

# Thandi's Story: An account of a hand-raised black rhino's journey and close encounter between pachyderm and human

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Black Rhino Monitoring Project in South African National Parks Sponsored by the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation

Thandi arrived unexpectedly; her mother Sasha gave birth to her in the holding bomas after relocation from Namibia. Thandi got separated during the night and was found cold and alone at first light. Concerned that Sasha may reject Thandi, she was airlifted by helicopter to a rehabilitation centre.

We visited Thandi every month to photograph and monitor her progress. It was a unique opportunity to study this rare and endangered animal at such close quarters. After nine months Thandi was moved back to the bomas where she had been born because she had chronic diarrhoea and needed to start ingesting natural browse. We were committed to giving Thandi the best opportunity to make it in the wild. At two years she was moved to a 400 ha fenced-in camp to begin breaking the human contact.

A very young female, Mia, arrived and Thandi immediately took to her and they formed a close bond. A year later they were moved to an arid park 500 km to the north. We intensively monitored Thandi and Mia's introduction to the harsh environment until we were sure they could find water, adapt to the new browse and meet the resident rhinos.

After brief stays in a boma, then a fenced camp, the gate was opened late one afternoon and they walked out. This was a critical time, two years earlier a young female died shortly after a veld-to-veld introduction—Thandi had always had a concrete reservoir from which to drink, so we were concerned about her ability to find water in such a vast arid land when she was only five-and-a-half and Mia three years old. As dark fell, we left them to explore. Before sunrise we found them at the top of a small flat-top hill (koppie), and that night they drank water outside the camp.

On the third morning they were on top of a much higher hill with a steep slope, It was getting hot on the treeless koppie and there was not a cloud in the sky. We established that they had not found any water since the previous morning. Up on top of the koppie the rhinos stood up, looked down the steep slope. They must have been thirsty and did not know where to find water—a very stressful situation.

The field rangers knew of an easier way down. We had 20-litre containers of water and two troughs. We believed that intervention was essential—what was the point of all the effort by so many people over the last 5½ years if we left them to die like the young female in 2006. It was 38° C at midday when the field rangers called us for help; Thandi and Mia would not move any further and they thought that she may respond to Sue.

Both rhinos were exhausted, I talked softly to Thandi and hoped that she would follow me down the hill. I tried several times but she always turned and walked back to Mia. Finally, I remembered correct rhino greeting etiquette and instead of turning and walking away from Thandi, I stood still and held my hand out as she walked hesitantly up to me. Thandi smelt my hand, as she had done many times during her stay in the bomas. Slowly her prehensile lip moved up my arm, smelling and greeting and I talked non-stop. Soon her soft nostrils were touching my cheek and I breathed gently into her face. I cannot begin to describe the astonishing feeling of the trust Thandi had given to me. But again, she returned to Mia.

We carried the water and troughs back up the hill. Both drank thirstily and now knew the troughs contained water. Thandi followed us, as did Mia reluctantly, squeaking constantly, as they came down the hill. The rest of the water was ready as the rhinos reached the bottom of the hill. They were now close to a thicket and stayed to rest and recover.

That was three years ago and Thandi is now the proud mother of a female calf.

To put Thandi's story in context, we have been monitoring sub-populations of *Diceros bicornis bicornis* in four South African National Parks for ten years, with generous sponsorship from the David Shepherd Wild-

life Foundation (DSWF). Recently, with the massive escalation of poaching by unscrupulous gangs in South Africa, we initiated a review and implementation of security and protection plans in each area and received emergency grants from DSWF.



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Thandi (3 weeks) and Sue, 9 June 2003.



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Sue, Thandi and Mia walking down the hill, 23 November 2008.



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Thandi and calf, 7 February 2011.