

Team tagging in Etosha National Park

Etosha is magnificent. It's vast. It's beautiful. It's one of Africa's greatest National Parks. It's one of the jewels of Namibia. It's stuffed full of elephants, lions, leopards, honey badgers, wild cats, chameleons, wart-hogs, monitor lizards. All life is there, in abundance. And it's home to a large population of happy and well-looked-after rhinos.

Kenneth Donaldson

Pierre du Preez, Namibia's Rhino Coordinator and Chief Scientist in the Ministry of the Environment and Tourism had kindly invited us to come and see the team tagging rhinos. This was an extraordinary offer; privileged access to the Park and a chance to observe an aspect of rhino husbandry that few get to witness.

Now, we'd seen TV documentaries about rhino 'immobilisations' as these ops are usually called. But what we'd never appreciated is just how tight the teamwork has to be. Once the rhino's darted, it's a race to minimise downtime, finish the job in hand (in this case inserting telemetry equipment into the horn), and simultaneously take all sorts of vital statistics, DNA samples and other measurements. So here's the step-by-step guide:

Now, it happened that in Etosha, an international team of three vets were doing research on how best to lay out the unconscious animal, in terms of its breathing patterns. So if the vet overseeing the darting says it's OK to go on, then the three research vets get to work



8

Note how the vets hog the shade!

ALL IMAGES SRI UNLESS NOTED

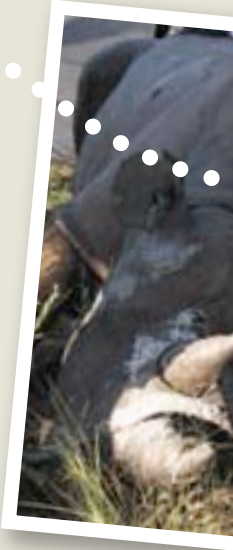


One grumpy rhino!!

1



First, find your rhino. This usually involves a ground crew of trackers and a spotter plane. The vet sits pretty in the helicopter and darts the animal from the air. Once the dart is in, the chase is truly on, with ground crew and chopper converging on the drugged animal



7



By now the hole in the horn is ready for the transmitter, which is glued in place



9



2

Once you have found the unconscious beast, get eye-cover on (or the sun may blind it as it sleeps) check how it's fallen, get oxygen ready, and the ballet really begins

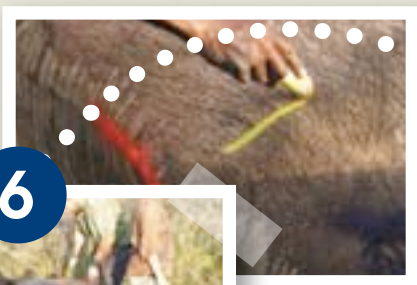


3

Ear plugs in (the rhino), drill out the horn

Hose the animal down and get it some shade. The chopper pilot doubles as broly man. Never waste a skilled resource!

4



6

Paint its back, so you know not to

dart it again... Collect some tail hairs and some ticks for analysis (a ticklish job and no mistake)... Notch the ears and take pictures!



5

All the while, the vet is monitoring vitals. In this case, there are three vets crammed in there (don't ask!) while the animal is being measured: length, girth, horn size, sex, age, you name it

We did between five and seven rhinos each day, getting up at 5am, first animal down around 7am, last animal at around noon, after which it was dangerously hot for the animal to be stressed. Hell of a morning's work. An experience we will never, ever forget.

Our lasting impression is of the utter professionalism of these people. Everyone knows the routine inside out, knows their job, doesn't stand in others' way, gets the whole thing done in double-quick time. It's very much like an episode of ER, but outdoors, with rhinos, and a much better-looking cast!

Grants

Our deep thanks to Opel Zoo in Kronfeld, which has supported MET since the EAZA Rhino Campaign 2005-06 with annual grants of €5,000. This year's funding has been used to buy metal detectors (to be used at crime scenes) and a nifty little anti-poaching device we are keeping quiet about just now...

Everyone bar the vet clears the site. The chopper stands by. The vet gives the wake-up drug and runs for the chopper.

