

Mozambican residents  
came to help.

## Rhino escape at Cecil Kop

**M**ANICALAND, in the eastern districts, is usually quiet and serene. The city of Mutare is, one way or the other, not a headline newsmaker. Except late last year when rhinos in the Cecil Kop Nature Reserve escaped and received not just media attention but screams, surprises and jostling as some residents of this city tried to catch a glimpse of the protected species, while others ran for dear life.

Situated in walking distance of the city centre, Cecil Kop - WSZ Manicaland's project - is home to a variety of indigenous animals that have provided much needed education to multitudes of school children around the country. Included among the animals was a lone white rhino, Daisy, translocated to the sanctuary about a decade ago.

Last year, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWM), adopted a National Rhino Policy, which meant that Daisy had to be relocated to a protected zone for breeding purposes. But Mutare residents, in a petition signed by over 5 000 people, vetoed the idea of losing the province's only rhino. "Give us more rhinos and we will carry out the breeding programme at Cecil Kop", WSZ Manicaland said in its letter of protest. The DNPWM listened. Four rhinos, two male and two female, were translocated into the game park between 23 and 27 September 1999.

On arrival the rhino were put in a partitioned boma, previously inspected and approved by DNPWM, to prepare them for release into the park. Trouble began when one of the females broke a partition and the rhino starting sharing the same "room". Scuffles followed and on the fateful night they all started fighting.

The manager of Cecil Kop, and former WSZ president, Mr. Mike Hitschmann, decided to release them into the park "for their own protection". Three, two adult

females and a male, set off along the perimeter fence, while the fourth, a sub-adult male, separated from the rest and went straight to the Thomson's Vlei area of the park. The three later broke out of the fence and went into the town, causing pandemonium.

In spite of the multitude of people who dogged the rhinos, Mike Hitschmann successfully darted and recaptured the two females and they were immediately taken on a lorry back to the bomas. "We needed to reverse the drug but could not do that while they were still in the truck, and we had to wait for a heavy-duty crane to uplift them into the boma. Unfortunately, while we were waiting we lost one female. We later reversed the drug on the surviving one" said a distraught Mr. Richard Chinheya, chairman of WSZ Manicaland.

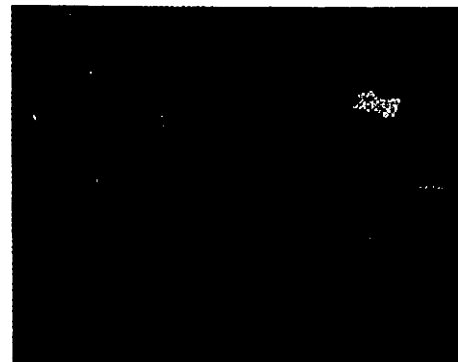
The male had fled the unusual human attention, and was eventually found around dusk after slipping down a steep slope into a gully blocked by a railway culvert. Efforts to manoeuvre him to a more accessible area for recapture were unsuccessful. After three nights he moved east, crossing the border into Mozambique, this time into an area infested by anti-personnel mines, placed during the war of liberation. Meanwhile the animal had been darted.

While efforts to de-mine the area with a front-end loader were underway, he rose and moved further across. Efforts to drive him with a helicopter failed. The branch enlisted the help of their Mozambican counterparts in the Border Patrol Unit, and the rhino was eventually loaded into a container and brought back by road. All the activity and running from humans had heavily stressed the animal and he died after a night in the park. In his post mortem report, a veterinary surgeon, Mr. Norman Mukarati, said the animal had died of "severe capture myopathy" (stress).

The surviving pair have now joined Daisy in the park but, with only a sub-adult male, it may be up to 10 years before breeding starts. "It could be less than that, depending on a number of factors. National Parks should consider giving us another male adult to speed up the breeding", said Hitschmann.

The Provincial Warden, Mr. Onias Bepe, said, "The idea was for these animals to breed and for Daisy to have some partners. Her nearest friends were the elephants, and these sometimes attacked her. The other (benefit) is educational, people see and learn from these rhinos, the only ones in the entire province". He added that a physical study had been conducted by ecologists before the rhinos were translocated "but we will not bring another until we are sure that the habitat is suitable. If they start breeding then we may bring in more".

"We are overwhelmed and humbled by the tremendous, unexpected and selfless support rendered the branch by the local business and farming community and individuals towards the recapture of the rhino" said Mr Chinheya. "They offered their time and resources, including specialised equipment such as front-end loaders, cranes, vehicles, and even a plane, all free of charge."



The rhino being roped near a vehicle.