Location, location, location

The current drought in Namibia has been tough for people and wildlife. For rhinos in Etosha National Park, the available browse in some places was so little that we needed to translocate one population from a severely drought stricken part of the Park to a lesser-affected area.

Carl-Heinz Moeller | Chief Pilot, Ministry of Environment and Tourism

Black rhino capture and translocations are tricky operations in themselves and in this case, a whole population of animals had to be moved, including breeding cows with their calves. Capture equipment, transport trucks and crates, experienced capture personnel, veterinarians, aerial support, release sites and post-release monitoring systems all had to be organised and in place for the operation to be successful.

The release site chosen was about 200 km from the rhinos' original home and did not have a resident rhino population, which would help the rhinos settle in to their new range. The site was excellent black rhino habitat, as it had not been overly browsed due to the low number of animals in the area. Prior to the translocation, non-functioning water points were restored, with water pump installation and rehabilitation of waterholes, thanks to donor funding.

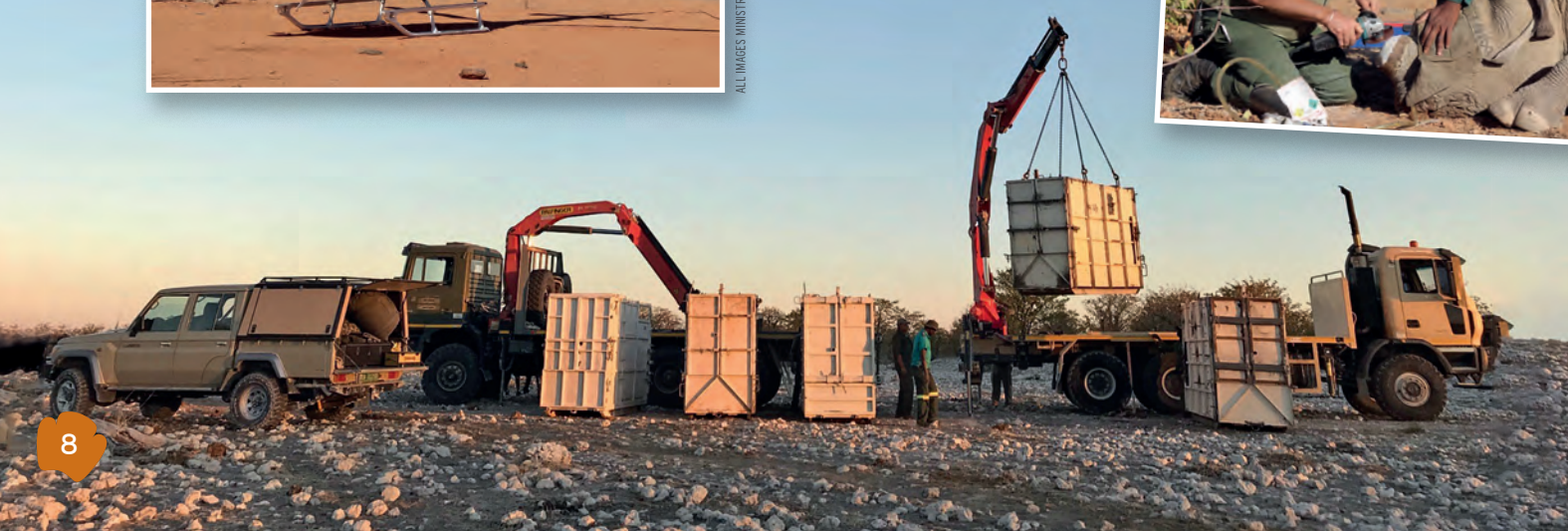
In a typical capture day, tracking teams would follow fresh spoor (rhino footprints) from the few remaining water points and once a rhino was spotted, the helicopter would be guided to the tracking team. After darting, ground teams were guided to where the animal 'went down', which, in the case of black rhino, is often a very inaccessible area.

Once immobilized and processed (dehorned for security reasons, ear-notched, DNA samples taken), each rhino was partially reversed from the anaesthetic, 'walked' carefully into a transport crate and loaded onto the transport truck. Only then could the journey to the release site begin.

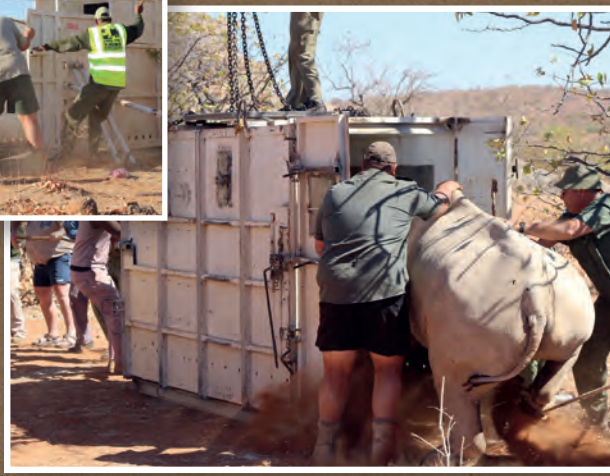
Constant monitoring during transport is extremely important: occasionally animals have to be topped up with tranquillizers to prevent injury during the trip. At the release site, individual animals were released directly into their new territory.

Translocating rhinos takes a lot of equipment and a big team to make sure the rhinos are as safe as possible.

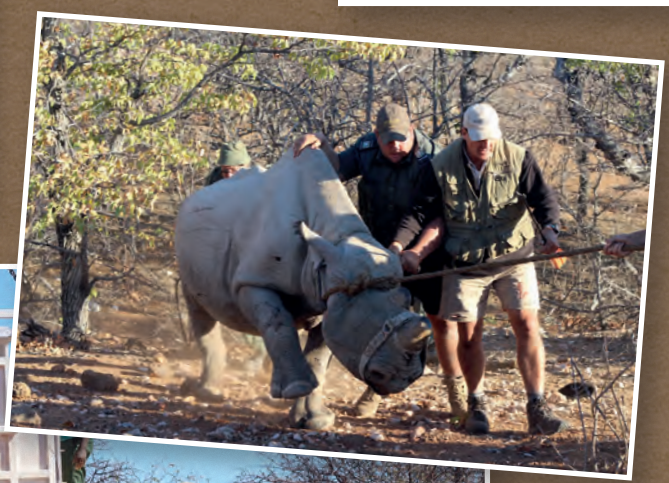
ALL IMAGES MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM



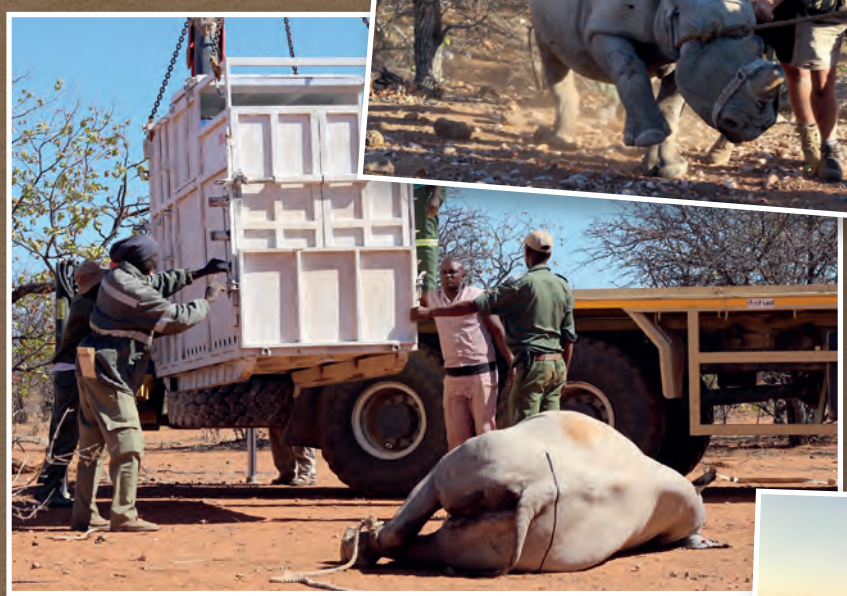
Cows with calves, however, required a bit more effort. Both mother and calf were anaesthetized again and walked out of the crate. Once outside, all equipment was removed and both animals were fully reversed from the anaesthetic at the same time, to ensure that they could wake up and wander off together. Of course, once all animals were offloaded, everything had to be transported back to the capture site for the next set of translocations.



To get rhinos into the crates, they had to be partially reversed from their anaesthetic and 'walked' in!

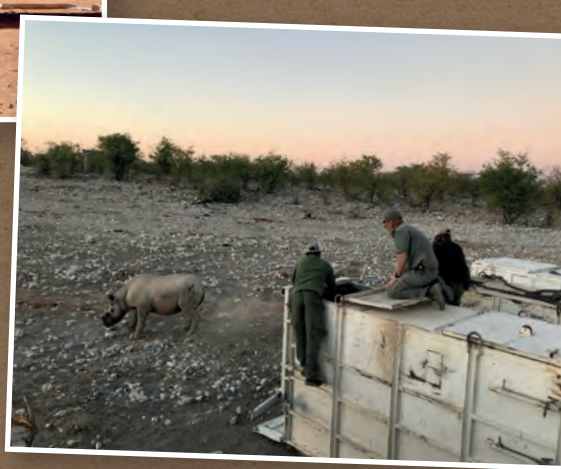


Guiding big rhinos to and from travel crates is no easy task!



To keep an eye on the rhinos after the move, key individuals were fitted with satellite foot bracelets, tracking their daily movements and behaviour. Each week, animals would be spotted from the air to check on their condition and overall health.

In total, we successfully translocated 29 rhinos. This black rhino relocation is, to date, the largest translocation operation that the Ministry has undertaken, in the shortest space of time. A very big thank you goes out to all of the team and the donors that made this operation possible.



The team make sure that all rhinos are ok once they are released, through post-release checks.