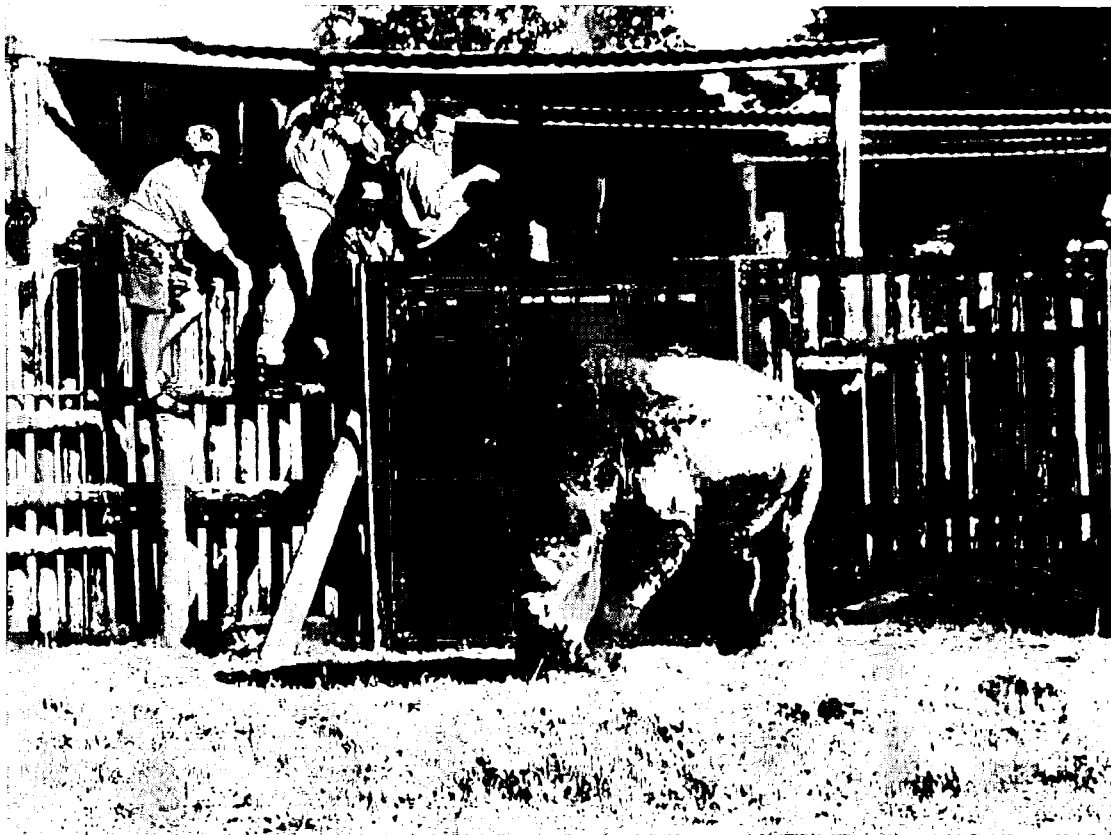


# WILDERNESS SAFARIS

## WILDERNESS RHINO TRUST NEWSLETTER

ISSUE #4  
DECEMBER 2001



The Vice President of Botswana, Lt. General Ian Khama, opened the boma gate to release Sergeant

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## RHINO RELEASE

On the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2001 the Honourable Vice President of Botswana, Lt.General Ian Khama released the first two rhinos from the Mombo bomas. The Vice President was gracious enough to speak to a small group of invited dignitaries, as well as the guests from both Mombo and Little Mombo Camps, before the release. The Vice President has been extremely supportive of this project from the outset and complimented both Wilderness Safaris and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks for a successful endeavour.

Mr Gift Otumile, the regional wildlife officer from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) spoke on behalf Mr Jan Broekhuis, the Ass. Director of the DWNP, who was absent due to illness. Mr Broekhuis has played an integral part in promoting the re-introduction of the White Rhinos and has worked together with Wilderness Safaris from the beginning of the project. In his speech he said that this was a landmark moment in the history of the Moremi Game Reserve and a true collaborative effort for the benefit of conservation, that he hopes has set an example for others to follow.



Kgosi leaving the bomas and moving past the viewing platform.

The Managing Director of Okavango Wilderness Safaris, Mr Keith Vincent, spoke on behalf of the company. He discussed the involvement of Wilderness Safaris in the project and the company's involvement in Environmental Conservation. He also thanked the DWNP, Mokolodi Game Reserve and the Khama Rhino Sanctuary for their involvement and assistance with the project.

It was an emotional moment when the gates were finally opened. The females were released first and wasted no time in leaving the confined space of the bomas. Within two minutes they walked out, looked around uncertainly, fed for a moment on the green grass outside the gate and then ran off in a northerly direction. What a wonderful sight! At last the white rhinos had returned to take up their rightful place in the Okavango Delta after many years of absence.

After about an hour the DWNP helicopter flew in the direction of their departure to get some idea of their whereabouts. The tracking equipment was working well and together with the expert knowledge of the pilot, Barney O'Hara, they were sighted within minutes. The rhinos were still running north but finding it increasingly difficult to negotiate the deep floodwater-fringing Chief's Island. Although the area would be inaccessible by vehicle, it was a 'safe' area for them to readjust to their new surroundings. Food and water was abundant and they wouldn't be disturbed by anybody. They remained on a relatively small island for the first week after release before gaining the confidence to explore.

The Vice-President released Sergeant and Kgosi, the two bulls, early the following morning. They were released separately so as to avoid immediate contact and as with the females, they moved out of the bomas within minutes of release, but headed south without looking back. So much for me thinking they would return for Lucerne that evening!



Sergeant surrounded by Wild Date palms (*Phoenix reclinata*) in the middle of the Okavango Delta.

#### **MONITORING EQUIPMENT INSTALLED**

Horn transmitters were installed prior to release. Each rhino has had a transmitter installed so that there is a greater chance of finding the animals each day and, in turn, increasing the security of each animal. The purchasing of the telemetry equipment was made possible as a result of a financial donation from the TUSK TRUST.



Dr Morkel fitting the horn transmitter into young Kabelo's horn.

## **RHINO SECURITY AND MONITORING PROGRAMME**

The teamwork between the DWNP anti-poaching unit and the Wilderness Safaris monitoring team has been extremely successful so far. Due to serious commitment they had a 100% success rate, in finding all the rhinos on a daily basis, for the first month after the release. The DWNP helicopter remained at the rhino camp for the first week after the release and made the initial monitoring relatively easy. The rhinos movements were erratic initially and the helicopter enabled the teams to find the rhinos earlier in the day. The radiotelemetry equipment has a longer range from an elevated position thus we could receive a signal almost immediately from the air. The tracking teams would then move out in the direction of the signal and find the rhinos from the ground.



The DWNP Anti-poaching Unit on foot patrol whilst tracking the rhinos.

Two factors that can influence animals stress levels after release from captivity is the availability of food and water. Both these requirements are in abundance throughout the region, particularly since the first rainfall at the beginning of November. The numerous

water channels and flat topography, with expansive open grasslands, will provide an ideal habitat for the animals wherever they choose to live.

All four rhinos have remained within the Mombo region, but have all moved southwards on at least two occasions before moving back north. The furthest any of them has moved so far is 28 kilometres, and the closest is three kilometres, from the camp.



DWNP Anti-poaching Unit tracking rhinos

**Grant Woodrow**  
Rhino re-introduction - project manager