

Wildcare

THE STORY OF KAREN TRENDLER AND HER
AFRICAN WILDLIFE REHABILITATION CENTRE

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Introduction

Wildcare Africa Animal Rehabilitation Centre, Kameeldrift:

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With firm but gentle hands and palpably suppressed concern, four members of the Wildcare animal rehabilitation team work methodically and quietly, examining bloody wounds torn deep into a Mountain Reedbuck's grey flanks and chest. The young wild animal, not much taller than a retriever dog, lies still and silent on the straw-covered floor in the dark interior of a game-capture crate, patient and seemingly uncomprehending of the urgent attempts to save his life. An old woollen blanket has been draped over the animal to keep him warm, and overhead a medical drip dangles from a length of old twisted fencing wire, the clear liquid contents of the bag occasionally sparkling in the torchlight. Hot water bottles have been placed under the blanket, and a cloth shields the injured animal's eyes in an attempt to keep him calm. Caring fingers probe the surface of the antelope's dark brown velvety ears, searching for a suitable vein to allow the insertion of the drip needle, which will deliver a rehydrating electrolyte solution, painkillers and steroids. Karen Trendler, the 42-year-old founder of Wildcare, drawing on her vast experience in wild animal rehabilitation and rescue, selects a vein, but warns in a calm voice to her colleagues, "His blood pressure is too low, the veins are collapsing – we're going to struggle to get a needle in anywhere. He's on a knife-edge." The knife-edge between life and death. Her colleague Mike Jamieson, feigning robust cheerfulness, teases his colleague about not trying hard enough, and runs his large work-roughened hands over the usually alert, but now motionless, ears and slowly massages a section of vein until it is ready to accept the needle. Using a disposable plastic razor, he clears the area of

hair and deftly inserts the needle. Another colleague, Carin Harvey, opens the drip, and the medical care begins on "Bokkie" – as the reedbuck has, a little unimaginatively but perhaps as a barrier to emotional attachment been named. After removing the blanket and listening to the reedbuck's lungs and heart with a stethoscope and examining the wounds again, Karen quickly suggests a course of action. "He's very stressed, his blood pressure's low and he's not breathing well. I think we should cover the wounds, keep him warm and keep the drip going – we're going to have to watch him all night," she says. "It's possible that a lung and the main body cavity have been pierced. Time will tell."

In the torchlight, the whole procedure has been conducted by torchlight because few African animal rehabilitation centres have the resources to afford formal operating theatres, the team fixes sterile swabs the size of hand towels over the wounds. Carin, who has scurried back to the medical store to find a space blanket, a thin foil cover designed to help patients retain body warmth, returns, but in the dark walks slap-bang into the steel tow-bar of a trailer and doubles up, initially in pain, but then in laughter. Everyone joins in, not laughing at her discomfort but with her, the small accident a welcome release of the tension that has built during the evening. Once the dressings, space blanket, and woollen blanket are all placed to the team's satisfaction and the drip has been checked again, Mike slides the heavy crate door shut. Chris Pears, Wildcare's administration manager, who all night has been helping his colleagues by holding torches, cutting sticking plaster and offering support, senses everyone's tiredness and offers, "Coffee anyone?" It's shortly before midnight and autumn's chill is settling in on the

Opposite page: Kapela, gaining in confidence, picks up pace



Highveld while far away the highway traffic hisses by, drivers and passengers oblivious to the wildlife drama being played out in the darkened farmyard. Over coffee in the brightly-lit kitchen, the team discusses Bokkie's chances of survival. Earlier in the day he was at death's door after being savaged by domestic dogs at a poorly-fenced nature reserve near Pretoria – he still is close to death.

"Reedbuck are extremely prone to stress, and his wounds are so bad I don't know if he's going to make it," Karen says summing up the situation to her colleagues while sipping her coffee and checking on an orphaned baby baboon, asleep in its basket in a corner of the open plan kitchen/lounge. The tiny baboon is apparently unmindful of the loud cheeping of its neighbour, an incessantly hungry baby African Penguin temporarily housed in a warmed plastic crate.

"So how long do we give Bokkie?" she asks her colleagues. Everybody agrees. "Monitor him throughout the night and then decide."

The real issue they are talking about is at what point do they decide to stop treating Bokkie and euthanase him. "It's not fair to the animal to carry on with treatment if we know he won't make it," Karen tells me, the writer. "We can't let our emotions add to his suffering. If we know we have a fair chance of getting him healthy and putting him back into the bush, we will do our damndest to help him. If not, it's better to end his suffering."

Bokkie has to be checked hourly. So does Kapela, the 24 kilogram Black Rhino born prematurely and abandoned by his mother. The baby Sable Antelope also needs feeding throughout the night. And Stevie and Makweti, the young White Rhinos, need to be monitored too because they have both got runny tummies. Tackling the first shift, Karen, her

face drawn and pale from tension and lack of sleep, announces sometime after midnight "He's looking more alive – Bokkie is holding on."

At 2 a.m. Carin gets up, dresses in a light jacket and tracksuit pyjama pants decorated with drawings of smiling cows, and begins preparing a milk powder formula for the sable, one of south Africa's most threatened antelope. Out in the various pens and cages most of the animals seem to be asleep save for an ostrich calling from its grassy paddock behind the house, its booming baritone call drifting eerily across the still yard. Walking out to Bokkie's crate Carin carefully negotiates the trailer – her shin is still sore – and cautiously opens the door. "You never know what to expect," she says quietly, but really meaning "I hope he's not dead".

It turns out that Bokkie is doing well. He's moved and is lying in a corner but clearly doesn't like the rustling sound the space blanket makes when he moves. Carin removes it, and then checks the drip, finds that it is low, and puts up another one. Bokkie has taken another very small and very shaky step away from death. Nearby in a small room Kapela is fast asleep under the infrared lamp rigged above his bed, a foam mattress covered with a blanket. Born prematurely and abandoned by his mother after the enormous stress of a game capture operation, the little rhino has a long road ahead of him if he is ever to be released to live a natural life in the bush again. Across the yard inside their boma made of thick wooden poles and steel cables, Stevie and Makweti have woken up, their dark bulky bodies partially visible in silhouette as they shuffle and shift under the red glow of the infrared heating lamp. "Please check Makweti and Stevie. They were awake." Carin's log entry reads.

After feeding the sable calf she heads back to bed to grab a little bit of



Lesser Bushbaby

sleep for the 05h00 series of checks and feeds. Soon dawn breaks, and the neighbourhood slowly comes to life, but for the animals and staff at Wildcare, the previous day's work has already seamlessly become part of the new day's tasks. Mandy Strachan marches by carrying two heavy buckets, and in doing so unintentionally creates a brief vignette portraying the unusual tasks that are routine at the centre. Each bucket holds four two-litre bottles full of warm milk (wild animals are not fond of cold milk) that are the morning feed for two more rhinos – Feisty and Wrinkle. As she walks by Boo, the baby baboon squawks a protest, clearly looking for attention. Mandy stops, checks that Boo's baby's feeding bottle is full and her nappy is clean, chatting to the tiny animal all the while, and then carries on with her load of milk towards the



Cheetahs

rhinos' boma. To many people in the world the scene would appear very unusual, but to Mandy it's the most normal thing in the world.

"Animals are my life," she says simply.

Across at another boma where some of the older rhinos are housed, Alfred Molekena is busy with his daily chores. Alfred has been with Wildcare since the first days back in 1987.

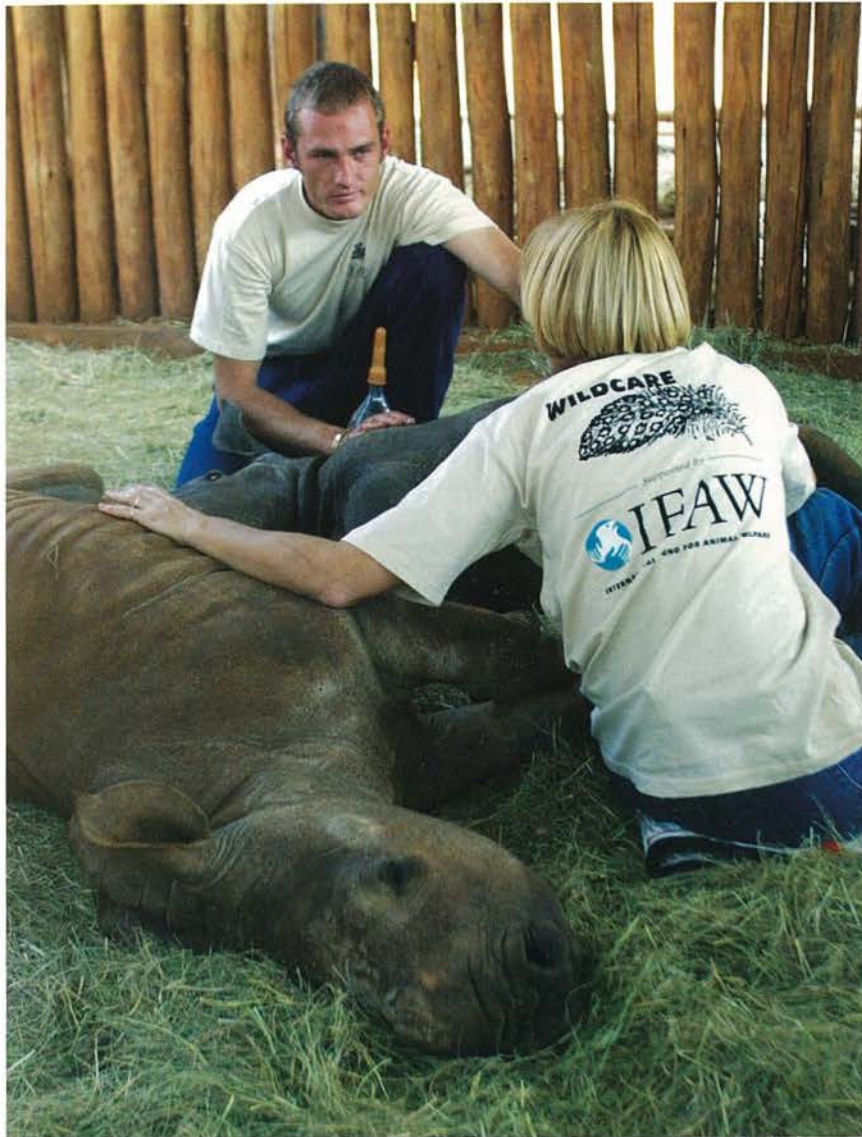
"I used to work in the garden but slowly I got involved with taking care of some of these animals. I still tell people I work in the garden because most wouldn't believe me if I told them about the rhinos," Alfred says with a laugh. "In the beginning I had never seen a rhino before, and when the first one arrived here we were all rather scared of the things. I remember throwing lucerne over the fence because I had no idea what they might do." Things have come along way since those days. Today, 6 May 2003, there are a total of 203 individual animals ranging across 34 species that the staff will have to feed, clean and in some cases medicate during the day.

The list is remarkable: White Rhino; Black Rhino; Leopard; Eland; Zebra; Sable Antelope; Roan Antelope; Black Impala; Springbok; Serval; African Wild Cat; Aardwolf; Black-backed Jackal; Porcupine; Banded Mongoose; Suricate (Meerkat); Small-spotted Genet; Striped Polecat; Sudanese Fox; Vervet Monkey; Chacma Baboon (the only baboon that occurs in South Africa); Lesser Bushbaby; Tree Squirrel; Leopard Tortoise; Hinged Tortoise; Angulate Tortoise; Ostrich; Lesser Kestrel; Barn Owl; Marsh Owl; Spotted Eagle Owl; African Penguin; Red-eyed Dove; Flap-neck Chamaeleon.

There is a sad story behind every one of the astounding 70 000 cases that have been treated at the centre since opening in 1987. In an ideal

world, Wildcare would have no reason to exist but the modern world is a dangerous place for wild animals. Over and above the physical threats posed by fast-moving cars, electric fences, the game capture industry and other dangers, wild animals are becoming increasingly stressed by a lack of space and the pressure created by an ever-growing human population. And, as with humans, these stresses and pressures can themselves impact negatively on wild animals' health by compromising their immune systems making them vulnerable to disease, disrupting their breeding patterns and forcing other changes in habits which can be detrimental to their long-term well-being.

As a rehabilitation centre, Wildcare only deals with injured, sick or orphaned wild animals, and nearly every case is as a consequence, direct or indirect, of human activity. Wildcare's first prize is to enable as many of the patients as possible to one day live as wild animals in their natural habitat again. Some may only get second prize and live as sheltered placement wild animals – they will only live a sample of their previous lives. Many others will get no prize at all – their destiny is merely death. Bokkie ended up with a first prize. On 26 May, the healthy antelope was released at the 540 hectare Klipkop Nature Reserve, an important conservation area of highveld grasses and scattered trees called Bankenveld. When his release crate was opened, he was at first reluctant to leave but soon trotted off into the long yellow grass, looked back once, and carried on up the rocky hillside. Bokkie was no more, but *Redunca fulvorufula* – a wild Mountain Reedbuck – was back where he belonged, and that's what the long night of 6 May was all about.



Wildcare staff do their best to replace the company of adult rhinos



Carin running with Kapela

In the beginning

“Damned women,” the old style ‘biltong, tobacco and rifles’ conservation officer cursed, his worst fears confirmed. There they were, these meddling women, looking after injured and orphaned birds and small mammals, and then releasing the creatures into the wild when they were healthy again. What was the world coming to? In his opinion, and that of the vast majority of men who ran conservation in South Africa, birds or other animals, not strong enough to survive on their own, should simply have their necks wrung or be left to die as part of nature’s cycle of life and death. One of the targets of his scorn was Karen Trendler, enthusiastically beginning a new job with the then Transvaal Directorate of Nature Conservation in Pretoria. Back in the mid-1980s, South Africa was a very different place to the country we know today. The National Party government was doing everything in its power to crush political dissent, and Nelson Mandela and other leaders were still in jail with evidently little prospect of ever being released. International sanctions, imposed to try and accelerate the collapse of apartheid, were taking their toll on the economy, and most in authority had adopted a resentful ‘siege’ mentality towards the world. The idea of change was not looked upon kindly, in fact the machinery of the state was geared to stifle change, and the civil servants who ran the government’s conservation departments were almost exclusively white men, many with military experience, who held conservative views of how things should be done. The wildlife management ethos within most South African conservation departments had long been loosely based on the Darwinian concept of ‘the survival of the fittest’. These wildlife administrators believed the weak had no place in nature, and that injured or orphaned animals should merely be left to nature’s fate.

Secondly many of those charged with decision-making viewed themselves as ‘the manne’ – ‘the men’ – overtly macho, tough and, perhaps most importantly, they made it clear they were in charge, and disliked having their beliefs challenged. And if that challenge came from a woman, ‘damned woman’ was the polite response. The idea that women could play active, and even groundbreaking, roles in conservation was a concept to be distrusted and discouraged. They – women were always referred to as ‘they’ – were employed in the administration department, could work as receptionists and even radio operators. That was fine – nice, safe ‘woman’s work’. Some women even turned out to be good natural scientists but this was regarded as unusual because, in the main, everyone knew that wildlife management was the



Karen in the early days with a hippo

domain of the male. It also needs to be remembered that while there was much discrimination against white women, it was nowhere near as severe as the total exclusion of black people from any senior jobs.

So when Karen arrived at the Directorate of Nature Conservation with its drab linoleum-coated floors, grey steel filing cabinets and endless khaki clothing, she stood out like a pink and blue springbok. Young, female, English speaking, and an active supporter of opposition politics, she fell way short of the accepted profile of a wildlife officer entrusted with the care of the 'harsh paradise' of South African wildlife. And, one never knew, as a girl she might even cry if some animal had to be shot or if by chance the weekend's *potjiekos* contained something cute like a warthog.

"It was a tricky time. We were accepted but so long as we knew our place," she recalls. "It was very much a man's world where macho views were the norm and any compassion was viewed as weakness." But Karen knew how to look after herself. She and her husband Roy, who holds an honours degree in zoology, had married in 1981 and promptly moved to the hot mopane woodland of the Tuli Block in south eastern Botswana where they managed a vast area of game-rich land.

The Tuli Block boasted a large population of notoriously aggressive elephants who remembered full well that many humans shot at them, and in return they regularly charged invaders on their turf. There were lions and the other usual potentially dangerous hazards of the bush but these were the least of the challenges.

It was the transitional human population that posed the greater threat. The area was a well-known conduit for armed African National Congress (ANC) guerrillas heading south in their war against the South African



Karen in Nyani's sleeping quarters



A baby baboon

government, activity that attracted the attention of the South African Defence Force. Additionally in nearby Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe's 5th Brigade were engaged in what became known as the 'Gukuruhundi', the systematic murder of more than 15 000 people in a campaign aimed at crushing political dissent. The massacres sparked a flow of refugees and armed militia across the border creating a very tense and unstable situation. Roy and Karen carried firearms at all times – game, politics and challenge were all part of daily life. In between elephant charges and wondering about the regular gunshots in the night, Karen studied part-time for her National Diploma in Nature Conservation, and when the time came to leave the Tuli she landed her job in the liaison section at 'Flora and Fauna,' as the Division was known.

Life at the Division was relatively easy, politics excluded, and Karen's official duties seldom required her to deal with anything remotely approaching a real, live animal. Talk around the office covered the usual topics – elephants in the Kruger National Park, enforcing wildlife regulations, funding and the usual gossip about people and life. But as one year stretched into the next a plot, unwritten and to begin with unspoken, was slowly taking shape. Most days passed by filled with routine duties, but quietly and inexorably Karen and a friend in the department, photographer Janet Matthews, were indulging in subversive activities. They began looking after the occasional abandoned bird or injured small mammal.

"At first one or two people passed birds our way, but as word spread the flow began to increase," Karen says. "Our office was at the end of a corridor, so we tried to keep things quiet in the hope that no one would notice."

"Our first patient was a baby Burchell's Coucal that had fallen out of its nest. We raised it in the drawer of a filing cabinet," she remembers. A baby Burchell's Coucal grows into a large, handsome 40 cm-long coppery coloured predator with a black head and cream under-parts, not an easy bird to hide, but the plotters were undeterred. "We kept birds in shoeboxes, bushbabies in the bathroom and got involved in all sorts of clandestine operations to save small creatures. All sorts of sick animals found their way down to us."

"A couple of the guys were big softies at heart, and after we raised the coucal they secretly began bringing us orphans and injured animals," Karen says with a smile. "Soon it got a life of its own and the trickle of animals and birds increased to a flood."

Many people in the department had kept small animals as pets before. Mongooses, monkeys and snakes were all common pets, and out in the bush everyone had met people who had raised a lion or some other large animal, but the problem with Karen and Janet, as those in authority saw it, was that they wanted to formalise the practice and then later return the animals back into the wild. The old guard hated the idea but unintentionally the two women had stumbled across a niche market in the world of South African wildlife.

"Karen was going through a very steep learning curve in a society that was not going to help. They, Karen and Janet, were seen as absolute bunny huggers who were wasting their time," Roy Trendler says. "The prevailing attitude was that there was no space for women in 'real' conservation and this simply confirmed it."

The public, often desperately seeking help in dealing with injured or orphaned wild animals, were generally considered an irritation at Nature

Conservation and were fobbed off as quickly as possible. Many in the department were contemptuous of the concept of animal rehabilitation, and virulently opposed to emotions playing any role in conservation. Injured or orphaned animals were usually left to die or in some instances were put down. Those few people within the department who did acknowledge the need for animal rehabilitation argued that other issues took priority, and that if it were to be accepted at all it should be handled by the private sector.

And to make matters worse, private vets were often reluctant to treat wild animals or lacked adequate facilities. Most zoos were already overloaded with their own work.

Only one formal animal rehabilitation centre existed in South Africa in those days and that was 500 kilometres away in Durban. CROW – the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife – had been founded by Izolde Mallet in 1979 but was clearly too far away to deal with animals in the Transvaal.

Soon the process gathered such momentum that it really had a life of its own. Karen, Roy, Janet, and some friends, veterinary surgeon Anthony Erasmus, Professor Johnny van der Walt and his wife Lia, discussed what should, and being painfully aware of their financial constraints, could be done. They all knew that given the prevailing view amongst those in Nature Conservation, the concept would not be welcomed. But they also knew there was an urgent need for a formal structure to look after indigenous animals in trouble.

“It was a time when life was cheap. There seemed to be so much wildlife, and most people in the Division could not see why anyone should spend time a money worrying about a few cases,” Karen says.

“They did not see the point in saving a few individuals, and understood that their job was looking after a species as a whole.”

“I was told on many occasions that I had no chance of making a rehabilitation centre work, that I’d fail and was simply wasting my time,” Karen recalls, laughing.

The ecology movement that had begun to grow in the United States of America and Europe in the 1970s took a long time to reach the then largely isolated South Africa.

Most people within South African conservation were unaware of the development of rehabilitation centres elsewhere, and few realised the growing need to find alternative solutions to the new pressures on wildlife.

“What they could not see was that most injured animals brought in to us were hurt because of human activity. It was not nature taking its course at all, but rather human interference that was causing the casualties,” Karen explains. “Birds that are injured after flying into power lines or antelope that are hit by cars are not suffering natural injuries.”

“The old guard were firm that nature had to take its course, and if that meant an injured animal dying, they argued that death was part of the reality of existence in the wild.”

“We thought differently and were determined to try and offer alternative solutions.”

So the plans to form a rehabilitation centre continued. A non-profit company had to be formed, permits acquired from Nature Conservation, and a fund-raising number registered. Not least of the difficulties was that a name had to be found. Choosing a name was tricky. It had to convey a message, as well as be short and to the point. Some of the options were even scarier than the toughest political opponents to the



Karen examining a young elephant

idea of establishing a rehabilitation centre. Someone, who for the good of their own reputation shall remain anonymous, came up with EAGLE – Every Animal Gets Loving Etention. Another option was HAWK – Healthy Animal Welfare Kooperasie! Fortunately ARC – the Animal Rehabilitation Centre was settled upon, and Wildcare’s predecessor was born. ARC’s doors opened at Kameeldrift some 14 km north-east of central Pretoria in June 1987. The site just happened to be the Trendlers’ home, and little did they realise that home would never be the same again. No one imagined then, and they certainly didn’t have time to sit and daydream, that Karen, ARC, and Wildcare would grow into a South African success story with a global reputation.



Karen working in her office



Alfred Molekena carrying lucerne for the older rhinos

The littlest big things – rhinos

In mid-June 2003, it seemed to those at Wildcare that former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell's pop song "It's raining men" had been rearranged to the somewhat more exotic, and possibly even dangerous, "It's raining rhinos". During the 12 weeks since the arrival of Makweti on 26 March, no fewer than seven rhinos, four white and three black, were admitted to the centre. The previous 16 years had seen 45 rhino patients. Three of the new arrivals had been abandoned by their mothers or injured during game capture operations, one had been gored by a male rhino, another had been abandoned after his mother fought with a bull, one orphaned after his mother had been killed by an elephant and yet another orphaned after his mother was killed by a rhino bull. There were now 18 rhinos in the bomas, the high care area and even a badly injured new arrival that had been accommodated in the room next door to Karen's office.

The deluge of arrivals was unusual and seemed to be a direct result of the growth in the legal trade of rhinos in recent years and the increase in the numbers of rhinos kept in relatively small areas. More rhinos are being traded than ever before, and during the 2003 winter game auctions held at various places in South Africa, more than 470 rhino were up for sale. Some were sold to tourism operations and others went to hunting ranches. Much of the land used for relocation is close to the minimum size for rhinos, and territorial bulls cramped for space take their toll fighting with other rhinos.

Kapela

Driving quickly through the dark northern Drakensberg mountains of Mpumalanga in the noisy 4x4, Karen and Mike were anxious, not

because of the road conditions but because they were rushing through the night to collect an unusual and very precious passenger – a tiny prematurely born Black Rhino.

About 13 hours earlier on 24 April 2003 vets from the vast Kruger National Park (KNP), which sprawls over 20 000 square kilometres, the same size as Israel or Lesotho, had called with an urgent request. "We've had a Black Rhino give birth prematurely in a game capture boma and the mother and calf are not interacting the way they should," SANP vet Peter Buss said. "If the mother refuses to accept the calf, can you help?"

Karen and the vets at SANP have a mutually respectful relationship built over years of dealing with wild animals together and she did not hesitate. "Of course, tell us when you need us."

The calf's mother was captured as part of an ambitious programme to restock the North Luangwa National Park in Zambia. It's very difficult to tell visually if a rhino is pregnant, had the rangers known the mother was, they would have left her alone. The stress of the game capture exercise, all fear, noise, strange smells and sometimes physical pain, had initiated the premature birth, and the mother was not coping with her new arrival. She had at first sniffed her tiny baby, which hardly stood shin-high to a human, but wandered away, disgruntled and disinterested. Rhinos have a complex bonding process that mother and calf need to initiate soon after birth if they are to relate to each other normally, but in this case the signs were not good. The vets and other staff were extremely anxious about the young male rhino's fate. The baby urgently needed his mother's milk and body warmth without which he would rapidly weaken and die. It was time for tricky decisions, and the

Opposite page: Mbali and Karen share a quite moment after their daily walk



vets decided to allow the mother some time to get used to the baby, hoping she would accept it. Sadly it soon became apparent that this was unlikely.

The stressed mother was in no mood for the calf, but the vets still held onto the faint hope that she would change her attitude within the eight-hour deadline they had decided was as long as they could wait before handing the calf over to Wildcare.

They knew that they could do nothing until their self-imposed deadline passed; interference would ruin any chance, no matter how slim, of the mother attempting to bond with the baby; and there was a real risk of physical danger to the baby if the powerful mother reacted badly and started lashing out.

A student was given the task of monitoring the grey calf's every action, but when it became clear the cause was lost, the student cuddled the rhino into a pile of blankets and tried to keep him warm and make him sleep while the vets made their emergency call to Karen.

"Come as soon as you can."

The call came at about six thirty in the evening while Karen was in the bath but she shot out of the comfortable warm water like a rocket.

"Every minute is important with such a frail animal and any time-wasting could cost him his life."

Earlier everyone had helped clear the decks and prepare for the anticipated patient, cleaning the small room in the building next to the Wildcare house that is used as a high-care clinic, first washing it down with soap and then a strong disinfectant and putting a clean foam mattress and blankets on the floor.

Chris spent most of the day stocking up on new blankets, bottles, teats



Karen exercising a very young Kapela

and other equipment essential to the care of the premature baby. Very young rhinos, which have not been fed naturally, are highly susceptible to infection because they have not had the benefit of colostrum, a component of the mother's milk which enables the animal to build up the gut biota that under normal circumstances fight bacteria. As usual in emergencies at Wildcare a quick assessment was made of the duty roster, and workload was reassigned to other staff members so that the centre would run smoothly while Karen and Mike were away on their rescue mission.

Carin and Chris would handle things with Roy on standby to offer advice if necessary.

Banyani, the five-month-old rhino that had arrived two weeks earlier after his mother had died at a game park in the Free State, was behaving himself health wise and all the other patients, the two sable calves excluded, seemed to be in relatively good shape. Banyani had shown some irritation at his new environment, grumpily chasing Carin one evening and forcing her to scramble over the boma poles, but the minor incident was nothing to worry about.

The interior of the battered 4x4 was washed with disinfectant and packed with milk powder, electrolyte solutions, feeding bottles, stethoscope, blankets and other kit needed for the emergency trip.

So the long trip through the night began, and at about quarter past one in the morning Mike and Karen met up the KNP staff, and their precious baby rhino, at Paul Kruger Gate, one of the major entry points to the park. After a quick exchange of notes, the tiny rhino, now known as Kapela – meaning “the one who came too soon” in North Sotho – was handed over to Karen. The tiny animal, not more than 19 hours old and

Rangers at the Kruger National Park (KNP) and other game reserves, both state-owned and private, regularly capture rhino for resale and translocation. Usually scientists work out how many animals the specific area of land can sustain, and then capture and sell animals deemed to be part of a surplus population, but this is not always the case on private land.

Vets and rangers at the KNP and also the Hluhluwe-Umfolozzi Park (HUP) are world-renowned for their expertise in capturing rhinos, and still use the basic techniques pioneered by Ian Player and Dr Toni Harthoorn in Zululand in the early 1960s. Once a suitable animal has been identified, it is darted, usually from a helicopter, with a strong tranquilliser, and then moved

into a crate where it is injected with the antidote which helps the animal to recover. At base camp the animal is moved into a boma where it awaits relocation, usually by heavy truck. Although the process sounds simple, it is immensely stressful for the animal. Firstly the drugs used to immobilise the animal are very powerful and take some time to wear off, as anyone who has recovered from a general anaesthetic will remember without pleasure. Secondly the capture, confinement, proximity of humans, their scent and unfamiliar surroundings all add to the animal's stress levels. Some are used to restock game reserves, including those in other African countries, some are sold to game farms used for tourism and others are, controversially, hunted for their trophies.

weighing only 18 kg, was ice cold, dehydrated, not breathing well and very weak. Had he been born normally, Kapela should have weighed at least 25 kilograms.

“I wrapped him in a duvet cover and sat on the back seat with him,” Karen says. “We had prepared space for him in the back, but he was so tiny I could cuddle him easily, and he was in dire need of body warmth. We fed him small amounts, about 200 ml of hot water and electrolytes, every 20 minutes or half hour,” Karen says of her patient.

He slept fitfully, his long eyelashes flickering as he opened and closed his dark eyes in fright while trying to get used to his noisy surroundings. Sometime before dawn, when the odd little party stopped at a petrol station to get some coffee, visit the loo, and replenish the hot water supplies and feed Kapela, they unintentionally caused a passing motorist some concern.

“What are you feeding with such a huge teat?” he asked after suspiciously watching Karen’s indistinct activities with a blanket-wrapped object in the stationary vehicle.



Thandi



Thandi



Dips



Mbali

“Just a baby rhino,” came the answer. Unconvinced, the motorist watched a while longer – who knew what was in the bakkie, but whatever it was the outlandish claim that it was a rhino would make a good story for his mates at the pub.

During the long journey home, it’s about 480 kilometres from Kruger to Pretoria, Mike and Karen both had to fight off exhaustion. Mike who had been driving since the mission began the night before, drank a strong caffeine and sugar energy drink to help him stay awake but instead of helping, the drink clipped his wings in no uncertain terms and Karen had to take the wheel.

The team arrived back at around 10 in the morning and immediately put the exhausted rhino to bed in his new heated quarters.

Carin was amazed at the sight of the small animal snuggling into his new woollen blankets next to Karen.

“It’s the littlest big thing I’ve ever seen,” she enthused, her cheeks glowing pink with excitement.

Later in the early evening Karen, exhausted from lack of sleep and too

much travel and tension fell asleep with Kapela in her arms and awoke only to find a brief note from Roy resting on the blankets next to her. "Gone. Bye." it stated.

Roy, who has seen it all when it comes to Karen taking care of animals had decided that even though he was leaving on a two-week overseas trip, both his wife and the rhino shouldn't be disturbed.

"It's at moments like that I get feelings of complete unreality. There I was sleeping with a day-old baby rhino in my arms, and my husband who was going away for two weeks knew what was best," Karen laughs. "He was going to visit our son Jason during the trip and he was taking all sorts of gifts and photographs which I hadn't finished wrapping but it didn't matter."

For the next few days Kapela would have human company 24 hours-a-day in an attempt to replace the attention he would have normally received from his mother. Karen, Mike and after a while, Carin, all spent smelly, tousled nights sleeping with the small, rhino-lonely animal, who through no fault of his own, or his mother's, had been rejected.

Before long Kapela was drinking milk from a bottle about every two to three hours throughout the day and night, his sucking reflex instinctively, after a while, allowing him to drink from the tough latex calves' teat, a product more usually used by sheep farmers when hand-raising lambs. It took him some time to realise that this strange thing called a bottle delivered milk, but when he did Kapela made excited little squeaks as he drank hungrily, his dark grey and pink prehensile top lip curling around the teat.

Rhinos, and all baby mammals, are born with a sucking reflex – they curl their tongue around their mother's nipple, holding it against the roof

of the mouth to enable proper milk flow, but it takes some rhinos days to get used to sucking on a teat not carefully designed by nature. The sucking reflex in premature animals is poorly developed and makes feeding a much more difficult procedure.

Before each feed, low fat milk powder and supplements are carefully mixed with warm water to create an approximation of the mother's milk which contains less than one per cent fat, (cow's milk contains 3,7 per cent fat), and has a high carbohydrate and sugar content.

Feeding went well, but as with all baby rhinos he seemed to take delight in urinating on his bed, his tiny eyes half closed in apparent enjoyment. When rhinos urinate, even baby rhinos, there is an awful lot of liquid, and his bedding needed to be changed regularly by his patient foster parents.

Soon, despite bouts of diarrhoea and dehydration, Kapela was ready for exercise but at first he was very nervous and unwilling to venture into the great outdoors, more content to snuggle up in his blankets on his mattress. But whether he liked it or not, he was going to get the exercise and sunlight needed for bone and skin development and was gently coaxed outside.

His skin was flaky and dry, a result, as with human babies, of premature birth, but the team regularly rubbed his warm rotund body with Elizabeth Anne's baby lotion to improve its condition.

Kapela was not alone in this luxury since all the baby rhinos at Wildcare are regularly rubbed with body lotion to try and keep their skin in good condition. It's difficult to match the nutrients the animals receive in the wild, and to equal the effects of regular wallowing but the lotion helps. Wildcare uses about 300 litres a year.

Waiting until mid-morning when the sun has warmed the ground, Karen would call “Come little rhino” encouraging Kapela to head towards the sandy road that leads from the farm gate to the house.

At first he was unsure of how to co-ordinate his feet, and skipped along with tail swinging like a crazy pendulum, his forefeet simultaneously airborne and his back feet, well, they sometimes seemed to have lives of their own, one heading west and the other east.

Once or twice he fell, red sand covering his mouth, and for a while he stood there apparently perplexed. Wandering down the road he lifted his feet gingerly when encountering occasional sharp stones. Every so often he would begin to suckle on the nearest human knee available. Following Karen, Mike or Carin he slowly gained confidence, and before long managed to get everything working together and could run for up to twenty metres at full pace. Turning corners was difficult because usually all four feet suddenly forgot the new-found rules of running and rebelled against instructions, causing crashes with the sand, grass and anything else in the way. So he tried again. With a stoic determination he started trying real rhino things, and even at the age of two weeks there was a quick scrape of the forefoot and then a huffing charge that went all of 2 metres. Hey, even Black Rhinos have to start slowly. Tjokke, a Jack Russell, one of the five family dogs, was delighted by this development and would happily run alongside this new addition to the household. Tjokke and the other dogs have grown up surrounded by wildlife and none of the animals seem to worry much about them.

As Kapela learnt to run, three older rhinos, an eland, a zebra, several ostriches and two springbok living in the adjacent paddock gathered along the fence watching the miniature rhino pounding by. Perhaps they

were interested, perhaps they were just hoping the humans with the rhino would give them some more food.

Thandi

While Kapela was slowly building his strength and learning the mysteries of his wayward limbs, another rhino rescue mission was developing. Thandi (which means “hope” in Xhosa) was about to make her entry into the Wildcare saga. And she was going to make a pretty theatrical entry, even for a Black Rhino – so much so that she brought a soccer match to a grinding halt and temporarily stopped a few hearts too. Wildcare was fairly busy in May 2003. Kapela was demanding a lot of attention, the sable calves were proving a handful and needed feeding and care throughout the night, and the other patients and temporary residents each had their own little requirements too.

Everyone was busy feeding, cleaning and doing all the usual tasks that make up a normal day, when early on Friday, 12 May, Karen rushed out of her office and announced “We’ve got another one, it’s arriving tomorrow.” “Another one what?” somebody asked.

“Another baby Black Rhino,” Karen said, surprised that anyone would imagine that ‘another one’ could be anything else. “Her mother gave birth in a capture boma at Addo and has rejected her”.

One baby Black Rhino was unusual – Wildcare and ARC had only had five admitted in 16 years – so two newly-born animals at the same time was nothing short of sensational.

Thandi’s story was similar to Kapela’s. Rangers at the Addo Elephant National Park in the Eastern Cape had captured what they thought was a healthy female rhino that promptly gave birth in the holding boma

and, as in Kapela's case, immediately lost interest in her 25 kg female calf. The stress of capture had resulted in another disaster and rangers and vets were distraught.

Both mother and calf come from the endangered rhino subspecies *Diceros bicornis bicornis* that originates in the harsh semi-deserts of Damaraland and the Kaokaoveld in northern Namibia. During the 1980s wildlife authorities moved a number of the subspecies to Addo in an attempt to spread their population base, and today between 40 and 60 still exist in Namibia and about 16 in South Africa. So Thandi, as a female, is an important component of the species breeding stock. Thandi's mother was also captured for relocation to North Luangwa. The vets and officials at Addo discussed their dilemma and came to the same conclusion as their colleagues at the KNP had a few weeks earlier – call Wildcare.

Parks Board vet David Zimmermann supervised the initial care of the small animal and made sure she was properly fed and kept warm. The long journey to Pretoria, some 1 000 kilometres by road, was risky for a newly-born rhino, but the vets decided that her best chance of survival was to get her to Wildcare as soon as possible.

Then it dawned on the staff that they had a helicopter available, and so they quickly commandeered the aircraft to provide the VIR (Very Important Rhino) a proper door-to-door delivery service.

Wildcare rapidly prepared for the new arrival. A clean mattress and blankets were put into Kapela's nursery, and feeding schedules for both babies were established. All that was now needed was the rhino.

On Sunday morning 18 May the chopper, complete with pilot, vet and VIR, duly left Addo for the long journey north.



Mbali, Thandi and Gina

Arrival

Hours later an enthusiastic group of Under 17 soccer players involved in a hard-fought soccer match near Sandton were surprised when the referee, with a blast of his whistle, stopped their game for no apparent reason. Accustomed to the sometimes unfathomable behaviour of soccer referees, the players waited for an explanation but instead were astounded to see the man with the whistle watching a helicopter appear over the skyline and begin shouting to someone on the sidelines, "Please call Karen, the rhino will be there in ten minutes. Tell Karen the rhino's on its way!"

To the players there was no explanation for this bizarre behaviour but to Chris Pears, who just happened to be the referee, it was all very simple. Chris, who during his work as an honorary game ranger in the KNP, has flown in the National Park's game capture helicopter many times had instantly recognised its motor sound, and knowing the arrangements thought it would be a good idea to alert Karen.

"I thought it was a logical thing to ask Jill, my wife, to call Karen."

Chris, who is a highly qualified soccer referee, recounts. "The players all thought I had gone mad. Firstly I'd stopped the game for no reason, and secondly I was telling them that some helicopter that happened to fly overhead was carrying a rhino and I knew where it was going!"

Soon after the sceptical players resumed their disrupted match, Karen and Carin saw the Eurocopter 120, painted with the dark green and yellow colours of SANP, swoop low over the SANP headquarters near Pretoria and settle on the concrete helipad. As the rotors stopped, the helicopter's rear door opened and out climbed a vet dressed in khaki shorts and carrying the baby rhino in his arms.

For a second Carin's heart faltered because this was her version of heaven: a helicopter, Carin has piloted small fixed wing planes and is fascinated by helicopters; a glimpse of khaki-topped muscular male legs; and the cherry on the top, a baby rhino. What more could she ask for? But the euphoria passed quickly because there was lots of work to do. The two women, after swapping information with the SANP crew, whisked the rhino back to Wildcare, a twenty-minute drive, and introduced Thandi to her new home and roommate.

The two rhinos weren't sure about each other. Kapela, still only 22 days old and a little unsteady on his feet, wobbled towards Thandi, who, aged 3 days was no steadier. After a few tentative sniffs and squeaks, both animals moved onto their mattresses under the warm red glow of the infrared lamps. They were tired, and friendship could be explored later. So Wildcare now, in mid-May, had two baby Black Rhinos lying next to each other like fat sausages in the nursery. But unknown to anyone at this stage, another rhino was soon to be added to the row – this time a baby White Rhino.

Mbali

Soon after Thandi had made her classy arrival, Wildcare received a call from the Hlane Game Sanctuary in Swaziland. They had a two-day-old White Rhino that had been abandoned by her mother. A large male rhino and the mother had fought, and the day-old calf had been flung into a waterhole whereupon the mother had abandoned it.

Male White Rhinos are territorial and defend their turf against all comers. They usually only mix with females when mating, and despite their usual placid appearance are fearsome fighters when defending their

turf. Tipping the scales at between 2 000 and 2 300 kilograms, they are Africa's third heaviest land mammal after the elephant (6 500 kg) and hippo which in exceptional cases can weigh as much as 3 000 kg. The game rangers, reading the tracks left on the ground, surmised that the female had fled. Knowing that without its mother, the already dehydrated and cold baby was doomed, they took her back to headquarters where Mickey Riley, the son of the well-known conservationist Ted Riley, began feeding it. Realising that the rhino needed specialist care, they consulted Karen and made what, by now, were the usual arrangements to get the animal to Wildcare as soon as possible. But moving rhinos from one country to another is no simple matter, and rightly so. Veterinary permits as well as CITES documentation is required. CITES is the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species, a World Conservation Union (IUCN) agreement which regulates the trade in endangered species. The White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) is listed in Appendix 2 of the Convention, which allows strictly regulated and limited trade in the species. Once the relevant documentation had been gathered, the animal itself had to be inspected at the entry point to South Africa. So on both sides of the border, hundreds of kilometres apart, both parties to the rhino handover set about collecting the relevant forms, stamps and approvals. Mickey spent hours at the Swaziland State Veterinarian's office in Manzini, Swaziland's second largest town. Chris spent hours at various offices in Pretoria similarly navigating his way through the usual bureaucratic procedures that characterise government offices the world over. Two days later the documentation on

In the early 1990s rangers in the Pilanesberg National Park in North West Province and HUP began regularly encountering rhinos that had been killed or injured, apparently by elephants. Research revealed that young bull elephants, nearly all of them relocated from the KNP, were goring rhinos during fights, but what rangers and scientists could not explain was why this abnormal behaviour was happening.

Although the phenomenon was known to scientists and rangers, it was unusual behaviour and not common.

Further research revealed that the culprits were usually young males, specifically those that had come into musth – a condition that manifests when they are

ready to begin breeding. And the youngsters were misbehaving because there were no large bulls to enforce discipline.

No large bulls had been moved during the relocation operations, and the young animals were simply acting like badly behaved, 4 000-kilogram teenagers because the bulls usually enforce discipline.

The authorities promptly moved in several large bulls, and the killings declined, but did not end.

To date some 40 rhinos have been killed in Pilanesberg, and a further 25 in the Hluhluwe/Umfolozozi Park. Three of the 18 rhinos at Wildcare lost mothers to elephants.

both sides of the border was in place, and at about 3:15 p.m. on 15 May, Mike was dispatched to the Oshoek border post, some 330 km from Pretoria.

Hurtling along past the giant cooling towers of Mpumalanga's coal-fired power stations with his unexpected partner, me, Mike chatted about his career in animal rehabilitation.

After various jobs he ended up working with SANCCOB, the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds in Cape Town and discovered his niche in life – wildlife rehabilitation. Besides helping maintain the centre, Mike learnt how to clean oil from African Penguins, Cape Gannets and a variety of other seabirds, and it was during the *MV Treasure* oil spill in 2000 that he met Karen and learnt about Wildcare. He moved to Kameeldrift soon afterwards, but now we were a long way from the nearest Cape Gannet, although it turns out he took such a liking to the birds he sports tattoos of them on his shoulder and back. At around 6:30 p.m. we arrived at the Oshoek border post, set amongst pine plantations and grass-covered hills. Oshoek is South Africa's main border crossing with Swaziland, and it is a busy place.

In the chill of an early winter's evening, the high tower spotlights cast their yellow/orange glow over the 18 wheel pantechicons, travellers, officials and others bustling through the offices. The border post was undergoing major reconstruction, and Mike and I wandered around trying to familiarise ourselves with the layout. A young woman, and judging by her dress and attitude a lady of the night attracted by truck drivers and others with business here, looked at Mike, smiled and commented, "Nice body!" We burst out laughing. We were there to pick up a baby rhino, not to have women pick us up.

We linked up with the South African veterinary services officer who had been in touch with his Swazi counterparts. He chatted with customs officials on both sides of the border, and generally paved the way for the 'swap' to take place. I also chatted with officials on both sides of the border trying to impress upon everyone the urgency of getting the unusual animal from one vehicle to the other as soon as possible, and then to get it to Pretoria. The spotlights cast deep shadows and in the eerie light the whole procedure began to take on the atmosphere of a spy swap at the Berlin Wall in the 1970s.

Mickey Riley arrived at the Swaziland exit border post with his charge warmly secure and asleep under blankets piled on top of a mattress and a bed of hay in the back of a 4x4. A few doubtful Swazi border officials and policeman peered under the dark canopy of the vehicle to see if I'd been talking nonsense. The rhino, disturbed, wriggled and woke up and one man asked, "What's that thing? Is it a pig?" Everybody laughed. The officials were helpful and the vehicle was shepherded through to where Mike waited in the 'no-man's land' between border posts. After greetings were completed, Mike examined the rhino and together with the game scout who cared for the rhino on its long journey, prepared milk in a plastic bottle.

Mike towered over his small new-found colleague but they both displayed equal gentleness towards the tired and confused small animal. As the hungry rhino noisily sucked the milk from her bottle, she folded her ears back along her neck and rolled her eyes in pleasure. A crowd of curious, and some incredulous, onlookers gathered. The animal fascinated soldiers, police, customs officers and the usual ragtag group of people who gather at border posts.



Carin and Karen feeding Thandi and Kapela



Karen and Kapela aged approximately 3 months

“What are you going to do with it?” was the most common question. Someone else, who had been listening to Mike answering all the questions spotted an opportunity and asked if there are any jobs going at Wildcare. “I’m good with animals – I’ll come and work for you,” he offered.

I’m left to help sort out the paperwork and together with Mickey we set about getting the correct stamps and approvals. Things go fairly smoothly but there is a minor hiccup at the South African customs office “You have to have a CCA1,” an official says.

It turns out that this is the all-important “The Declaration Of Goods In The Southern Africa Common Customs Area”. I ask where I can get one. “Depends what you are importing,” the official says.



Kapela and Thandi

“A rhino,” I tell her.

It's already eight at night, it's cold and she's clearly impatient to go home and not impressed by my feeble joke.

A brief conversation in Swazi ensues amongst the officials and one man points to a picture of a fearsome charging adult Black Rhino on a 2003 calendar.

“You didn't tell me it's a dangerous animal,” the woman accuses.

Things are beginning to unravel, so anxious to make it clear that I only have a baby White Rhino, which weighs about 30 kg that it is not at all dangerous, I invite her to come and have a look. Most of the office joins us and sure enough, the baby rhino magic works. The official's attitude changes instantly and the CCA1 is completed and stamped. “GOODS – one rhino, *Ceratotherium simum*.”

As we climb into the vehicle to leave, cheerful soldiers carrying assault rifles and a few policemen warn us to be careful because the road from Oshoek is a well known hijacking hot-spot. “You don't want to lose your rhino. Have a good trip!”

The journey back to Pretoria is relatively uneventful, if driving an orphaned Swazi White Rhino through the night can be considered an uneventful event. Mike travels in the back of the vehicle keeping a close watch on his charge, firstly out of concern and necessity, and secondly to avoid being deluged in rhino urine.

All along the way he regularly monitors the rhino's breathing pattern, and makes sure it's properly hydrated and comfortable.

In the cold night air mist is forming across low-lying ditches and riverbeds, and a steenbok briefly steps into the strong light cast by the headlights and then, thankfully, because many of them are killed by cars,

disappears into the long yellow roadside grass, important shelter in the increasingly manicured fields of organised agriculture.

At midnight we stop to feed the rhino at the Ultra City petrol station in Middelburg, and opening the back of the vehicle I'm greeted by the strong smell of rhino, an unshaven, tired but cheerful Mike, and a curious look from two tiny bewildered brown eyes fringed by long eyelashes peering out from under a warm blanket. “What now?” the eyes seem to ask.

It's cold and most of the workers are huddled indoors so nobody seems to notice when the little rhino squirts about five litres of milky urine out of the back of the bakkie.

During the rest of the trip Mike and I chat occasionally on the two-way radios we are both carrying. We have also been in touch with Karen by cellphone and she and Carin are ready for us and have added a clean mattress and blankets to the nursery in preparation for Mbali's arrival. When we arrive, the sleepy baby rhino is shepherded into the warm nursery, to join his somewhat bemused, and equally sleepy roommates. They seem unconcerned, and after giving each other a few greeting sniffs, the animals settle down for what's left of a night's sleep.

All the humans are tired and could do with some sleep too, but no effort is spared for the rhinos. The angles of the heaters are changed to ensure maximum comfort, beds are rearranged and milk is warmed. When one of the rhino wakes briefly at 4 a.m. and wets the sheets, they are then changed without a murmur of complaint.

Mike, despite his exhaustion, spends the rest of the night with the baby rhino and will continue sleeping with the animal for the next three or four nights.

For the remainder of the night the two women take turns in doing feeds and general check-ups on other patients too. When dawn breaks a few hours later, nobody complains about lack of sleep. Instead everyone enthuses about the rhinos, the baby porcupine that has just come in and the great progress the Grass Owls are making.

Chips

Chips, a baby White Rhino from Limpopo Province, arrived on 31 May with a bad injury and possibly brain damage. He had been hurt in a confrontation with an adult, probably as a consequence of overcrowding. As a result of his injury the young animal constantly walked in circles but the vets hoped that the brain swelling might ease with time. While trying to administer drugs to Chips one night, the unhappy animal tossed Karen over a 1,4 metre high wall but she carried on the treatment, even if she was a little bruised and scratched. It takes more than being flung over a wall to stop her from treating rhinos and Chips' treatment would have to continue for a long time.

Another one

On 30 June a call came in from the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park (HUP) in KwaZulu-Natal. A White Rhino had been orphaned after an elephant had killed its mother.

The routine was well established, and Karen and Mike collected the animal and brought it back to Wildcare. Long distances, lack of sleep and another rhino to look after.

Through no fault of her own Londiwe proved to be a difficult patient because a worker, unused to feeding baby rhinos, had grabbed her by the

ears and pulled her forward in an attempt to make her drink. The stressed rhino hasn't forgotten this treatment and is quite a cranky patient.

Moheng

In late June when the bushveld is dry and leaf litter crunches underfoot, rangers out on patrol in the thick bush of Lapalala Wilderness in Limpopo Province noticed a baby female Black Rhino with a severe wound near her tail. The animal was in poor physical shape and was clearly in serious trouble.

After consulting with Clive Walker, the wildlife artist and owner of Lapalala, it was decided to capture the calf to examine the wound and treat it. The mother was in good condition and the baby was not keeping up with her movements, a dangerous situation for a young rhino not yet able to feed itself properly.

This was easier said than done, and they searched the valleys and hills for a full day before managing to locate and dart the six-month-old calf but the rangers were glad they had expended the energy when they saw her wound. It seemed that a bull had gored the young rhino.

The bloody, smelly, puss-filled cavity just below her anus was crawling with maggots, the flesh-eating larvae of a variety of species of fly, and must have festered for a week or more. The risk of life-threatening infection was huge.

The Lapalala vets cleaned the wound and administered antibiotics, but they decided that the animal was too seriously injured to cope on her own so the calls to Wildcare began again. Walker and Wildcare have a long-standing relationship, and the first rhino Karen ever raised came from Lapalala in 1992.

The new animal was very weak and Mike spent the first few nights with her. He sprayed the wound regularly with a warm salt, iodine and antiseptic mixture and then covered the area with petroleum jelly.

Mike and Karen were unsure of the exact extent of damage.

"We don't want to anaesthetise the animal so we can do an x-ray because it puts the animal's system under extreme pressure," Mike says, covered in blood, faeces and other grime after cleaning the wound and the room.

"We are not sure whether the wound has penetrated the rectum but all we can do is keep treating and monitor the situation daily."

When the animal arrived, Karen followed her usual course of action when faced with a difficult problem. She consulted vets and even surgeons specialising in human rape cases.

"We explained that we thought the rectum had been torn, and asked for as much advice as possible. Rhinos are clearly not humans but one never knows when a tiny piece of advice is going to be the key to helping the animal heal. We speak to as many people as possible."

"We are also using some of the knowledge that we gained in the treatment of Honey, a baby rhino that had its anus torn open by jackals. Honey's wound was so deep that it had torn into the rectum, and I called in the help of paediatric surgeons who had worked on human rape cases to try and save the rhino."

The treatment failed because the wound was sealed too well, and Honey had to be put down, but the experience was now being put to good use with Moheng.

"We've learnt with wild animals that sometimes one can over-treat. It is sometimes better to give them minimal help and let their bodies try and repair the damage."

"She's being kept on milk because although at four months she should also be taking solids, she's passing hard balls of faeces and body tissue so we decided that a low resistance diet is more sensible until we understand what is happening with her."

The work to save Moheng for a future in the bush of Lapalala was just beginning.

Raising baby rhinos

The rhinos that arrived during the 'raining rhinos' period were typical of the many cases handled over the years. The vast majority of cases owed their presence at Wildcare due to direct interference in nature by humans. Of the 52 rhinos raised for release at Wildcare, some were orphans created by the game capture industry; others had lost their mothers to attacks by elephants behaving abnormally; others were victims of territorial bulls short of space; and still others had injuries inflicted directly by humans or through human indifference.

Wireless, a large two-year-old White Rhino, survived a deep neck wound inflicted by a cable snare that almost severed his jugular, leaving scars still visible today. Legs hurt his head after getting it jammed between the poles of a poorly-constructed boma. Makweti's mother was gored by a male short of space, and Honey was trapped against an electric fence where jackals tore holes into her hindquarters.

None of the rhinos at Wildcare are there because of natural causes. Humans decide when and how to capture wild animals; humans, and sometimes their financial constraints, dictate how much space relocated rhinos are able to enjoy; humans trap and hunt animals and decide to translocate elephants without fully understanding the implications of the move.

Through trial and error and an enormous amount of research, the staff at Wildcare have become experts at raising rhinos with the intention of putting them back into the wild, or at least the semi-wild. Zoos and safari parks all over the world breed rhinos regularly, but in most instances the baby is raised by the mother, and in almost all cases the young are destined for life in captivity.

San Diego Zoo in the United States has bred well over 50 rhinos, and Whipsnade Zoo in the UK saw its 50th rhino calf born this year but the difference is that most of these births are carefully planned and encouraged. Wildcare doesn't try to breed rhinos, it has to rescue rhinos and it is emergency work – nothing is planned and the rhinos are only there because something has gone wrong. Badly wrong.

“Wildcare is faced with the problem that the animals don't have mothers and are usually extremely stressed and traumatised,” Karen says.

“Rhinos are very dependent on their mothers and bond closely from soon after birth until they are weaned at two years old.”

At the age of two White Rhinos weigh anything between 1 100 and 1 300 kg. Black Rhinos are smaller but still weigh an impressive 500 to 600 kg.

By the time they are adults, a very large male White Rhino will weigh up to 2 500 kg and a Black Rhino may reach 1 300 kg.

“It's easy to get wrapped up in anthropomorphic sentimentality when dealing with baby rhinos. To most people they are very appealing and easy to like,” Karen says, “although it must be accepted there are others in the world that couldn't care less about rhinos, babies or not. The urge to cuddle them, pat them and generally treat them like domestic pets is an emotion to which it is easy to succumb, but we also

have to acknowledge that they need company, tactile contact and other social interaction.”

Every day someone at Wildcare takes the younger rhinos for a walk or a run in the bigger paddocks.

Kapela, Thandi and Mbali – eight weeks old, five and a half weeks old, and five and a couple of days old respectively are knee high to Karen, and it's hard to imagine them as the giants they will eventually become. These three young rhinos usually go out into a paddock for a walk at the same time because they have been together from an early age and are comfortable with each other's company.

They, like many diurnal animals, need sunlight and exercise to enhance bone development, skin condition and many other aspects of growth. At this stage of their lives they get two to three walks a day and spend between six and nine hours a day outside.

Karen or Carin usually fetch the animals from their day quarters, a small grassy pen next to the high care centre, calling and encouraging the animals.

“Come on little rhinos, come on, let's go,” they call as the rhinos peer around and begin filing out of the pen which is surrounded by white wire fencing usually used around swimming pools. Thandi dawdles, sidetracked by tufts of grass, leaves and anything else that takes her interest. She picks up a twig in her prehensile hook-lipped mouth, rolling it back and forth and then briefly chewing it – part of her teething process. Rhinos' first teeth begin popping through the gums at between 35 and 45 days, and they experience the same problems as human babies; they chew on anything they can reach and get grumpy and listless while teething.

“Come on Thandi, it’s time to go and be a rhino,” Carin calls excitedly, slapping her thighs and encouraging the rhino. Eventually Thandi ambles along, flicking her ears in response to Carin’s voice.

“It’s so exciting to see her feeling the emotions that she’s feeling,” Karen says of Carin. “I’ve been there, I don’t get as much excitement from other species. Baby rhinos – they depend on you entirely.”

At the paddock the two women sit on some reddish rocks and the rhinos begin to wander on their own. “They all have their own characters: Mbali wants to be part of everything and is always pushing herself into anything that is going on; Kapela wants to run at every opportunity; and Thandi just wants to smell the flowers – she has her own agenda,” Karen says while Mbali ponderously flops into the sand, raising a small cloud of red dust.

“They are simple souls that are usually quite happy with food, company and the occasional tickle as a reward. I don’t think there’s too much intellectual activity that takes place in their heads though.”

Kapela and Thandi have wandered off, scuffling around in the sand and grass, but suddenly, when they are about 25 metres from Karen, they begin to display concern and start sniffing the air, heads held high in exactly the same manner as wild adult Black Rhinos, and making small high-pitched, pig-like communication calls. Being small, these animals have temporarily lost their surrogate mothers and peer around searching the grassy paddock for them, but their eyesight is so poor they cannot see anyone. Shuffling their small feet slowly back and forth in agitation, they begin calling again as if to say, “Where are you?”

Karen stands up calling their names and waving her arms, once everything is sorted out, the two tiny rhinos come trotting along, delighted by their reunion.

Two species of rhino occur in Africa. They are the Black Rhino – Diceros bicornis – and the White Rhino – Ceratotherium simum. Despite their common names, both species tend to be grey, and after wallowing in muddy pools they take on the colour of the sand and mud in their particular region. It seems likely that the confusion surrounding the names arose from use of the Dutch word “wyd” meaning wide and referring to the White Rhino’s large square lips which may have been misinterpreted by English settlers to mean “white”. “Black Rhino” was merely used to differentiate between the species and probably had no reference to colour. Simply referring to “hook-lipped” or “square-lipped” rhinos is a much clearer distinction.



Mbali decides that all the activity is a cue to play, and suddenly leaps up and makes a series of snorting, huffing and puffing charges around the other rhinos and humans and then, just as abruptly with a puzzled look on her face, stops in her tracks as if baffled at this surge of energy. Thandi being a Black Rhino with quite some worldly experience, a full nine weeks of it, stands her ground, head down, looking at her cousin with a certain amount of what appears to be rhino scornfulness. The rhinos get 'lost' regularly, and Karen, seemingly part human mother, part rhino and part mother hen, is onto her feet in a flash every time, calling their names, clapping her hands and making absolutely sure everything is alright.

All of which is very anthropomorphic – the animals have names and characters and seem to experience some of the emotions that we humans do. They get lost, show concern and enjoy company.

"But it must be remembered that this is exactly what they do in the wild – the difference is that they usually do it with their mothers," Karen, quite animated and patting Kapela firmly on his flaky back says. "We accept that as humans we are hopelessly inadequate in comparison to rhino mothers and know we cannot replace them but understand that these baby animals need company. It's not bunny hugging but really an attempt, the best we as humans can offer, to replace the security their mothers provide."

"It's not bunny hugging to try and give them warmth, clean them and look after them. It's a last resort because there is nothing else and they get scared and lonely. It doesn't get easier for me and I still get a high of excitement. It's a humbling experience and privilege that I don't want to cheapen."

"As humans we have to use our powers of observation to try and work out what the animals need. We have intense contact with them, day and night, and we have learnt to become very perceptive to their needs and health. Illness can develop in a few hours, and we need to be very alert to changes in the animals," Karen says. "All animals have a smell, a healthy smell and a sick smell and I can pick up the sick smell very quickly." While the rhinos play, it's easy to forget that they will soon be capable of easily bowling a human over.

"Despite their apparent slow minds, rhinos can also sense your mood and attitude and react accordingly," Karen says. "They are very quick to sense the attitude of the person dealing with them, whether the person is comfortable with animals or feeling tense. They also learn who they can bully and who they can't. We are very careful not to indulge in 'head butting' because, as they realise they are stronger than you, they become problems and can knock you flying," says Karen who has had various bones broken by rhinos and more bruises than she can remember. "The really cranky ones are usually the ones that have had the most traumatic experiences."

"You get used to handling them and learn what works and what does not but if somebody handles them incorrectly things can go wrong. They are big dangerous animals and they could wipe you out very quickly." Walking across the yard with a pile of lucerne, Alfred agrees. "If you take chances with a big animal like Wireless, he will squash you flat," he says laughing. "Most of the time he's fine but if you choose the wrong day you've got trouble."

And this is partly the reason that visitors are not encouraged at Wildcare. Firstly it's a hospital and the risk of infection and disturbance needs to be

kept to a minimum, and secondly, visitors might inadvertently frighten the animals with potentially disastrous consequences.

Rhinos are immensely strong and fast and could easily kill a handler, even accidentally, with a swing of the head.

Their size is their protection when they are ready for reintroduction in the bush.

When they are small, baby rhinos depend entirely on their mothers for protection from lions, hyaenas, jackals and other predators. Although it is surprising to many people, Spotted Hyaenas and jackals are very efficient predators and can easily kill a baby rhino.

“We can’t offer that protection or teach them about predators, but by the time they go into the bush they are large enough to look after themselves.”

Watching the little rhinos messing around in the dust it becomes very clear [to me] that, despite their rapid growth these are infant animals, confused and uncertain. They have no hope of existence without the help of the small group of humans looking after them.

Three at once

Hand raising baby rhinos, whether injured or orphaned, is a complex task at the best of times, and to an outsider it would seem that caring for three very young babies simultaneously would intensify matters, but Karen disagrees.

“Sure, there are more mouths to feed and more milk to prepare but if you have to get up throughout the night to feed, it doesn’t really matter,” she says. “In reality having three animals of roughly the same age is a huge advantage because it’s far better that they have rhinos for company instead of humans.”

There are only about 3 000 Black Rhino left in the world – in 1960 there were about 100 000, one of the fastest ever declines in the population of a large mammal. Poachers have slaughtered the Black Rhino for its horn to be used in Asia for medicinal purposes although it is also prized for making Yemeni dagger handles. Habitat loss has also contributed to their decline. Black Rhinos used to occur in many parts of Africa, but today they are restricted to game reserves and some remote locations. They are listed as critically endangered by the International Conservation Union (IUCN). During the 1600s they occurred on the slopes of Table Mountain in Cape Town! Black Rhino live in a fairly wide range of habitats and as browsers they use their pointed top upper

lip to pluck leaves, shoots and twigs from trees and shrubs.

Although they have a reputation for being ferocious and bad tempered, they are quiet, retiring animals that like to hide in thick cover and usually only charge because they feel threatened or are afraid. Large males weigh up to 1 300 kilograms and females about 850 kilograms. They have a gestation period of about 15 months, and when the calf is born it tends to walk at its mother’s side or behind her, unlike the White Rhino calf which walks at its mother’s side or in front of her.



“They smell like rhinos, rest up against each and they make the same sounds, they talk the same language and that’s something we can’t do. It gives them a small chance to experience what they might have done in the wild where they are with their mothers all the time and get used to rhino sounds, rhino scent and rhino behaviour,” Karen says.

“The constant socialisation with other rhinos makes handling them much easier and also eases the whole release process. They are better equipped to fit into ‘rhino society’. Babies that arrive on their own have to, initially, rely on humans for company and comfort.

“We spend three or four a day just sitting with babies that have come in on their own to provide companionship. We’ve had some very tiny babies that have needed a huge amount of time,” Karen says. “Lucky – named because he was lucky to survive – was so premature he still had soft foetal hair all over his body, and his ears were still coated in membrane left over from the womb – he looked like a little ghost. He was quite a scary sight – he looked like a foetus – but he was lovely and we had to devote a huge amount of time to him.”

There is a constant battle to try and imitate the care babies are likely to receive from their mothers but it is an impossible task. Karen and her staff do what they can, and then try to improve their understanding through daily experience. Each small advance helps make the baby rhinos’ lives a little easier, and improves their chances of survival.

Food

Matching the nutritional intake of wild rhinos is also difficult. Rhinos of both species eat a very wide range of plant matter and in doing so ingest a complex mix of vitamins and minerals that contribute to the animals’

health. Although they routinely eat a lot of the same plants, there are daily and seasonal variables that are impossible to recreate in captivity. Although rhino milk has been carefully analysed and the quantities of fats, sugars, proteins and other components are well known, the composition of the milk changes as the calf grows older. This complex formula is further complicated while the calf is still largely dependent on milk but also begins eating solids. It’s very difficult to know the precise ratio of solids to milk and to match the nutrients in a captive environment.

“After about after 8 to 10 weeks of feeding only milk, we begin to offer some cubes, which are similar to the plant material and vitamin-enriched cubes fed to antelope,” Karen says. “Some animals take to the cubes readily but others chew them and spit them out, but we have to keep on trying because they develop diarrhoea, which can take months to eradicate, if they are not getting adequate nutrition.”

It is important to ensure that new animals eat as soon as possible because it takes rhinos 30 hours to process a meal.

“They are hind-gut fermenters which means that there is a considerable delay between eating food, and that food being digested,” Karen says.

“This time-lag makes it important to get glucose and fluids into a sick animal quickly. They are very prone to low sugar levels, and a while ago Stevie collapsed and was comatose for two hours because his levels were too low. We have to monitor them very closely because a young animal goes into decline very quickly,” Karen says.

The future

Sitting in the warm sun watching the three baby rhinos beginning their lives, it’s easy [for me] to ponder the future of the species. In modern



Carin playing with Thandi

times their population has fluctuated dramatically. One conservationist estimated that in 1920 there were only about 30 White Rhino left in the whole of Zululand but this could have been a deliberate underestimation designed to spark public support for the conservation of rhinos.

Whatever the real number was they were nevertheless in serious trouble.

Today the White Rhino population is strong at about 11 000 worldwide, including captive animals, but it still faces an uncertain future in game reserves. The Black Rhino's position in the wild is far more precarious with about 3 000 animals left, and they are listed as critically endangered by the International Conservation Union (IUCN).

In 1960 there were estimated to be 100 000 Black Rhino in Africa and their decline is one of the fastest of any large mammal in modern history. Such is the threat to rhinos today, and other African game, that armed anti-poaching patrols are the only way to stop people killing rhinos. It's not the first time in history that people have wondered about the future of rhinos on Earth. One hundred and forty years ago the hunter and explorer Frederick Courtney Selous, who, ironically, himself killed many rhinos, issued a dire warning about the future, or lack thereof, of the species. After a trip undertaken in 1873 he noted in his book *African Nature Notes and Reminiscences*:

“Of course, neither the Cape Buffalo nor either of the two species of rhinoceroses indigenous to Africa are yet absolutely extinct in the country to the south of the Zambezi River; but of the great white, or square-mouthed grass-eating rhinoceros, the largest of all terrestrial mammals after the elephant (although in exceptional cases hippos are heavier) none are left alive today with the exception of some half dozen which still survive in Zululand, and very few which are believed to exist

in the neighbourhood of the Angwa River in Southern Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]. A few of the black or prehensile-lipped species, I should think, are still to be found here and there throughout the great stretch of uninhabited country which lies between the high plateaus of Southern Rhodesia and the Zambezi River, but, like their congener the White Rhinoceros, they are now entirely extinct throughout all but an infinitesimal proportion of the vast territories over which they ranged so plentifully only half a century ago.”

Perhaps 140 years from today, Thandi, Mbali and Kapela will form part of a less depressing passage about rhinos.

Tripod

The tiny male White Rhino was in agony. His left hind foot was gone. All that remained was a bloody stump of a leg, all red flesh, yellow pus, white bone and a seething mass of maggots. The foot had been torn off by a poacher's wire snare. Snares are usually made of fencing wire or cabling and attached to trees, and when an animal puts its foot or neck



Tripod and his prosthetic foot



into the snare it usually panics and attempts to run off, and the snare tightens and cuts deeper and deeper, often resulting in a slow and painful death from the loss of blood or gangrene. Sometimes the poacher returns to his snares and dispatches the animal and steals the meat, or in the case of rhino, its horn. Sometimes the animals takes days to die and the scuffmarks in the sand, damaged vegetation and blood trails tell a sad story. Snares set for big game are often made from cables a centimetre in diameter and not even a rhino or elephant can snap the steel wire. The rangers who found this rhino amongst the low Acacia thorn trees were unsure about what course of action to follow. They could simply leave him in the Zululand bush to whatever fate came his way or try to help him. They decided, perhaps incorrectly, to try and help. They captured the small rhino, and vets cleaned his terrible wound. Hoping against hope, and probably sensibility, he was taken back to his mother but it soon became clear that with only three feet he had no chance of survival. He could not keep up with his mother and would soon die. So humans took control again. Taking pity on the seven-week-old rhino, a game rancher bought him and delivered him to Wildcare. "See if you can give him a decent life," he offered.

Karen and Wildcare were in a quandary. What should they do? Clearly the animal would never live in the bush again. Karen and company prepared a boma and covered the surface in clean and soft river sand, a perfect combination for this patient. Tripod, as he became known, did well, remarkably well.

"We put in a huge amount of work to keep him clean and healthy. We consulted many people who had experience with heavy mammals but nearly all said we should euthanase him," Karen said. "We were

reluctant to do so and thought that because he was doing so well and seemed to be so good-natured that we could find a role for him. We felt that as he got older he could provide some sort of social support for the young rhinos that end up with us. They all need to learn how to interact with other rhinos, and mingling with an older and placid animal is a good way to do this," Karen says. "He was a lovely animal with an amazingly good nature. During the two years he was with us he helped a lot of baby rhinos to calm down, and without knowing it gave them a better chance of survival."

Karen and others also initiated an ambitious project to build a prosthetic foot that would serve two purposes. One was that it would allow Tripod greater mobility, and the second was that if the technology could be perfected, it could be used elsewhere.

Quite a lot of working elephants in Thailand and other parts of Asia, for example, have fallen victim to landmines, but because their owners are Buddhists they refuse to euthanase the animals as their religion does not allow them to take a life.

These elephants spend the rest of their days immobilised, and usually chained to a tree.

A prosthetic foot that worked for rhinos might enable these animals to have at least limited mobility.

Tripod turned two in 2003, and it was decided the time was right to try and fit a foot.

Wildcare called in the help of mining engineers, reconstructive surgeons, vets and anybody else who could offer assistance.

Various materials were considered. Human prosthetics were studied.

Clearly Tripod, now tipping the scales at almost 1 600 kg, would require

an artificial foot with support systems many times stronger than that of any human prosthetic.

One morning in early March, Douw Grobler, a vet with vast experience with large mammals – for many years he was the chief vet in KNP – met with Karen, the rest of the Wildcare staff, Roy and an engineer Marcel Rocher who had helped create the prototype foot. The foot was made of heavy-duty rubber and steel and was designed to strap onto the rhino's stumpy rear leg.

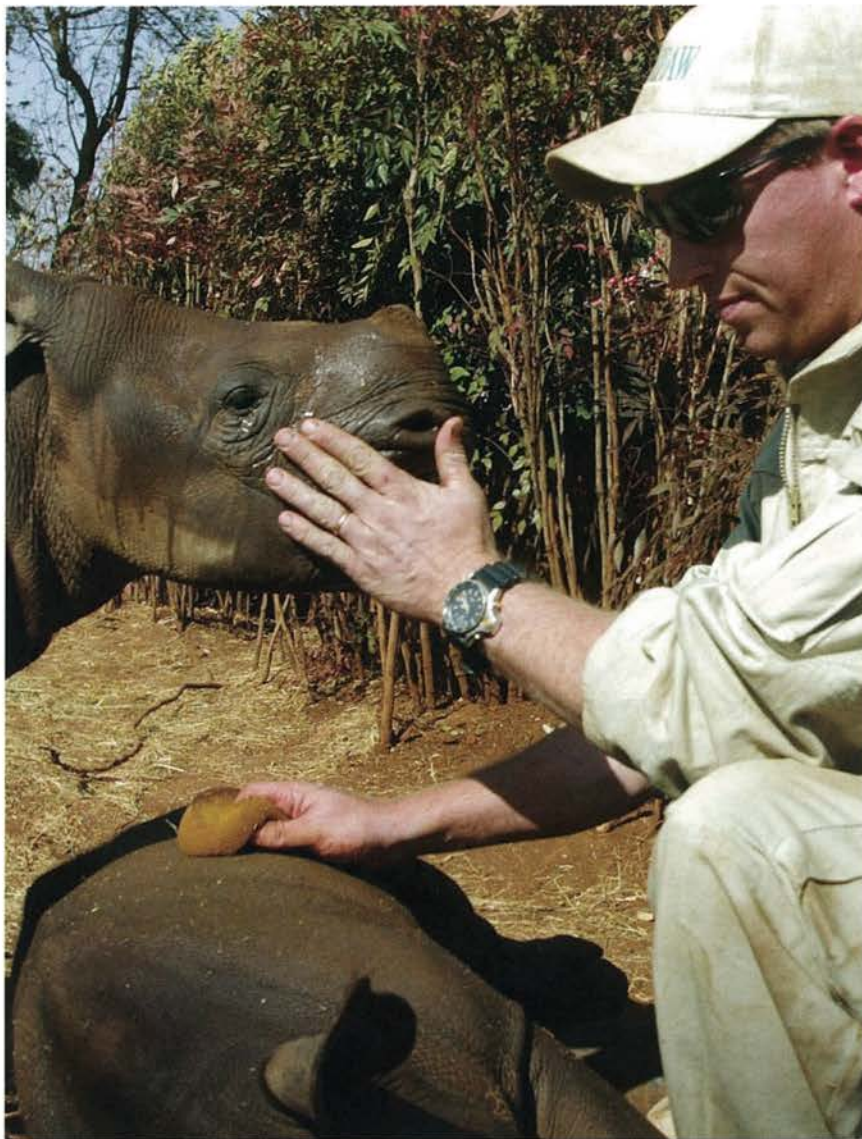
The animal was darted, a procedure that Douw has done dozens of times, and the foot was fitted. Later the antidote was administered, and Tripod slowly came around and tried to stand. The foot slipped off almost immediately, the rhino's great weight too much for it. A few months later another attempt was made. This time the foot stayed attached, to the delight of all, but sadly, came off during the night. Tripod's condition began to deteriorate fairly quickly. The rhino had not responded well to the drugs, and Karen and others were worried about making an already bad situation worse. His weight had reached levels where he was struggling to move easily and he was clearly in pain. The effort required to move his bulk was affecting his heart, and his good rear leg was becoming increasingly malformed because of the strain of the extra weight. Karen consulted with the vets, her staff and with Roy. The decision was difficult and painful. "We all knew what the correct decision was," she says, "not for us but for the animal." So Tripod had to be put down, or in coarser terms, killed. An overdose of M99 tranquilliser administered by dart gun followed by a bullet from a heavy calibre rifle ended his short life.

"I was relieved at the sound of that shot, even though I was terrified as I waited for it, because then I knew that his suffering was over." Karen was not the only person who was in tears that day.

"Did we wait too long?" she often ponders. "It's an issue we are still debating. I think initially we might have waited too long because he was a victim of human interference. Had he been suffering from a natural injury, we might have taken the decision earlier."

"We still agonise over the decision. Every time we tried something he seemed to respond and we wanted to give him some leeway," Karen explained one day while watching Kapela playing in some long grass. "To gauge whether or not we waited too long is very difficult but what we have to do is learn from the experience. The next time we are faced with a similar problem we can use our experience with Tripod to help us make informed decisions."

Tripod died because of humans. The poacher whose snare resulted in the death of a rhino doesn't know and doesn't care. Neither do the people who may have bought his horn or parts of it. They want more, and one day there may not be any.



Dave and Kapela

The White Rhino has also suffered heavily at the hands of poachers all over Africa although their worldwide population, both in captivity and the wild, is believed to be around 11 000 animals.

Historically the White Rhino occurred in many parts of Africa. Fossil remains have even been found in Morocco, although South Africa is now its stronghold. Since the 1960s more than 4 000 White Rhinos have been captured in the Hluhluwe-Umfolozzi Park (HUP) in KwaZulu-Natal and relocated to game reserves, zoos and safari parks all over the world. They are grazers and tend to prefer areas of open grassland. They use mud wallows every day if available to cool down and also to help rid their skin of parasites.

White Rhinos also use regular latrines, called middens, to mark their territories. They usually give birth to one calf after a gestation period of 16 months. Three other species of rhino occur in Asia – the Sumatran, (about 5 -70 animals); Javan (about 300 animals); and the Indian (about 2 000 animals). All three are endangered.



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