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African Parks to rewild 2,000 rhinos from controversial breeding program

by **Jim Tan** on 11 September 2023

- *African Parks, which manages national parks in several countries across the continent, announced it has purchased Platinum Rhino, John Hume's controversial intensive rhino breeding project*
- *The conservation organization plans to rewild all 2,000 southern white rhinos in Hume's project, following a framework to be developed by independent experts.*
- *The biggest challenge African Parks will face is finding safe spaces to translocate 300 rhinos to every year, as poaching the animals for their horns shows little sign of diminishing.*

On Sept. 4, African Parks, a multinational nonprofit conservation organization, announced that it had purchased Platinum Rhino, John Hume's controversial intensive rhino breeding operation, and intended to rewild the more than 2,000 southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) that came with it. The news was universally welcomed by those Mongabay has spoken to in South Africa's conservation sector, but the main question now is how African Parks will find enough safe spaces for the rhinos.

"The scale of this undertaking is simply enormous, and therefore daunting," says Peter Fearnhead, CEO and co-founder of African Parks. "However, it is equally one of the most exciting and globally strategic conservation opportunities — one of the largest continent-wide endeavours to occur for any species."

Hume, who made his fortune developing time-share resorts, estimates he has spent \$150 million over the last 30 years on intensively breeding rhinos, money he had hoped to recoup from trading in rhino horn. With no sign of the ban on the international trade in rhino horn lifting, Hume was forced into selling his operation.

After [the auction for Hume's operation in April this year failed to attract a single bid](#), African Parks was approached by concerned individuals in the conservation community to try to find a solution and assisted by the South African

government in conducting due diligence, says Fearnhead. The exact amount can't be disclosed due to nondisclosure agreements, but he says the purchase price, paid for with donor funding, was significantly lower than Hume's initial reserve of \$10 million.

"For me, John Hume's project was always a bit controversial because those rhinos were being farmed. It wasn't fair on them, it wasn't ethical," says Grant Fowlds, a South African conservationist and author of *Saving the Last Rhinos*. "I think African Parks taking it over is a very positive thing."

Hume's approach was focussed specifically on maximizing breeding numbers with breeding camps and intensive management that was undoubtedly successful at producing rhinos but divided opinion in conservation circles. African Parks has made clear that this intensive approach will stop, and they will now allow the herd to breed naturally. Accounting for these natural increases over the planned 10 years of the rewilding project, Fearnhead estimates that 3,000 rhinos will be translocated into the wild.



A rhino crate being lifted by crane onto a truck during a 2021 translocation carried out by African Parks. Image by Gael Vande Weghe / African Parks.



White rhinos translocated to African Parks at Rwanda's Akagera National Park in 2021. Image by Gael Vande Weghe / African Parks.

"This is a project of epic proportion and complexity, and many of us have felt that [African Parks] are the only ones who could really do it properly," says Elise Serfontein, founding director of Stop Rhino Poaching, a South African NGO.

African Parks plans to establish a reintroduction framework using independent rhino experts who will look at factors like what criteria an area needs to receive animals, what kind of feasibility studies need to take place, what security will be required in an area and what follow-up monitoring will look like. Fearnhead says he hopes the first rhinos will be placed by the end of this year or in early 2024, with an average of 300 rhinos a year being moved for the next 10 years.

However, the main challenge for rhino conservation over the last 10 years has not been a shortage of rhinos, but a shortage of wild spaces safe from poachers where they can live — a challenge that African Parks must now grapple with.

"We need to realize that rhinos, even in the best protected reserves, are still at risk," says Serfontein. "Sadly, it's no longer about maintaining a zero detected

poaching rate, but about getting on top of a poaching problem as soon as it's detected to keep losses to a minimum."

African Parks has extensive experience partnering with governments and communities across Africa to turn around struggling national parks, including successfully strengthening anti-poaching in parks like Akagera, Rwanda, using the latest technology and canine units. They have also carried out large-scale translocations, including [recently moving 500 elephants across Malawi](#).

"Ensuring protected areas for these animals is key to ensure the success of this project," says Fearnhead. "While there are always risks and challenges involved with moving animals, African Parks believes the risk to the species of not rewilding 2,000 rhino outweighs the risks associated with translocations."

While some rhinos will go to parks managed by African Parks, the organization is also open to requests from other parks and reserves that will be assessed under the framework once it is developed. The framework will also cover post-release monitoring to ensure that the rhinos are adapting to life in the wild.

"The responsibility and the scale of what we are undertaking is sobering, but we are cautiously optimistic," says Fearnhead. "We have years of hard work ahead of us, including maintaining the highest level of security for the sanctuary, carrying out translocations over the coming years, and facing known and unknown challenges, all while continuing our core work of creating safe wild spaces across Africa."