found killed, probably by younger rivals.

STRESS AND SURPLUS MALES

All the rhinos translocated from Pilanesberg to Madikwe were released without being kept in a boma at either end of the operation. The same goes for most of the 19 rhinos originally introduced to the Pilanesberg. This far from proves that keeping rhinos in a boma before and/or after a translocation is not beneficial to the animals. Contrary to their so-called 'white' relatives, Black Rhino appear to settle down more easily in a boma. However, this does not necessarily mean that Black Rhino have genuinely settled down in the new area – they could still be stressed. Under all circumstances, translocation is a stressful exercise for Black Rhino. Looking at the general picture of rhino ranges and breeding performance over the years in Pilanesberg, it may take almost ten years for an introduced population

TSHUKUDU 2000

While the Pilanesberg Black Rhino population has prospered, the White Rhinos have stood somewhat in the dark. One could say that they have been hit by many hardships. White Rhinos thrived after their introduction almost 20 years ago. Later, however, a substantial proportion of the White Rhino increase was translocated to other parks and some generated important income for the Parks Board by being hunted as trophy bulls. However, the several fatalities since 1994 have caused concern for the population – more than 20 White Rhino have died, suspected victims of attacks by elephants.

This problem has probably been solved with the introduction of some big, mature bull elephants from the Kruger and increased monitoring of the elephants. But more focus is now also put on the White Rhino with a programme called Tshukudu 2000 (after the Setswana name for White Rhino). The objective is to duplicate the Black Rhino Project's aims and methodology. All White Rhino were ear-notched at their first introduction, but births and translocations have confused the picture.

It is difficult and expensive to maintain up ear-notches in a population of around 200. Still, efforts in 1997 and 1998 meant that more than a third of the Pilanesberg's White Rhinos are now individually recognisable and a photo file has been assembled. Besides making it possible to monitor the White Rhinos more closely, it also gives an opportunity to estimate the population size more accurately.

INTRODUCING RHINOS

White Rhinos are normally quite easy to work with. If you want to take a picture of a White Rhino, you just sneak up to it and hope it does not see, smell or hear you. Otherwise you do not get the picture because the rhino runs away. Darting and ear-notching White Rhino is usually also a piece of cake, as the animal only runs a short distance after being hit by the dart, and it rarely chases the people involved in the operation, even after waking up again.

Black Rhinos are a totally different story. If you want to take a picture, you still hope it does not see, smell or hear you – not because it will run away, but because the picture might be blurred owing to your shaking as the rhino gives chase! When darted, they tend to run until the drug takes effect, which for unknown reasons often happens in a donga or other inaccessible place. Both Black and White Rhino fight and kill each other. But mostly it is Black Rhinos that chase people, or cars for that matter. This may have accentuated the Black Rhino's reputation as an aggressive, antiquated, erratic, eccentric and solitary animal. Yes, they do have a bit of a temper, are full of tricks, can be cheeky and

sometimes charge; still, Black Rhinos are also shy, charming animals with much character. They prefer to live peacefully in thick bush, where they forage on leaves, twigs or euphorbias.

REMEMBER RHINOS

The White Rhino saga is often described as a success story in conservation, and with a recovery from less than 100 around the turn of the century, to several thousands today, it can certainly be considered as such. The fate of the Black Rhino is more of a tragedy. Remember that of the probably 100 000 alive at the middle of this century, there are now just some 2 500 Black Rhino left on the entire African continent. However, there is also hope for this species, as populations are slowly starting to increase. But whether a rhino is called Black or White, it carries two horns that are still in much demand in the Far East. Both species are highly endangered species. According to a recent report by TRAFFIC (Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce), funding for rhino conservation remains inadequate.

But, why worry, you may ask? Does it matter whether the rhino disappears? The rhinos probably do not think about it, but it should matter to us, to humanity. It is our hope that, as we enter the next millennium, at least a couple of people each year will come to the Pilanesberg and ask us where to find a Black Rhino, and that there will be plenty to show them.

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BELOW LEFT:

A Black Rhino relieves an itch.

(PHOTO: GEORGE PERK)

BELOW:

And another rhino attempts to hide in a thornbush.

(PHOTO: HANS BJARNE HANSEN)

