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OUR BURNING PLANET

SAVING PRIVATE RHINO

‘Great day’ for conservation as rhinos reach safe haven in Greater Kruger as part of rewilding project



📷 *The first rhino to cautiously step over the threshold into living in a natural wild environment for the first time, most likely, since birth. (Photo: Kim Lesters)*



[s://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/julia-evans/](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/julia-evans/))

By Julia Evans (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/julia-evans/>)

Thirty-two southern white rhinos were safely delivered to Sabi Sand Nature Reserve last month. It's a private reserve within the Greater Kruger system and is engaged in what is believed to be the largest rewilding of a species of that size.



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10 min

Despite – or perhaps because of – a decade of poaching that ravaged the Greater Kruger open system, it was hailed as “a great day” when 32 white rhinos took their first tentative steps into Sabi Sand Nature Reserve in May. The reserve has become a safe sanctuary for rhinos in recent years thanks to innovative anti-poaching strategies.

“Our members and even myself, in my relatively short time at Sabi Sand, have personally seen far too many poached rhino carcasses,” Sabi Sand manager Iain Olivier told *Daily Maverick*.



The capture team holds a crate door open for a calf to join its mother in the secure temporary boma constructed on the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve specifically for the rewilding project. (Photo: Kim Lesters)



Sabi Sand Nature Reserve staff carefully guide a crate with the precious cargo from a transport truck into the release boma. (Photo: Kim Lesters)

“When the first southern white rhino stepped on to the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve from this group, it marked not just a moment of conservation success, but a deeply personal victory for us as a reserve, our members, and our dedicated team who have tirelessly worked to protect rhinos in this area, often risking their lives both within and outside the boundaries of our reserve. A great day.”





The Sabi Sand Nature Reserve manager gives a crated rhino an encouraging tap to leave the crate for the temporary boma area. (Photo: Kim Lesters)

The Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, with the Greater Kruger Environmental Protection Foundation (GKEPF) and non-profit organisation African Parks – supported by game capture specialists Conservation Solutions – successfully moved the 32 animals into the private reserve.

This marked the first translocation into the Greater Kruger landscape under the “Rhino Rewild” initiative by African Parks, which aims to move 2,000 southern white rhinos into secure protected areas across Africa over the next decade.

In September 2023, [African Parks purchased the world’s largest captive rhino breeding operation \(https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-09-04-humes-herd-of-2000-african-rhinos-get-a-last-minute-lifeline-in-major-purchase-and-rewilding-project/\)](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-09-04-humes-herd-of-2000-african-rhinos-get-a-last-minute-lifeline-in-major-purchase-and-rewilding-project/) for

an undisclosed sum from North West rhino breeder John Hume. At the time, the animals were facing an uncertain future.





A white rhino enjoys supplementary lucerne in the capture boma, a holding area that allows the rhinos to adjust before being moved into Sabi Sand Nature Reserve. (Photo: Kim Lesters)

The move was hugely significant as Hume's 2,000 rhinos represented nearly 13% of the world's remaining wild rhino population. It left African Parks with the mammoth task of rewilding all the rhinos to well-managed and secure protected areas, with the ultimate goal of helping to secure the future of the species.

The first leg of the project saw 40 southern white rhinos translocated (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-05-19-convoy-of-hope-40-rhinos-dropped-off-at-kzn-conservancy/>) to the 30,000-hectare Muniwana Conservancy in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

In the second phase, 120 southern white rhinos were moved to private reserves along the Kruger National Park's western boundary, which is part of the Greater Kruger open system in Mpumalanga and Limpopo – with Sabi Sand Nature Reserve being the first.

Read more in Daily Maverick: [Benefits so clearly outweigh the risks](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-07-benefits-so-clearly-outweigh-the-risks-120-rhino-successfully-translocated-into-greater-kruger-system/): 120 rhino successfully translocated into Greater Kruger system

[\(https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-07-benefits-so-clearly-outweigh-the-risks-120-rhino-successfully-translocated-into-greater-kruger-system/\)](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-07-benefits-so-clearly-outweigh-the-risks-120-rhino-successfully-translocated-into-greater-kruger-system/)

This donation to Sabi Sand will supplement its current population of white rhinos and support the work in conserving this important species in the Greater Kruger system and the Greater Limpopo transfrontier conservation area that has seen white rhino numbers fall from about 10,600 in 2011 to less than 2,000 at the end of 2022 due to poaching.

Transboundary crossing

The reserve's rhino numbers remain undisclosed for security reasons, but Sabi Sand currently maintains a healthy and stable population of white rhinos that is fluctuating at the upper limit of its carrying capacity.

The collaboration with the GKEPF and SANParks facilitates natural dispersal, allowing rhinos to move freely across the landscape. This connectivity is crucial for maintaining genetic diversity and bolstering overall rhino conservation efforts.



A few white rhino enjoy supplementary lucerne in the capture boma. (Photo: Kim Lesters)

Sabi Sand – like most reserves in the area – has faced losses due to poaching in the past (in 2021 the Greater Sabi Sand area lost more than 25 animals), so this reintroduction will boost Sabi Sand’s rhino population, but also provide a net benefit for surrounding parks as there will be a natural dispersal from the reserve’s population.

“If we reach our carrying capacity, dispersal would occur naturally,” explained Olivier. “Rhinos would naturally move to other areas suitable for them, filling gaps left by poaching.”

The reserve's eastern boundary is open to the Kruger Park and the rhinos can also move north into the Manyeleti Nature Reserve, across the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area, and even all the way east to Mozambique as no fences are blocking them.

Anti-poaching measures

Considering that the illegal demand for horns has claimed more than 10,000 rhinos in the Greater Kruger area since 2007, rewilding these animals does come with concern.

Despite past losses, Sabi Sand has implemented various anti-poaching strategies with great success, as Tiara Walters previously reported for *Daily Maverick* (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-12-20-turning-the-tide-weve-lost-just-one-rhino-in-350-days-sabi-sand/>). These include dehorning the population, polygraph testing staff, installing smart fences, and using satellite tracking technology and thermal cameras for monitoring.

Read more in Daily Maverick: Turning the tide? 'We've lost just one rhino in 350 days' — Sabi Sand (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-12-20-turning-the-tide-weve-lost-just-one-rhino-in-350-days-sabi-sand/>).

As of Thursday 13 June, Sabi Sand has gone 305 days without losing a rhino to poachers. Their last was in August 2023. Before that, they hadn't had a poaching incident in nearly a year.

At its peak in 2022, the reserve had 40 incidents related to rhino poaching in a single month.

“But thanks to our dedicated security and conservation law enforcement efforts over the last two to three years, we’ve been able to achieve almost a 97% reduction in incidents related to rhino poaching,” said Olivier.

“It’s why we felt confident to get involved in this project and back ourselves as a safe receiving park and a sanctuary for rhinos.”

Dehorning as a deterrent

In May 2022, Sabi Sand initiated a dehorning programme to make the animals less of a target for poachers.

The new animals Sabi Sand received last month were dehorned before arrival, so they would fit in with the existing dehorned population.

“Ultimately, it is very sad that we’ve had to go that far to remove something as critical as the horn, and so they are obviously affected,” said Olivier. “But at this stage, we haven’t seen behavioural abnormalities that would currently outweigh the benefits in terms of reducing poaching.”

Monitoring

Sabi Sand has integrated cutting-edge technology with its Anti-Poaching Unit (APU) and ranger forces. This includes thermal cameras along fences and in high-risk areas, and trail cameras deployed through all APU sections, with integrated AI technology to detect poachers and thermal drones for rapid response and follow-ups.

The reserve’s rangers, control centre and 24-hour monitoring system ensure constant surveillance across the reserve. The information is collated by EarthRanger, a technology platform for ranger-based law enforcement.