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Secret dehorning programme to save endangered rhinos in Africa, as countries struggle to tackle poachers

Four hundred rhinos will have their horns cut off for their protection



By [Tom Bawden](#)

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A rhino getting dehorned (Photo: Aspinall Foundation)

Four hundred rhinos are being 'dehorned' in ten days to protect them from criminals as **conservation groups struggle to tackle an upsurge in poaching under lockdown.**

The project is unprecedented in scale and shrouded in secrecy to reduce the threat of sabotage.

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The rangers, drivers and co-ordinators of the project have been asked by the Government of the country involved not to reveal its identity, so they can only say it's in Africa.

Some £15 million worth of rhino horn is being removed from animals in a particularly vulnerable part of Africa, which cannot be named for fear that vehicles carrying the cargo from the safari park to the capital city would be targeted by criminal gangs.

Horns will grow back





A rhino gets dehorned (Photo: The Aspinall Foundation)

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The move aims to protect rhinos by rendering them worthless to potential poachers - while the horns will grow back in time, conservationists say.

Rhino horn is seen as a status symbol in some Asian countries, making it more valuable than gold. It is in high demand for Chinese medicine and for carvings.

There has been a surge in poaching as tourists, who normally deter many would-be poachers by their presence, stop visiting wildlife safaris under Covid-19 lockdown.



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At the same time, the worsening poverty caused by the virus is pushing more people into crime.

“We’re absolutely shocked by this sudden rise in poaching”, said Damian Aspinall, whose UK-based animal conservation charity, the Aspinall Foundation, is overseeing the project.

He says the area where the dehorning is happening has seen 15 rhinos poached since the virus hit, compared to no poachings in the same period in the run-up to coronavirus.

'Absolute last resort'

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“Dehorning a rhino is an absolute last resort. Though the process is painless and the horns begin to regrow immediately we would only take this extreme course of action were it absolutely crucial for the survival of the animals. The speed and brazen approach of these poachers has left us no choice, there has never been an emergency of this scale or level,” Mr Aspinall said.

Poachers are now acting with near complete freedom given the new difficulties in policing and protecting the space that is now free from tourists and the crucial eyes on the ground that they provide.

It is estimated that the eyes on the ground provided by tourists accounts for up to 60 per cent of cover in Africa’s parks, leaving 40 per cent to the rangers.

The project explained

1 – How does the dehorning process work?

1. The dehorning process is like trimming your nails. The horn is made up of keratin, the same as your hair and nails. When removed, it grows back.
2. The vet flies in the helicopter to find the rhino.

3. The vet darts the rhino from the helicopter with a drug called M99.
4. The helicopter pilot then shepherds the rhino to keep it in a safe space, away from water, cliffs, rocks, etc.
5. Once the rhino has been sedated, the helicopter lands and the vet ensures that the rhino is stable.
6. The ground team moves in and the dehorning process starts.
7. An electric saw is used to remove the horn to ensure the procedure can be completed as quickly as possible.
8. The horns are then catalogued, weighed and processed as per international and government regulations. Photos and other required and DNA samples are taken of the rhino.
9. The ground team then moves away and the vet gives the rhino a reversal drug to wake the rhino.
10. The helicopter then takes off with the vet and they monitor the rhino from the air to ensure the rhino gets up and is able to move off without complications.

2 – Does this hurt the rhino?

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No, the horn on a rhino is made up of modified keratin, very similar to that of your fingernails. It can therefore comfortably be dehorned without injuring the animal.

The rhino is tranquilised during the operation. The team works quickly, and the entire procedure is done within 15-20 minutes.

3 – Rhinos use the horns to defend themselves, what will happen now?

Rhinos only real predator is man. There are several studies demonstrating the removal of the horn does not have an adverse effect on the rhino.

4 – Won't some of the rhinos die due to sedating and darting them?

The veterinary team is very experienced with the precise amount of drug needed to sedate the rhino, and they have not lost a rhino on previous dehorning exercises. Every precaution will be taken to manage this risk. The drugs which will be used are also very well advanced and have been used with great success previously.

5 – What happens to the removed horn?

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The rhino horns belong to the reserve or park who own the animals. They are managed very carefully within an internationally regulated framework. The data from each horn is captured and recorded in a

catalogue. Along with details of the rhino, photos of the horn and photos of the rhino.

The operation is guarded by armed rangers to ensure the safety of the team due to the high value of horns. The horns are then taken to a secure vault at an undisclosed location. The data is recorded on a national register and declared. The horns are not destroyed.

Source: The Aspinall Foundation

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