

Rhinos set foot on Ugandan soil

After three years of preparation, fund raising, training and construction, four rhinos have now arrived at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary! The four rhinos that were captured at Solio Ranch in Kenya in February 2005 arrived on 20 July at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Nakitoma, Nakasongola.

Yvonne Verkaik, Executive Director, Rhino Fund Uganda

The two males and two females, of the Southern white subspecies, were kept in a boma (enclosure) at Solio Ranch after their capture. During the boma period (usually 6-8 weeks), rhinos are trained to be relaxed in their crates, in order to facilitate the transport to their new location. Without proper boma training, the rhinos might stress and hurt themselves in the crate during the long journey to Uganda. Due to a delay in obtaining the necessary Kenyan export papers, the rhinos overstayed their boma training period for more than three months. They received good care from two Solio rhino keepers plus two Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary rangers.

The four rhinos were moved into their crates and loaded onto the trucks on 18 July. Each truck carried one rhino. The convoy, escorted by a vehicle from Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (contracted for the capture and transport of the four rhinos), set off from Solio Ranch near Nanyuki at 4.00pm. Two vets, from Ziwa Ranchers Ltd and from the Kenya Wildlife Service, travelled with the rhinos. The convoy reached Malaba border post at 4.30am on Tuesday, and once the customs and immigration offices opened, it took eight hours to get the animals cleared. A vehicle from Uganda Wildlife Authority carrying two veterinary officers joined the convoy at the Ugandan side of the border. After a 920-km-long journey that took 34 hours in total, the animals reached Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary, and were off-loaded into their receiving bomas.

All four animals underwent the long journey well, and are in excellent health. There were some concerns during the journey because they refused to drink water, but the moment they left their

crates they started drinking. They also seemed to enjoy the Ugandan grass very much!

The purchase of the four rhinos was made possible by funding from European Union, who also played a major role in the establishment of the sanctuary. Other donors that provided funding to Rhino Fund Uganda for the construction work at the sanctuary, were UNDP GEF/SGP, DAS Air Cargo, Wasmoeth Wildlife Fund and the Dutch Government, US Fish and Wildlife Service, International Rhino Foundation, Disney Animal Kingdom, Save the Rhino International and others. With their support, a 40-km-long, 2-metre-high electric fence was erected; an airstrip, visitor centre and rhino bomas were built; and a ranger force trained. Rhino Fund Uganda and Uganda Wildlife Authority are working closely together in the rhino reintroduction programme.

The Sanctuary aims to import 10-15 more rhinos, in order to create a viable founder population and start breeding. Donations of white and black rhinos have been requested from the Kenyan and South African governments. In total, 50 rhinos can live at the 7,000-ha Sanctuary. Ziwa Ranchers Ltd gave Rhino Fund Uganda the right to breed rhinos on their property in 2002, and they have since then played a major role in setting up the Sanctuary.

The rhinos were placed under quarantine regulations and then released into the Sanctuary proper in early September. Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary can now open its doors for visitors. The Sanctuary also runs an education programme, and schools interested in visiting can contact the Sanctuary's Education Manager, David Bakeine.

In May 2005, Save the Rhino International gave a grant of £2,920 to the Rhino Fund Uganda, which will pay for the salaries of David Bakeine, the Education Officer, and an Education Assistant for 12 months starting in June 2005. We wish the RFU every success for the future.

