

RHINOS CAUGHT ON THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

Poachers continue to kill rhino for their horns. But the remedy may be controversial. By Andrew Pinchin

THE spoor is unmistakable in the soft red earth of the dirt road. Motioning the other trackers to follow, Jackson Kamwi sets off in a determined line through the thick bush. It is early morning in the Matopos National Park in Zimbabwe, an expanse of wilderness famed for its towering granite *kopjes*. Central to the park, in an area of particular beauty, is an elevated plateau long known to the local Ndebele people as Malindidzimu, "Place of the Spirits". At this spot, which he was moved to name "View of the World", the great champion of Empire, Cecil John Rhodes, was finally laid to rest.

Sadly, the fate of the African black rhino has taken a turn for the worse since those not so far-off colonial days, a trend which has accelerated alarmingly in recent years. Kamwi has worked as a game scout with the Department of National Parks for a decade, a period which has seen the black rhino population in Zimbabwe crash from around 2,000 animals to little over 300. Many of the poachers filter into Zimbabwe from Zambia across the Zambezi river, intent on making off with the highly prized horns which fetch US \$2,000 and more per kilo in the lucrative medicine markets of the East.

Ever positive in its approach to wildlife management, Zimbabwe has ventured beyond conventional methods of protection. Pioneered in Namibia, on vulnerable populations of black rhino in 1989, dehorning was demonstrated to be a feasible exercise and early research suggested a subsequent reduction in poaching activity. Encouraged, Zimbabwe began to dehorn white rhino in Hwange National Park in 1991. Although the original intention was to run a small scale pilot operation, events were moved along by the mounting crisis and dehorning was soon adopted as a mainstream conservation strategy. Black rhino were brought into the programme in May 1992, and it is now policy to dehorn all of Zimbabwe's rhino as quickly as possible. To date, 123 white rhino have been dehorned and over 140 black rhino.

Carrying only their automatic weapons and necessary radio equipment, the trackers relentlessly pursue the line of spoor. A slight

impression in the dust here, a broken twig or flattened blade of grass there, is signal enough that the trail is fresh.

Finally, the rhino is close; recently scattered dung still warm to the touch, clear sap oozing from broken stems where the animal paused to browse. The gentle crunching of vegetation by rear molars and a glimpse of grey hide through dappled foliage confirm the presence and identity of the quarry, and the helicopter is called in on ground-to-air radio. Several minutes later, the jarring beat of rotor blades fills the air overhead, and the startled rhino breaks into a brisk trot.

Bracing himself in the rear of the helicopter Dr Mike Kock, senior veterinarian with the Department of National Parks, carefully aims the dart-loaded rifle at the rump of the fleeing animal for a good intramuscular shot, and squeezes the trigger. Taking off with renewed vigour, the rhino is easily followed by the helicopter and runs for almost a kilometre before succumbing to the effects of the drug and collapsing in some long grass. Speed is now of the essence, for the longer the rhino remains immobilised, the greater the risk of complications associated with anaesthesia. At the start of the programme, a small number of rhino were lost this way, but optimum drug doses and protocols were soon established and the mortality rate is now virtually zero.

The helicopter has barely touched down, yet Dr Kock – accompanied by Dr Mark Atkinson – is at the scene with the seemingly bizarre array of accoutrements required for the job. Having checked respiration and temperature and satisfied himself that the condition of the animal – in this case an adult bull – is stable, Dr Kock fires up a 13in chainsaw and goes to work on the horns. A tiny coded transponder is implanted under the skin of the rhino's forehead as a permanent identification mark. Having removed the horns, the stubs are painted over with stockholm tar and the rhino given a combined penicillin injection. Finally, to prevent the same animal being tracked again, notches are cut into the underside of the hooves of

one foot and a number painted in white on its back so as to be visible from the air, but with horn regrowth at 5cm to 6cm a year, the procedure is repeated after 18 months.

Literally seconds after the reviving drug has been administered, the rhino is up on its feet, and with much indignant huffing and snorting, crashes off through the undergrowth. The rhino suffers no long-term ill effects, and there is no reason to believe they find it a particularly unpleasant experience. "Within a very short time, rhino are often



A target for poachers – but for how long?

seen back in the localised areas they occupied prior to dehorning," says Dr Atkinson, "and the stress factor is, in most cases, minimal."

So far so good, but does dehorning really work in terms of deterring poachers, and how do the rhino manage without their horns? Results so far are encouraging, and Dr Kock estimates that dehorned rhino are around 60 per cent less likely to be poached than their horned counterparts. A small number of dehorned rhino have been killed by poachers. After tracking a rhino for several days only to find it has no horns, a poacher may shoot it anyway for the small vestiges of horn which remain, to prevent fruitless tracking of the same rhino again, or simply out of sheer frustration. Cases may also occur where a rhino is killed before the poacher is aware it has been dehorned because of thick bush cover. Most worrying of all is the possibility that horn speculators may instruct the poachers they employ in the field to kill all rhino they encounter, because to hasten the demise of these animals will enhance the value of their stockpiles.

On a happier note, examination of poacher's spoor on several occasions has revealed that a dehorned rhino was tracked but then left in peace. And as Dr Kock says: "Once all

the rhino in a given area have been dehorned, the poachers are unlikely to move in and risk being shot for a few dollars' worth of scrapings." It appears the poachers are being paid not only for the weight of the horn but for its integrity and shape.

Dehorned bull rhino have been seen to defend their territories successfully against other horned bulls, no increased susceptibility to predators has been observed, and there is no evidence to suggest breeding performance is impaired. With a woefully inadequate budget and resources for protection in the field at an all time low, dehorning represents perhaps the last line of defence for Zimbabwe's dwindling rhino populations.

Dehorning is a costly business and additional sources of funding are always being sought. To this end, the intriguing possibility of offering "darting safaris" to wealthy foreign nationals has been mooted. The hunt would proceed very much as normal and then the rhino would be dehorned. Depending on international regulations, the hunter might be permitted to keep the horns as a trophy. There are still enough horned rhino in Zimbabwe for this to be a real option if the practicalities can be overcome, and it is currently under serious consideration.

The obvious way of generating funds, which could put not only dehorning but the entire national black rhino conservation programme on a sound economic footing, would be to sell the horns. Although it is a deeply contentious issue, the arguments in favour of a controlled legal trade in horn are powerful and compelling. The total cost of dehorning a rhino is estimated to be around Z \$2,000, whereas an average horn yield of 4kg for a rhino is worth some US \$8,000 at today's black-market rate. No great feat of arithmetic is required to work out that the sale of horns from just a few animals could pay for the entire dehorning programme. If the Department of National Parks could offload its rhino horn stockpile (worth over US \$5 million) on to the international market, the positive implications for wildlife in Zimbabwe would be huge.

Adequate resources for protection, rather than efforts to stem the booming illegal trade in horn, will be the key to African rhino conservation. Horn trade or no horn trade, the black rhino is in real trouble. Dehorning might just provide an all important breather, during which longer term measures can be brought into effect. If this objective is achieved the programme will have been worthwhile. □

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