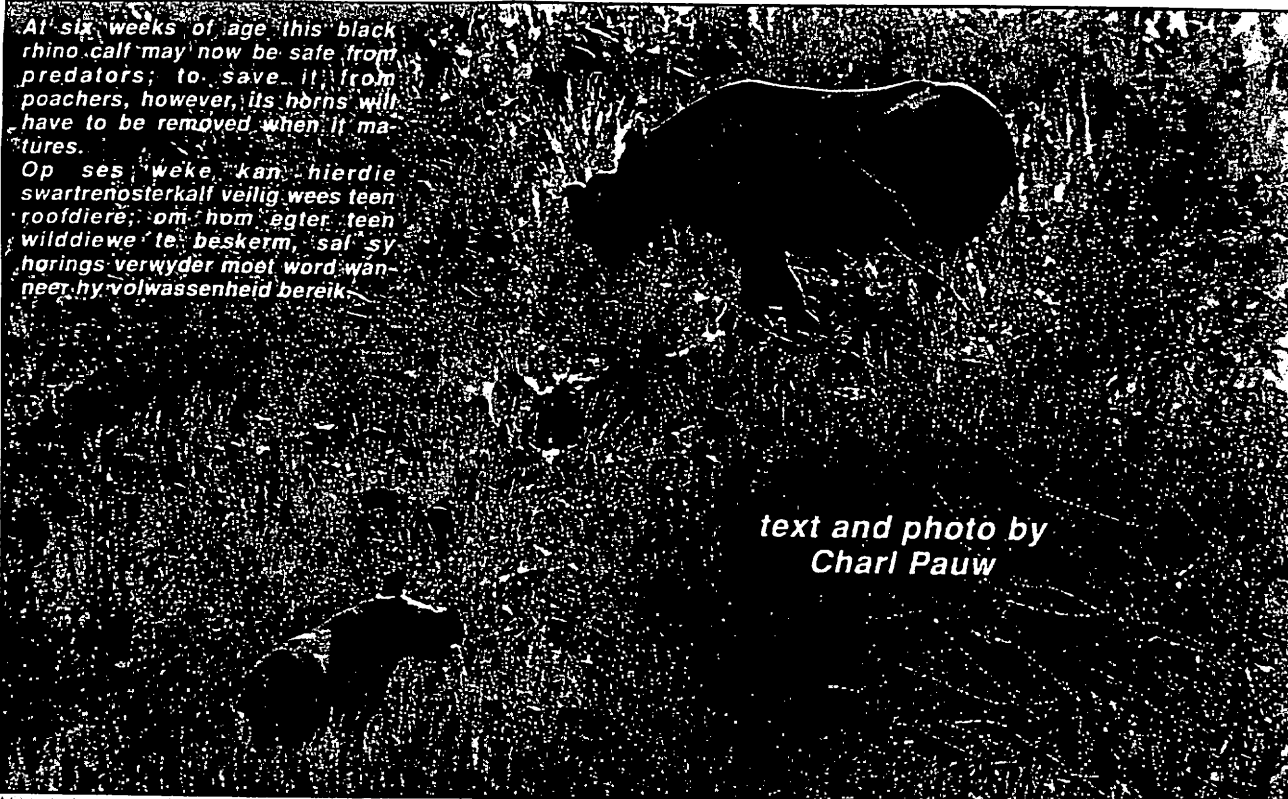


5946

At six weeks of age this black rhino calf may now be safe from predators; to save it from poachers, however, its horns will have to be removed when it matures.

Op ses weke kan hierdie swartrenosterkalf veilig wees teen roofdiere; om hom egter teen wilddiewe te beskerm, sal sy horings verwyder moet word wanneer hy volwassenheid bereik.



text and photo by  
Charl Pauw

## DE-HORNING CRITICS STUMPED!

### Rhino cow in controversial programme proves capable mother

When conservationists in Namibia launched Operation Bicornis last year in a last-ditch attempt to ensure the survival of Damaraland's famed desert rhino, their plan to de-horn the entire rhino population of the region unleashed a storm of controversy both here and overseas. Disfiguring an animal to save it from poachers had never been attempted before and, amongst other criticisms, opponents of the scheme pointed out that a de-horned rhino might be killed or incapacitated in an intraspecific encounter with a "normal" rhino, and that a female rhino would be unable to defend her offspring against predators (*African Wildlife* Vol. 43(5), pp.218, 229-233).

It now seems that the latter criticism can be refuted — at least provisionally — following the birth of the first calf to a de-horned mother in early September (as reported on S.A.B.C.T.V. on 24 October 1989).

Blythe Loutit, researcher and founder of the "Save the Rhino Trust Fund" in Damaraland says, "It proves that the cow was a capable mother, and that she was able to defend her new-born calf against predators despite the fact that she had been de-horned." The calf has perfectly symmetrical ears, which shows that apart from keeping at bay the larger predators such as hyaenas, lions and leopards, the cow was also able

to defend her offspring against jackals. Rhino calves quite often have rip marks on their ears from attack by black-backed jackals.

I joined Blythe Loutit and her team of auxiliary game guards and trackers one day in October, and we were lucky enough to find the calf and its mother on a rock-strewn mountain slope studded with Damara mil bush. The pair were only 50 metres away, browsing on *Euphorbia virosa*, a thorny desert shrub. Blythe explained that the plant is highly toxic to other animals, and yet the desert rhino manage to thrive on it. This is thought to be a special desert adaptation in an area where vegetation is sparse.

The calf was already browsing at six weeks of age. It remained close to its mother, and nudged her for milk at least 15 times a day. Calves are weaned at two and a half to three years, shortly before the next calf is born.

Although Operation Bicornis was severely criticised by some conservationists, Blythe Loutit believes it has been extremely successful, and has achieved more than its initiators had hoped for. It was not a decision taken lightly. The programme was sparked off by a spate of poaching in February and March of 1989, when non-Damara poachers moved into Damaraland, and with local support

poached five rhino. The assistance of Louis Geldenhuys and Pete Morkel of Namibia's efficient game-capture unit was arranged, and an unspecified number of rhino were de-horned. Since the de-horning, not a single rhino has been poached in Damaraland. Blythe says, "Poachers have been back into the area making enquiries from local tribesmen, but they were told that the rhino had been de-horned, and the poachers withdrew."

Some safari operators were particularly critical of the de-horning, anticipating that it would discourage game watchers. This has not happened, however, and tourists are more keen to see the animals than ever before.

The first calf has been born, but there is still no answer as to what effect, if any, the de-horning has had on rhino breeding. In one area a bull and a cow were de-horned at the same time, but as yet there has been no evidence, one way or the other, that the mating process has been affected.

More good news is imminent. A second de-horned cow is gravid, and at the time of writing was due to give birth.

C. Pauw,  
4 Tweed Road,  
7700 Newlands

# Renosterkoei in kontroversiële program blyk bekwame ma te wees

**D**ie geboorte van die eerste renosterkalfie in Namibië vir 'n renosterkoei was onthoring is, het groot opgewondenheid ontketen onder natuurbewustes. In Damaraland het ons ons aangesluit by Blythe Loutit, die stigter van die Reddie-Renoster-Fonds, om te voet die pasgebore kalfie op te spoor.

Ons het op hulle afgekom op 'n rotsbesaaide berghang waar die paar niksvermoedend aan die wei was. Die kalfie vreet reeds bosse op ses weke, maar bly gedurig baie na aan sy ma, aan wie hy sowat vyftien keer per dag drink. 'n Renosterkalf word op tussen twee en 'n half en drie jaar gespeen net voor die volgende kalf gebore word. Renosters het meesal 'n kalfie by hulle en in Damaraland is hulle veral gelukkig omdat al die koeie kalwers het.

Operasie Bicornis waartydens renosters onthoring en verplaas is, het sterk kritiek onder sekere natuurbewustes uitgelok. Blythe Loutit sê egter dat die hele operasie ongehooflik geslaag was en selfs meer bereik is as wat aanvanklik verwag is. Daar is op die operasie besluit na 'n vlag van wilddiefstal in Damaraland in Februarie/Maart 1989 toe wild-

diewe van buite inbeweeg het en met plaaslike hulp vyf renosters platgetrek het. Die hulp van Louis Geldenhuys en 'n veearts, dr Pete Morkel, van Namibië se uitblyker-wildvangspan is ingeroep om die diere te onthoring. Sedertdien is nie 'n enkele renoster in Damaraland deur wild-diewe geskiet nie.

Blythe sê wilddieuwe wat weer terugkeer na die gebied, moes by die plaaslike inwoners hoor dat die renosters onthoring is en het toe be-

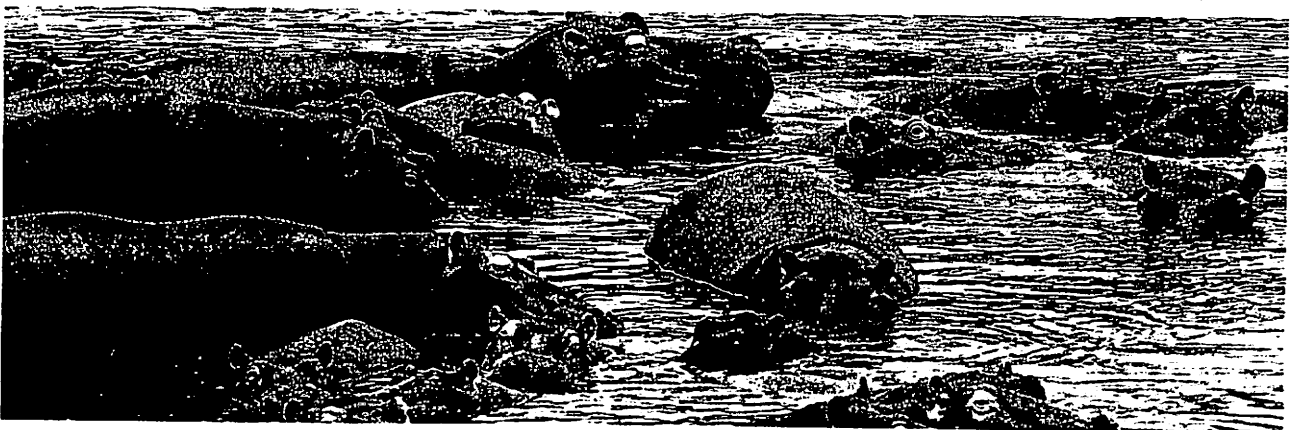
sluit om die aftog te blaas.

Sommige safari-leiers was erg ontsteld oor die onthoring, en het gemeen dat dit wildkykers sou ontmoedig. Dit het nooit gebeur nie. Intendeel, besoekers stel nou eers belang in die wel en weë van die renoster.

En watter beter bewys dat die vind- ingryke Operasie Bicornis geslaag het, as die nuus dat 'n tweede renosterkalfie van 'n ma sonder horings binnekort gebore gaan word. ■



## WHERE BETTER FOR YOUR NEXT THINK TANK?



*When you need to think, think big. Hold your conference where the wide open spaces free your mind. Where the presence of the untame will help your ideas go wild. Hold them at Kwa Maritane, just two hours' drive from Johannesburg, a half hour by plane – and eight minutes away from Sun City.*

*Kwa Maritane offers you the choice of three sophisticated conference centres. The Rhino, Cheetah and Hippo Rooms which hold up to 80, 30 and 15 people respectively.*

*And we can supply all the most up-to-date equipment you may need.*

*Accommodation's luxurious, catering is excellent, leisure facilities outstanding. Here the tensions unwind, the creative juices flow.*

*Here's the most natural place on earth to hold your conferences.*

*Kwa Maritane.*

*Kwa Maritane*  
AFTER KWA MARITANE, EVERYTHING'S TAME.  
Phone now for our fact kit.  
(014651) 21821/35 or (011) 803-6714