



BLACK RHINO FOR VAALBOS

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One of the most effective actions that can be taken to conserve an endangered species like the Black Rhino-ceros, is to establish new populations in suitable protected areas. With the acquisition of over 20 000 ha of good rhino habitat in the Barkly West district, the National Parks Board is in a position to carry on with its current Black Rhino conservation project. This operation was launched in 1985 with the translocation of black rhino from Etosha to Au-grabies, a project that was generously supported by the Endangered Wildlife Trust and other sponsors.

The new land near Barkly West will shortly be proclaimed as the Vaalbos National Park. At present the land is in two blocks, the largest of which is 16 000 ha in area. It is fronted by the Vaal River for several kilometres to the

east and north. The riverine thicket, especially on the northern boundary is in good condition. The rest of the block consists of typical northern Cape and Kalahari thornveld with large camelthorn trees, clumps of other Acacias and areas of extensive shrubland where the "vaalbos" *Tarchonanthus camphoratus* is the dominant species. The camelthorn savanna, unlike that of the true Kalahari, is characterised by clumps of thicket which Black Rhino would find ideal as feeding sites and as shelter. The common plant species in these thickets are *Ziziphus mucronatus*, *Grewia* spp. and an *Asparagus* sp.

Most of what will become the Vaalbos National Park has been used for many years as a productive cattle ranch by the Gant family enterprise known as Sydney-on-Vaal. Their cat-

tle management was of the highest standard and the veld is in excellent condition. Though cattle were run successfully there was always room for game. There is a healthy population of Red Hartebeest on the property, as well as Kudu, Steenbok, Duiker and Warthog. The abundance of kudu, in particular, is indicative of a habitat well suited to browsers.

A reconnaissance visit to Vaalbos, undertaken with Peter Hitchins and Clive Walker, and other studies led to a decision to introduce Black Rhino to Vaalbos. This will be done during the winter of 1987 when the animals can be caught in Etosha with the minimum risk. A small herd of Addo buffalo will also be introduced and if the Sydney-on-Vaal cattle are anything to judge by, they will soon be fat and calving regularly.

Before the rhino can be introduced, however, much preparatory work must be done. A new set of rhino bomas to accommodate six Black Rhino must be built. The perimeter fencing must also be brought up to standard. The newly appointed Park Warden, Mr Clive Cheney is already well into the fencing routine, with game fencing going up as fast as cattle fences come down.

As with the Au-grabies project, the National Parks Board hopes for financial support from commerce, industry and non-governmental organisations to help establish Black Rhino in the Vaalbos National Park.



The typical camelthorn savanna of the Vaalbos National Park is characterised by dense thickets which are sure to provide ideal feeding areas for Black Rhino.