

# Uganda's new 'whites'

UP FRONT

A pair of white rhinos from Kenya finds a new home at Entebbe. **Curtis Abraham** reports.

**T**he white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum*, is back on Ugandan soil for the first time in more than twenty years.

This follows the arrival – in early November – of a pair of southern white rhinos imported from neighbouring Kenya at a cost of US\$ 20,000 (US\$ 35.2-million). The new arrivals are reportedly settling in well in the 1.5-hectare holding facility specially prepared for them on Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC) grounds formerly occupied by Entebbe Zoo.

According to UWEC Director, Beti O Kanya, the semi-natural holding facility cost US \$100,000 (US\$ 174-million) to develop. It includes a sandpit and a wallow and some partially cleared areas providing visitors with discreet viewing points.

The rhinos, named Sherino and Kabira, were reared on Solio Ranch in Kenya's Laikipia District. Their purchase was the result of a fund-raising campaign initiated by Rhino Fund Uganda, a non-governmental organisation established recently by the Desmonds, a German volunteer couple now resident in Uganda.

The Fund's appeals elicited substantial contributions from both the Kampala branch of the ITT Sheraton Hotel chain and the Ruparelia Group of Companies, also based in the city. The rhinos' holding facility was also developed with help from the Kampala Sheraton Hotel.

Prior to their move, the two pachyderms – and their human minders, both over the journey and in Uganda – underwent thorough preparations aimed at minimising stress to the animals



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during the transfer-*cum*-acclimatisation period, while also ensuring that all their dietary requirements would be properly met.

White rhinos are one of the world's most endangered species. Having no natural enemies besides man, poaching and habitat loss are the principal threats to their continued survival. Today, fewer than 8,000 white rhinos are thought to remain in the wild.

White rhinos are also among the largest of all land animals. Adults may stand 1.8 metres tall at the shoulder and weigh more than three tonnes. They once ranged freely over

grasslands and savannahs across Africa, between the southern Sudan and South Africa.

According to Petra Schaefer of Rhino Fund Uganda, the country's indigenous rhinos – black and white – became extinct about 20 years ago: a casualty of the rampant poaching that accompanied the political chaos of the late 1970s. The last Ugandan white rhino was reportedly gunned down in the country's West Nile region by an American founder of the Kuluva Hospital for Leprosy.

Until then, countless generations of rhinos had frequented the area now called Uganda. Indeed, the fossil record

shows that rhinos – of at least four genera – had existed here since the early Miocene, going back some 23-million years.

This year's arrival of the two white rhinos marks the first step in an ambitious reintroduction programme envisaged by Rhino Fund Uganda. The anticipated next step, says UWEC's Beti Kanya, will be to import as many as 20 eastern black rhinos. A secure sanctuary for these animals is already being developed – on an 80-km<sup>2</sup> private ranch in central Uganda's Luwero District, where breeding programmes are expected to be put in place.

Some critics contend that Rhino Fund Uganda's efforts are premature, however. They argue that the habitats in Uganda that are best suited to white rhinos, in particular, all lie in either West Nile or Karamoja, both regions where the animals' security cannot yet be guaranteed.

Rhino Fund Uganda remains anxious to build further on the conservation successes achieved in South Africa and – more recently – in Kenya, now one of Africa's leading exponents of rhino conservation. Like Uganda's, Kenya's rhino herds were decimated in the 1970s and early 1980s. Kenya's Save The Rhino project, launched in 1984, was instrumental in stemming the spate of poaching that slashed the country's rhino count from about 20,000 in 1970 to just 400 in 1983.

Solio Ranch, home today to the highest concentration anywhere of black rhinos, has been a major force behind the rhino's recovery in Kenya. Now, some of that success is coming to Uganda.