

INTRODUCTION OF TWO WILD MALE WHITE RHINOCEROS (*Ceratotherium simum*) TO FACILITATE BOMA ADAPTATION OF AN INJURED SUBADULT

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A rhino rescue operation in Botswana led to the capture and translocation of four white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*). At the time of capture, an approximately three- to-four year-old bull was found to have three bullet wounds estimated to be approximately seven to 10 days old. Internal injuries that may have resulted from the wounds could not be adequately assessed. All four animals, including the injured bull, were judged to be in good body condition at the time of capture and translocation to holding bomas. The subadult bull refused to eat any significant quantity of food offered, even after 10 days in captivity. It appeared to be seeking social interaction—vocalizing and rubbing against the fence between itself and the adult bull. Given the history, age and general behavior of this subadult bull, it was felt that the problem observed was likely not the “classic” confinement-related inappetence of the white rhinoceros. The decision was made to not give the young bull access to a larger paddock, as it was felt this would only serve to further isolate it from the other animals. In addition, the rearrangements necessary to achieve this might have disrupted the otherwise smooth boma adaptation process in the other three animals. Thus, paddock were kept closed off.

Post-capture inappetence is a potentially life-threatening problem for free-ranging white rhinos put into bomas, especially older bulls, with animals often not feeding for the first seven to 10 days (or longer) post-capture. Ideally, bomas should be situated so that anorectic animals can be released back into the field if no evidence of feeding is seen within this time period. Such animals often start grazing almost immediately after they are out of the boma. In the case of this project, security concerns precluded building holding facilities in actual rhino habitat in northern Botswana. In addition, the private sanctuary established to protect the rhinos was still in the process of trying to raise funds for a perimeter fence, so the only option for “release” from a boma would be to allow the animal into a slightly larger paddock.

The gate between the two bulls’ bomas was opened 12 days after the young bull’s capture. This was felt to be a novel but potentially dangerous approach to the inappetence problem. Normally, wild-caught white rhino believed to come from different social groups are not penned together, especially if they are of the same sex and of disparate sizes. The young bull was approximately 70 percent the size of the adult bull. No aggression was manifested as the young bull crossed over into the adult bull’s boma. The young bull’s overall attitude improved, it charged the fence much less, and it followed the old bull around constantly. The two animals were frequently in bodily contact. The young animal watched the old bull eating, and then it too started to eat. The adult bull tolerated the young bull relatively well, only occasionally gently horning it in the axillary region.

Although short-term improvement was seen, the young rhino died six days after the introduction to the adult bull, despite ongoing veterinary intervention for suspected wound-related sepsis and secondary anorexia. Necropsy revealed that a bullet that had entered the right shoulder had gone through the thoracic and abdominal cavities, leading to diffuse pleuritis and peritonitis, which was confirmed histopathologically. Examination of the bullet recovered from the abdomen revealed that it was of a 7/62 caliber, fired from an AK-47 or an SKS semiautomatic weapon, according to the Botswana Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks Anti-poaching Unit.

The fact that this animal died from bullet wound-related injuries should not detract from the positive behavioral responses the companionship of the adult bull seems to have elicited. The authors were

unable to find any similar cases of such an intentional introduction of two captive white rhino bulls documented in the literature.

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