



HORNS OFF OUR RHINO

WHAT DO CHAINSAWS, ANGLE GRINDERS AND HELICOPTERS HAVE TO DO WITH CONSERVATION? THEY MAY JUST HELP SAVE A SPECIES ...

The rhino was down. We'd been briefed by veterinarian Dr. Shaun Beverley from Limpopo Wildlife Vets that once the dart takes effect, there is a small window of opportunity to get to the animal, get its horn off, and administer the antidote.

In a decade, more than 8 000 African rhinos have been poached. In February 2019 the South African Department of Environmental Affairs, released the 2018 poaching numbers, which indicated 1 028 rhinos were killed for their horns in 2017 in South Africa. There are no more recent,

definitive figures available. Desperate landowners and conservationists have slowly agreed that cutting off their horns may be the only way to save the rhinos.

Karongwe Private Nature, close to the Lowveld town of Hoedspruit, arrived at this conclusion earlier than most. "The first rhinos poached on our property were a cow and calf. The calf was in agony when we found it," said Rudolf Hanni, the reserve's Director. By the time they'd lost their fourth rhino towards the end of 2015, the rest of the population had been dehorned. They haven't lost a rhino since.

This morning's dehorning is a maintenance operation to remove regrowth. "To see a rhino without a horn isn't nice, but the alternative, a dead rhino, is even worse. We wanted to deter poachers by making the



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Jan

WORDS: DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS



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reward as small as possible compared to the risk they would be taking,” he said.

Before our vehicle stopped, Rudolph had moved through the bush, to where nearly two tons of rhino lay prostrate on the ground. Helicopter pilot Gerry McDonald had maneuvered the vet into the best position to dart the rhino, but neither the terrain nor the rhino's movements are predictable before the powerful tranquilizers take effect.

In this case, the massive bull was on his side, head sloping downward and one leg awkwardly bent, potentially compromising his breathing and the feeling in his legs. “We’re going to move him,” said Shaun, coordinating the volunteers and the ropes needed to shift the unconscious animal. Blindfolded, and ears stuffed with wads of cotton, the rhino was hard to shift, but with each heave, it moved a few inches, until Shaun was satisfied. The oxygen tube in, veterinary nurse Janelle Goodrich began the routine collection of blood samples.

Then, the chainsaw screamed to life.

Flakes of keratin swirled around the rhino's head as the blade sliced through the fat base of the horn. While the veterinary team worked, the lodge owners, Global Vision International (GVI) volunteers and reserve staff cooled the rhino with litres of water, some of it mixed with their sweat and tears. A smaller blade delicately contoured the stump, before the

angle grinder smoothed the rough edges.

Back in the vehicle, we watched the rhino lurch back to life. The oil Janelle had applied to the stump gleamed as we contemplated the absurd necessity of such an extreme exercise. Poached rhinos don't get up and crash through the bush. Instead, their horns are hacked off with deep, bloody blows into the skull, sometimes while the animal is still alive.

“The tipping point was in 2018 when one of Balule's finest rangers preferred to resign rather than face another poached rhino,” said Sharon Haussmann, Chairperson for Balule Private Nature Reserve and spokesperson for the recent coordinated dehorning exercise that took place in Kruger's Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR).

“With every carcass we found, the aftermath was even more traumatic than the one before,” she said. From finger-pointing and mistrust, to sheer exhaustion, anti-poaching teams were dealing with unprecedented stress, and they weren't winning. The relentless onslaught has reduced the rhino population within Balule by nearly 70% since 2012.

Once the decision to dehorn was made, “it seemed obvious,” said Sharon, who helped drive and coordinate what is one of the largest dehorning exercises ever undertaken in South Africa on wild rhino populations. As a strategic and



collaborative management intervention between South African National Parks (SANParks) and its conservation partners in the Greater Kruger region, it's part of an integrated rhino management approach that took nine months to facilitate.

"In a way it's an experiment," said Sharon. It's the first time it's been done in an open system, but so far, "it's been intensely worthwhile". The operation was carried out with textbook precision – their record was nine dehornings in a day and the quickest dehorning took just 12 minutes. It was also top secret, announced publicly after the fact. "For the first time in my life I feel like I am doing what I'm meant to do by helping to proactively save a species," she said, adding that it's brought the neighbouring reserves' management closer together than ever before.

It is still just one security intervention, but by the end of 2019, Balule, Klaserie and Thornybush had dehorned all their rhinos with the Mpumalanga Parks and Tourism's Manyeleti Reserve following suit. Like Karongwe, most other private reserves in the lowveld have also dehorned their rhinos, with ongoing follow-up operations. All horn off-cuts are securely stored off-site at an undisclosed location.

While the costs are enormous, on average about R15 000 per rhino, most agree the price of not dehorning animals is higher.

"What you don't have are intensive

after hours and reactive costs. Even more importantly, you don't lose rhinos, or carry the emotional and mental burden of repeated poaching events," said Sharon. And what's become apparent, given the ongoing costs of repeated dehornings, is that people are willing to pay to be part of them.

"Visitors to lodges or landowner donations covered our initial costs, but we've found having lodge guests participate in dehornings really valuable too. When you can touch, see and smell the animal, it really drives the conservation message home," she said. Karongwe funds 80 to 90% of its dehorning work from guest contributions to their dehorning fund, with property owners picking up the rest of the tab.

Losing their horns doesn't seem to negatively affect the rhino in any way, but its effectiveness against poaching and the health of the rhinos will be scientifically monitored into the future.

Meanwhile on Karongwe, the smell of dust, antiseptic, and the burn of steel against keratin, lingers in the air. We readied ourselves for the next dehorning – there were two female rhinos to go. The chopper's rotors cut through sunbeams and birdsong as Shaun and Gerry set off to find them. Dust covered, sweaty and emotional, we stood waiting, different to who we were before. ●

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