



# DARTING SAFARIS – CONSERVATION RIGHT ON TARGET

*Take one part initiative, two parts  
determination, some intensive  
collaboration and networking, and a  
healthy injection of funding. Add a  
very real need to provide a valid  
conservation service to the custodians  
of wildlife species, and what do  
we get? A successful and viable  
conservation project . . .*

YOLAN FRIEDMANN

These days there is more and more pressure on non-government organisations to explore new means of raising funds and to initiate projects that have the potential of ultimately becoming self-sustaining. The cap-in-hand approach to fundraising is no longer effective, and there is now too much competition for an ever-decreasing pool of funds to rely simply on appealing to moral conscience and good-natured generosity. However, with the future of wildlife in Africa relying more and more on the conservation NGOs, the NGOs have no choice but to explore every means of making conservation pay, so to speak.

The Wildlife Breeding Resource Centre, a working group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, launched a new project in 1998 which serves as both a service provider to the custodians of valuable wildlife species such as rhino, buffalo, elephant, Lion and Sable Antelope, and which also acts as a fundraiser for a number of the WBRC's other projects. Darting Safaris, as the project is called, is in fact one of the most unique and novel conservation projects recently launched, providing not only the already-mentioned opportunities, but allowing for increased public education and awareness of conservation issues, participation in conservation management procedures for members of the public and the expansion of the concept of sustainable wildlife resource utilisation in an exciting new direction.

Wildlife conservation, research and management procedures often require an animal to be captured by way of chemical immobilisation. The reasons for capture may include translocation as part of a breeding project, medical treatment, microchipping or ear-notching for identification purposes, radio-collaring for tracking purposes, blood or tissue sampling for disease and genetic surveys and a host of other procedures. This practice is carried out by both private and government biologists, veterinarians and professional capture teams and is ongoing in many countries around the world. Darting Safaris deals with the practice of using a paying client to accompany the wildlife capture team and to allow the client, or clients, to track, stalk and 'hunt' the animal as in a sport hunt – only this time the stalk culminates in the darting of the animal and the subsequent participation of the client in the procedures to be performed on the anaesthetised animal.



The practice of using paying clients or sportsmen to dart an animal has been in operation for a number of years, mostly, however, on an *ad hoc* basis. Wildlife species that have been darted as part of these operations have included White Rhino, elephant, Lion, buffalo and Jaguar (South America). But not all of these darting safaris were undertaken with a research, conservation or management intention and were often purely for the purpose of providing the client with the opportunity to dart an animal for the pleasure and sportsmanship of it. The EWT's project, Darting Safaris, has, however, a number of provisos and is leading the way in setting the ethical standard for others to follow. In fact, the WBRC and the EWT have published the first policy on Darting Safaris, which addresses the issue of the ethics of 'dart hunting' and serves as a code of conduct. (See block, overleaf, on policy statement.)

All animals darted as part of the project are those which require the immobilisation for a

research, management or conservation purpose, in which the client also gets to participate, but are never for commercial purposes only. Clients are able to take horn measurements of their 'trophies' for the purpose of having casts made, and these measurements may be entered into the Trophy Record Books. In the case of certain species, such as rhino, it is often far more challenging to stalk and dart the animal than to shoot it, as one has to get closer with a dart gun than an ordinary rifle. There is also a time lapse of up to 15 minutes before the animal succumbs to the effect of the anaesthetic drug, which means that the animal is not 'stopped' in its tracks as in standard hunting. Said Pierre van der Walt, a South African hunter who attended an EWT Darting Safari in 1998: "Dart hunting provided me with one of the more gratifying stalking experiences in my life. It is an incredible thrill to stalk so close and then have to contend with the trajectory of the dart, which is more pronounced than an arrow's."

*A microchip is placed in  
darted rhino's front horn*

(PHOTO: WBRC)

## EWT POLICY ON DARTING SAFARIS

*The Endangered Wildlife Trust supports the practice of darting safaris with the following provisos:*

1. Only animals that have to be immobilised for conservation, research or wildlife management reason should be made available for Darting Safaris.
2. An experienced and qualified veterinarian must be used to handle the immobilisation drugs (a legal requirement in South Africa) and be present throughout the procedure, that is from when the animal is immobilised until its full recovery.
3. All the relevant laws, acts and guidelines governing hunting, game capture and animal welfare must be adhered to.
4. The issue concerning when and how often a particular individual animal can be re-darted is prescribed in points 1 above and 5 below.
5. No animal should be darted for the sole purpose of providing an animal for a client, that is, for commercial reasons only.
6. The Darting Safari should be promoted and carried out by appropriately trained and experienced professionals, with due regard for the safety and well-being of the animal, the client and personnel involved. Suitable insurance should also be taken out for both the animal and the client for the duration of the Darting Safari.
7. The darted animal should be kept in sight during the entire procedure so that the effects of anaesthesia can be monitored and the team can be in a position to render immediate assistance in potential life-threatening situations, for example, lateral recumbence in ruminant animals, sternal recumbence in elephants and so on. In most cases it is strongly recommended that a radio transmitter be used in the dart and that a helicopter be on standby to find lost animals or render immediate follow-up assistance if required. Human trackers should also be on standby to serve the same function. Darted animals have been known to break out of small camps or to 'disappear' in open countryside. In the case of animals such as elephant, rhino and buffalo the use of a helicopter on standby should be considered as mandatory to the safety and success of the Darting Safari.
8. The client's ability to carry out the Darting Safari successfully should be assessed before the safari by the professionals involved and appropriate training given to the client in the areas found lacking before the safari commences.

*Dr Paul Bartels with an endangered Roan Antelope that has been darted so that a tissue sample can be collected for sub-speciation determination.*

(PHOTO: WBRC)

### A TYPICAL DARTING SAFARI UNFOLDS

The professional hunter, his client and the wildlife veterinarian, followed closely by their ground crew of trackers and rangers, begin their safari at sunrise, setting out to find the trail of a very specific animal that has been earmarked for undergoing a specific procedure. On this particular morning, we are looking for a White Rhino cow, who needs to be microchipped and ear-notched as part of an anti-poaching and monitoring project.

The safari often runs for three days and the client may spend all of this time simply looking for the animal, enjoying the intensity of his wildlife experience and getting in tune with the sounds, sights and smells of the African bush. The excitement of finally spotting the animal is soon





replaced with an even more exhilarating experience, as the hunter and client quietly stalk to within 25 metres of the cow, and, taking the wind, tree cover and distance into account, prepare to take a shot with the loaded dartgun. With the dry twigs and leaves threatening to give the game away at the slightest crackle and snap, stalking an adult rhino to within whispering distance is not as easy as it sounds.

The dart is shot using a 32-gauge rifle with powder charge and, if all goes well, the rhino will be fast asleep in ten minutes or so. A bullet can stop a charging rhino, but a dart cannot, so the hunting party has to ensure that they are protected, or able to run very fast, while keeping the animal in full view all the while. Radio-transmitter darts are used which enable the team to keep track of the animal at all times, as they can cover distances of up to two kilometres before they fall asleep, and under no circumstances should the team ever be in a position to lose the animal. A helicopter is always kept on standby as well, in the event that it should have to be called in to assist in locating a darted animal in thick bush.

Once asleep, the rhino is worked on by a ranger who, among other things, inserts microchips into the rhino's neck and its horns and takes appropriate measurements and tissue samples. The wildlife veterinarian focuses all his attention on the sleeping rhino, monitoring its vital signs under the anaesthetic and administering other necessary drugs. The hunter assists with all these procedures and also gets the chance to pose for photographs with his 'bagged' trophy. After taking the measurements of the horns, an antidote to the immobilising drug is injected into the rhino. The rhino wakes up within the next minute and it goes without saying that all persons

need to be safely out of reach by this time. The feeling of elation and satisfaction at seeing the rhino recover and return to its environment is unlike any other and needs to be experienced to be appreciated!

In the past eighteen months, the WBRC has undertaken ten Darting Safaris with individual clients, and the project is supported by hunting organisations both locally and abroad. These events generate an income for projects like the WBRC, and the rhino custodian not only receives an important service to aid in the monitoring of his wildlife species, but also often derives an income from having hosted the hunting party on his farm or game reserve; as such, wildlife is made more of an economically viable option for the custodians of rare and endangered species, and in the long run this may play an enormous role in the conservation of these key species.

As with most good ideas, there is, however, always room for growth and the expansion of ideas. The potential for client participation in wildlife conservation and management extends far beyond the individual client, and Darting Safaris has recently expanded to include other options in order to accommodate larger groups of people. With the modern tourist being educated, curious and interested in seeing more of wildlife than simply what it looks like through the glass of a bus window, small groups of tourists now have the opportunity to witness and participate in behind-the-scenes management procedures as part of wildlife conservation strategies, providing them with the most incredible opportunity to experience a first-hand interaction with wildlife in its natural habitat.

ABOVE LEFT: *Dr Paul Bartels and the team on of the many darting safes conducted on Tilodi Wilderness in Northern Province.*

ABOVE: *And Dr Paul Bartels darting rhino from a helicopter on Tilodi Wilderness, although no darting is done from helicopters.*

(PHOTOS: WBRC)



*Dr Paul Bartels and a proud darter (Pierre van der Walt) with his "trophy".*

(PHOTO: WBRC)

This type of safari differs slightly from that described above, and is generally a single-day event. To kick off the darting safari, the group is first given a talk by the wildlife veterinarian and staff, who introduce them to the ways of the wild and the reasons for, and the bigger picture behind, the event that awaits them. The tour group is then divided into game-viewing vehicles and, accompanied by experienced rangers, driven into the bush in search of the animal. The wildlife veterinarian and helicopter pilot then get airborne and locate the animal from the helicopter, while the group then quietly follows the helicopter and the animal, keeping it within eyesight and at an accessible distance.

The animal is then darted at close range from the helicopter in full view of the tour group on the ground. Once the animal has fallen under the effects of the anaesthetic drug, the ground crew and tourists move in and perform the critical procedures on the animal, monitoring its status under anaesthetic and getting the management procedures done as quickly and as smoothly as possible, with participation from certain selected members of the tour group. Every member of the group then has the chance to make contact with the animal, to interact more closely than ever before with a wildlife species and to

experience the full impact of being close to the action! The animal is then given an antidote to the anaesthetic drug and, within a minute or two, moves off again into the bush, by which time the ground crew, tour group and helicopter are all back at a safe viewing distance.

Not only does this represent a unique opportunity for a tour party to break away from tradition and participate in a genuine wildlife conservation event, but the group further contributes to the conservation of South Africa's most threatened wildlife species as proceeds of these events are ploughed back into Endangered Wildlife Trust projects. Membership to the EWT for one year is also a feature of this unique tourist adventure.

An additional area where Darting Safaris has been well received and an opportunity for expansion identified, is in the realm of executive training and team building. The Darting Safari represents a unique and challenging opportunity for executives to build team spirit, to learn valuable lessons about effective team work, to sharpen personnel skills and to drive home principles in strategy planning and project management.

The group Darting Safari can be added into the agenda of any corporate event, but is particularly

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and, finally, gets to participate in a group darting safari along the lines of the group option described above, which will involve the performance of a genuine conservation management procedure.

The concept of involving a paying public in conservation procedures is fast becoming a feature of many conservation projects today. Opportunities for the public actually to bid for participation in these types of events are even available, and project participation is now being auctioned on Internet sites such as WildNet Africa. Conservationists are fast learning that the work which they have for so long taken for granted, is in fact a privilege and is an opportunity for which many people are prepared to pay in order to simply be able to experience it for themselves. The WBRC team has taken children from ten years old, foreigners who have never even seen a rhino, hardened hunters who have hunted all that Africa has to offer, committed bunny-huggers, groups of corporate executives, city slickers and members of the media on Darting Safaris, and in each case has witnessed and jointly experienced the participants' excitement when they are finally given the opportunity to get into a hands-on situation with a species such as a rhino.

Apart from the numerous other advantages of this project, sharing the novelty and enjoyment experienced by each new client on each different safari makes the conservationists themselves see their work through fresh eyes, and that makes this project right on target down to the very last detail.

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*Reach for a dream. Darting safaris held to bring together people from many different backgrounds to encourage a greater understanding of conservation.*

(PHOTO: WBRC)

suiting to conferences, training events and team-building weekends. Accompanied by the WBRC Darting Safari team, the group of executives enjoys a weekend of role playing, brainstorming to solve genuine conservation problems, educational insight into other pertinent wildlife management issues