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GETTING THE RHINO
BY THE HORN

IDEAL VENUE FOR
FAMILY HOLIDAYS

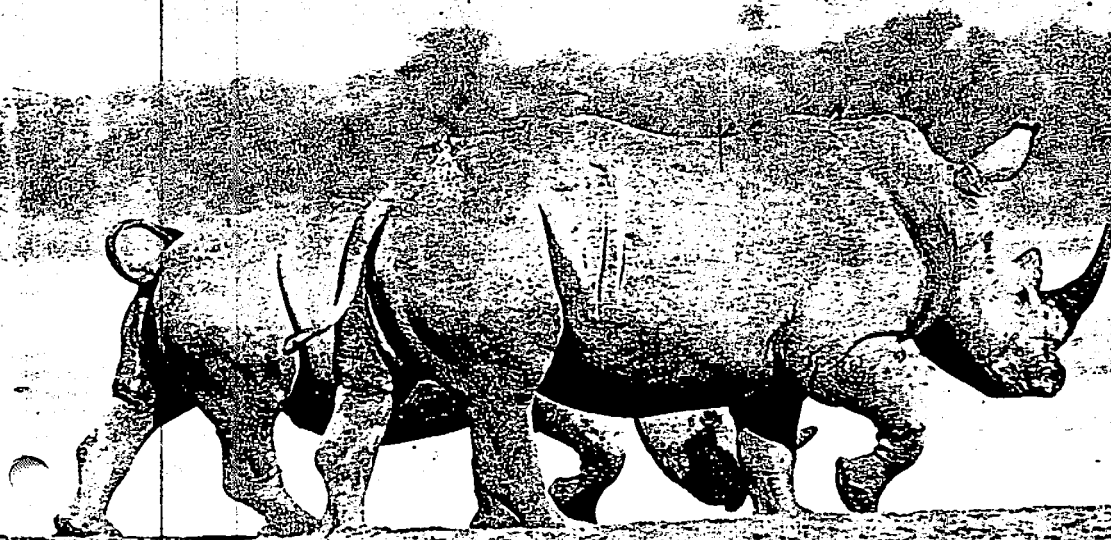
NEW JERSEY
GAMING



THE

RHINO

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AS A GUIDE FOR
CONSERVING RHINOS



Rhino on the run.

In the Linkwasha wilderness area of Hwange National Park, a helicopter circles and swoops in to land between the trees. A team of men jump from the chopper and rush over to an unconscious rhino lying nearby. While some of the team apply thermometers and stethoscopes to the animal, others begin notching and tagging its ears. Suddenly an ear splitting racket breaks the quiet, the team leader wielding a chainsaw begins to cut through the rhinos horn.

This bizarre scene was repeated frequently through August and September of last year as part of an exciting pilot programme, in Zimbabwe's war against international rhino poaching — dehorning.

The plight of Africa's rhinos over the past twenty years has been a much published, but tragic story. Of an estimated 65 000 Black Rhino in Africa in 1971, Zimbabwe's estimated 1 500-2 000 constitutes nearly two thirds of the total that survives today.

The relentless illegal slaughter of

rhino to satisfy the demand in the Yemen for dagger handles and the Far East for pharmaceutical products began in earnest in Zimbabwe in 1984.

At that time, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife initiated Operation Stronghold, a paramilitary operation with orders to shoot to kill. This operation has developed into a war that according to the Chief Warden Glen Tatham has claimed the lives of 145 poachers and 4 National Parks men to date. However during the same time there have been at least 800 incursions by armed poachers into Zimbabwe and at least 959 rhino are known to have been poached.

This war has primarily been fought in the Zambezi Valley along Zimbabwe's northern border, which is the stronghold of the Black Rhino. However during the past 18 months international poachers have begun killing White Rhino in Hwange National Park, one of Zimbabwe's largest population of White Rhino.

Despite some success against these poachers by the Game Scouts

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of the Department's anti-poaching patrols, a proposal from the Department's Branch of Terrestrial Ecology Assistant Director Rowan Martin received approval from the Minister of Environment and Tourism in April 1991, to dehorn the White Rhino of Hwange and Kazuma National Parks.

The technique hinges on the fact that the horn is not actually a true horn, but is made up of highly compacted hair-like fibres. Dehorning a rhino has been likened by National Parks veterinarian Dr Mike Kock to cutting fingernails. Further rhino dehorning is not a permanent disfigurement, as the horn continues to grow. We know that the Namibian Black Rhino regrows at 6-9 cm per annum.

This tactic has been tested in Namibia, where a successful programme to dehorn the rare desert Black Rhino began in 1989. According to Namibian conservation authorities not only has there been a significant decline in poaching, but also initial indications are that the rhinos are

unaffected by the loss of their horns.

The Zimbabwean programme began in August 1991. As well as Dr Mike Kock the team leader, another veterinarian from the Department of Veterinary Services Wildlife Unit assigned to the team was Dr Chris Foggin. The National Parks pilot Albert Paradzai and Warden Frank Potts both from Hwange Main Camp assisted. The fifth team member was an American biologist Janet Rachlow attached to the Department, whose study project is to monitor the effects of dehorning on the rhino.

Within a short time a successful modus operandi was developed. This involves the spotter plane getting airborne just after first light. After locating rhino, the helicopter back at base camp is radioed and the team guided onto the rhino. Dr Kock armed with a compressed gas gun then darts the rhino with a "cocktail" of a narcotic and sedative drugs.

Once the rhino is darted it is followed until it goes down from the effects of the drug, usually in less than five minutes. The

helicopter then lands nearby and the team then swings into action on the ground.

Dr Foggin then begins monitoring the animals vital functions: body temperature, heartbeat and respiration. Blood samples are taken for later analysis to study the animal's health, disease and stress levels. While this is going on, the animal's ears are tagged and notched to enable later field

identification of individuals.

In the meantime, Dr Kock gets on with the task of removing the horn. A small chainsaw performs the task in a few minutes. Namibians used hand saw which took up to an hour. Both horns are cut off as close to the base as possible, without damaging living tissues. The stump is then trimmed and rounded off to decrease the visible



Dr Kock chainsaws the rhino horn.



profile to poachers even. Lastly the stump is covered in Stockholm tar to seal its surface.

Once all tasks are completed an antidote is administered intravenously to reverse the effects of the immobilising narcotic. A few minutes later the rhino clambers to its feet and runs off. The average "down time" according to Dr Kock is less than 30 minutes, the record on this operation from "dart-in" to "rhino-up" is an incredible 17 minutes.

By the end of the operation 71 White Rhino were dehorned, about 70% of Hwange's White Rhino. Unfortunately extensive searching in the Kazuma Pan National Park failed to locate any rhino.

For 1992 a proportion of the dehorned rhino will be immobilised to examine horn regrowth and to attach radio transmitters for monitoring movements. Also any White Rhino missed during this year's operations will be dehorned then.

According to Hwange's Senior Ecologist Mike Jones, this initial operation appears to have been a success. However only time will tell whether rhino poachers will continue to kill these animals. But the general consensus within the department is that the rhino will be unattractive to poachers.

"SILLY"

What about other considerations. The general feeling at the tourist camps in this area is that the rhino according to one tour guide "do look a little silly". But most agree that the situation has reached the stage where these preferences are secondary to the larger issue of species extinctions. The other big questions about the effects of dehorning, such as the defense of territories by bulls and protection of calves by cows, will also be answered in time by the National Parks monitoring programme.

But the story does not end here. The operation netted nearly 250 kg of rhino horn for Zimbabwe. The longest horn was a meter long and the heaviest weighed 7.5 kg. The present illegal market price for horn is around US\$2 000 per kg. The horns are stored in the National Parks vaults in Harare.

Sixteen years ago CITES (The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) placed a complete ban on the trade in rhino



The rhino horns are stored in Harare.

horn by placing rhino both Black and White on Appendix 1 listing.

However in that same time period horns from possibly as many as 50 000 rhino have moved illegally from Africa to the markets in Asia. It would appear that the rhinos status as Appendix 1 has failed dismally to stem the illegal hunting and trade in rhino horn.

Many conservationists, particularly in Southern Africa, feel that if Zimbabwe's huge stock of legal horn were sold it could be of benefit to the surviving rhino populations.

If Zimbabwe were allowed by CITES to sell these horns a twin effect would result. Firstly, demand would drop and hence prices, poaching would become less profitable and so decrease. Secondly, the huge revenue generated could feasibly be used to improve impoverished conservation agency budgets, and hence the conservation and management of surviving rhino populations would be enhanced.

At the previous CITES meeting in Lausanne in 1990 Southern African conservationists were squared off against East African and Western agencies determined to place a moratorium on elephant ivory. Though this argument will continue at the next CITES

meeting in Tokyo in March 1992, the other hot topic from Southern Africa will be opening the trade in legal rhino horn proposed by Zimbabwe.

When crocodiles were endangered 20 years ago Zimbabwe embarked on a vigorous programme of crocodile farming, that not only restored the species back to abundance in this country, but also resulted in a sustainable multi-million dollar industry. Mr Rowan Martin says "It seems that the successful conservation lessons of the past are ignored with each new species crisis".

Zimbabwe has always resisted exploitation of rhino, but a long standing world trade ban on rhino horn has had little noticeable effect on the slaughter of rhino and according to Rowan Martin "they appear to be economically valuable only to a poacher". "The time has come to take a good hard look at the options for conserving rhino" says Rowan Martin. While dehorning may provide a temporary respite for Hwange's White Rhino, the undeniable economic value of rhino horn might well produce the revenue needed to conserve rhino numbers while they are still significant.