

Historic rewilding of 120 rhinos into the Greater Kruger National Park area



Environmental history was made on Friday 7 June 2024 when the last of 120 white rhinos was released into the network of private and communal reserves on the western border of the Kruger National Park. The operation was carried out under a strict veil of secrecy to ensure its security.

It has been over 15 years since the poaching crisis first hit [Greater Kruger](#), when heightened demand for rhino horn in Asian markets sparked an unprecedented onslaught on the world's largest rhino population.

It has been impossible to quantify the [destruction of the crisis — on rhino populations and ecosystems](#), but above all, on the hearts, minds and morale of people who've had to witness its brutality day in and out.

Yet today, Friday 7 June 2024, we celebrate an unexpected milestone amid significant anti-poaching successes. Over the past few weeks, a historic rewilding project has seen 120 southern white rhinos translocated to private reserves along Kruger National Park's western boundary. These rhinos have arrived, marking a successful end to this translocation, which forms part of African Parks' Rhino Rewild initiative.

After such protracted devastation in this area, it is a remarkable sign of positivity, progress and hope.



The translocation of 120 rhinos is an enormous undertaking and has resulted in many sleepless nights but it has been worth it. (Photo: Mike Dexter)

In September last year, African Parks [announced it would rewild](#) the 2,000 rhinos it had bought from the world's largest private captive rhino breeding operation. Around the same time, here along the western edges of Kruger, we were reflecting on security gains with cautious optimism. Criminality continues to be a significant threat, but poaching rates, particularly among our private reserves, have stabilised significantly. In the last three years, specifically, we have seen positive rhino population growth.

On behalf of our private member reserves, the [Greater Kruger Environmental Protection Foundation](#) (GKEPF) submitted a proposal to African Parks to return some of the rhino to their historic Greater Kruger habitat — an unfenced landscape of over 2.5 million hectares. Not only did it represent a chance to offset losses and restore a healthy rhino population in the landscape — but we could also offer a suitable habitat for the rhino to live a free and natural life. It was an extraordinary opportunity that arose through extraordinary circumstances.

Of course, there is no way to plan, coordinate and execute such a translocation without being clear-eyed about the many risks involved — including the ongoing threat of poaching. Thankfully, this is the most security-stable time to be taking this risk.

When the poaching onslaught first began, the threat was new. People equipped with the mindset, skills and propensity for a career in conservation suddenly found themselves scrambling to deter, mitigate and deal with a complex form of organised crime. Now, so many years and losses later, we have the partnerships, knowledge and expertise to be proactive and effective in our responses.



A capture team 'walks' a rhino to its crate after being darted on the African Parks Rhino Rewild location. (Photo: Mike Dexter)

Hard-fought battle

Every day on this frontline has brought hard-won lessons. It has been a frequently painful school of life that has incurred a tremendous toll, but in the process, it has produced world leaders. A case in point is Project Fire, [an unprecedented study](#) published last year, which analysed intervention and poaching data from 11 reserves in the area over a five-year period.

GKEPF was formed in 2016 as a security alliance of 11 parks and reserves to unite in their anti-poaching efforts and approach. We've been able to establish that most elusive of collaborations: a well-functioning public-private partnership. And we've seen significant anti-poaching success.

Dr Sam Ferreira, Large Mammal Ecologist at South African National Parks (SANParks) and Scientific Officer for the African Rhino Specialist Group, attributes this success to GKEPF's partnerships and operations.

"GKEPF focuses on workable areas, where reserves have been able to implement access controls and the cost-effective monitoring of rhino. They know their rhino well, and have excellent situational awareness by covering small enough areas. They've also attained and manage high levels of integrity among personnel. All these factors, with strong partnerships at the core, have enabled them to keep rhino safe."

He adds: "Despite many challenges, the management team are still positive about having a healthy population of free-ranging rhinos. The resilience shown in that is just remarkable. People in this landscape have earned the right to do this. They have earned the privilege."



Collaboration is at the heart of GKEPF's mandate. GKEPF CEO, Sharon Haussmann, talks to Benjamin Kossama from Sabi Sand Nature Reserve while watching rhino being released into a holding boma. (Photo: Cathan Moore)

Population boost

Ferreira also explains that the rewilding project is a tremendous opportunity to restore rhino populations and some of their vital ecological functions.

“As mega-herbivores, white rhino can be thought of as ecosystem engineers that contribute cascade effects in the landscape. For instance, where they graze, they leave behind shorter grass suitable for small antelope, which in turn provide prey for predators. They help to create water holes and wallows. And rhino dung helps to disperse seeds and provide nutrients that help multiple other species thrive.”

How the rewilded rhino will adapt to their new landscape presents many unknowns — including how they will interact with existing populations, predators and other large mammals like elephant. That the habitat here is optimal for the species is indisputable, and this was a key consideration.

The rhinos are released into a temporary holding boma for two days to recover from the sedative drugs used during the process. This also allows vets to monitor the rhinos to ensure they are healthy before they are released into the Greater Kruger system. (Photo: Cathan Moore)

“This will be the first re-introduction of rhino into this landscape in about 50 years,” says Markus Hofmeyr, wildlife vet and Director of the Rhino Recovery Fund, who formed part of the rewilding planning and oversight. “We know rhino do well in the Lowveld. We know there will be losses from adaptation, but we don’t expect them to be significant.

“The rhino are coming in dehorned, which has been shown to be a very effective way to decrease poaching risk in this landscape,” adds Hofmeyr. “We do need to go in with our eyes wide open, which everybody is — but no success ever happens without taking some form of risk. We’re at a point where this risk is well calculated.”

The rhinos are all dehorned and fitted with trackers to assist with locating and monitoring the rhinos once released into the Greater Kruger. (Photo: Cathan Moore)

While African Parks are donating the animals, the translocation itself comes with a hefty price tag — as does the close, ongoing security monitoring of the rhino. This is a critical part of the process, with extensive network surveillance.

The data gathered will help to inform future translocations for African Parks’ Rhino Rewild initiative. But beyond that, in a time where “rewilding” has become a buzzword, it will also help to guide processes for restoring ecosystems across the globe.

“We can draw from these insights,” says Hofmeyr. “It’s an urgent and important function that we cannot discount, and we need to promote it positively as much as we can, so that people are willing to take those risks.

“Our own existence depends on having healthy ecosystems, and often animals are part of making sure those ecosystems function correctly.” **DM**

Sharon Haussmann is CEO of the Greater Kruger Environmental Protection Foundation.

