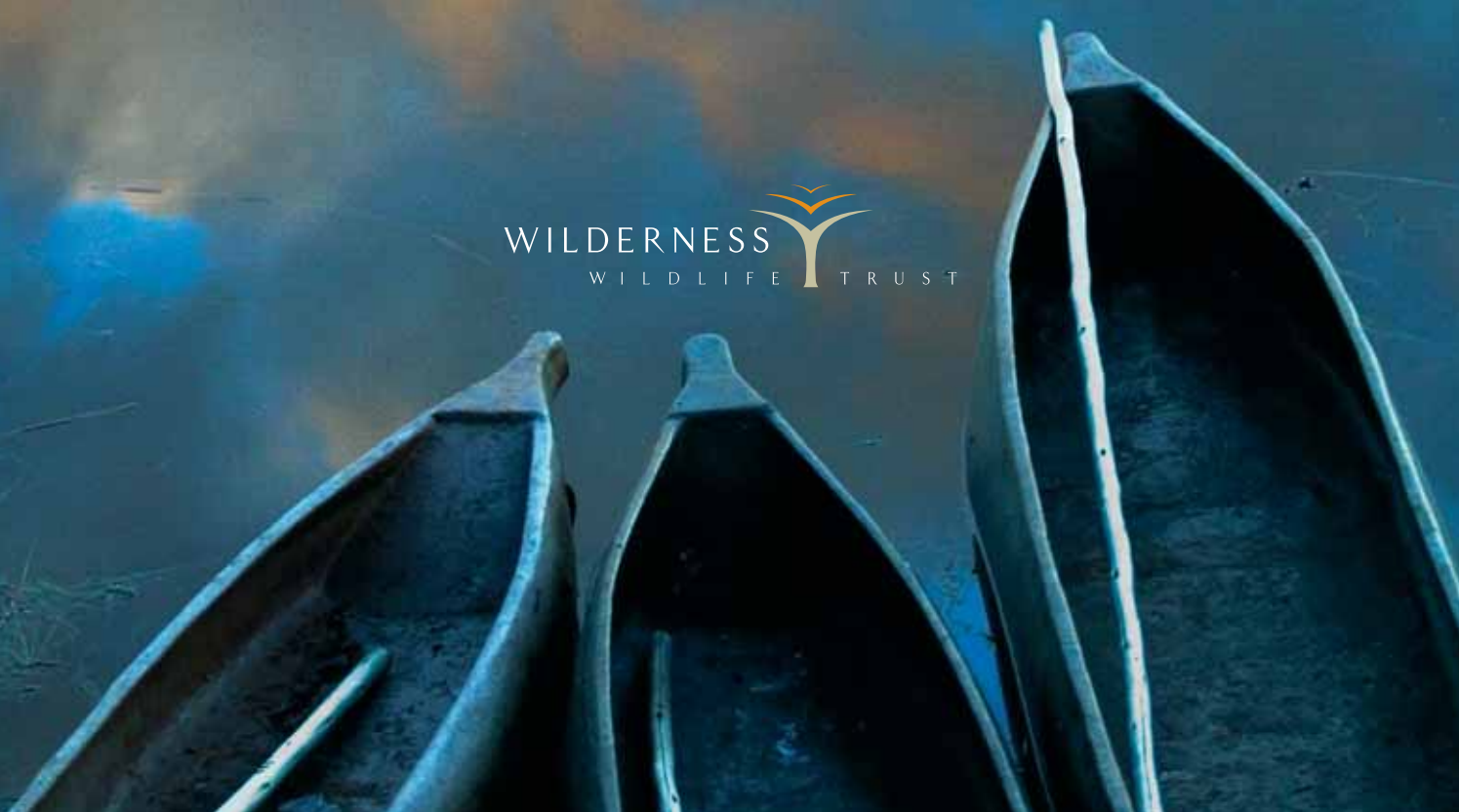


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Communal Conservancy Black Rhino Relocations

Namibia holds almost a third of all the black rhinoceros remaining in Africa, and 95 percent of the south-western subspecies (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*). The North West (Kunene) population, the largest population of black rhino outside a protected area, has increased over the last twenty years under strong partnerships between the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET), NGOs such as Save the Rhino Trust, concessionaires such as Wilderness Safaris and the local people in Kunene

While rhino numbers have increased steadily under this innovative conservation and management programme, the annual growth rates of the Kunene black rhino have declined steadily. In addition, new challenges face the area, particularly the need to secure the long-term sustainability of monitoring programmes and to further integrate tourism with conservation objectives.

To improve this situation, a number of translocation and tagging operations were carried out in 2006 to expand black rhino range into specific identified areas within communal conservancies. 22 specific individuals were identified from the database and earmarked for the operation by being fitted with transmitters in 2006. In 2007, once conditions are at their peak in the release sites, these animals will then be located by air, caught and moved immediately to the release site.

The first step, though, was the testing of equipment and translocation procedures involving male animals. MET translocated two bulls from the upper Aub and Barab rivers to the Kliprivier in the #Khoadi - //Hóas Conservancy where a single cow resided; during this translocation newly custom-built equipment was field tested for the first time.

The Trust provided financial assistance to assist in the hiring of a helicopter that was used for the capture and translocation of two male black rhinoceros from the Palmwag concession area and two receiver units for follow-up post-release after the planned operation. As per Namibian policy, transponders were inserted in all animals immobilised. In addition, Peter Hitchins, the world expert on rhinoceros ageing, trained field personnel in the field ageing and development of an adapted field ageing reference for Namibia.

All in all, 13 animals (seven males and six females identified from the Kunene database) were fitted with transmitters in the upper Barab and Aub rivers of the Palmwag Concession area. Reasons for choosing this area included the fact that it has the highest density of black rhino within the current range, the ratio of male/female is skewed towards males; and the area is close to or at carrying capacity.

Finally, a further nine animals were marked and fitted with transmitters in the Poacher's Camp and Springbok River area of the Torra Conservancy. This was done to assist the community in developing business opportunities in the reliable and sustainable tracking and viewing of black rhino with paying clients.

Conclusion

The operation was a huge success. An important factor was that the helicopter time was reduced from over two hours per animal in 2005 to less than an hour in this operation, with more procedures done in 2006 compared to 2005. The specially developed and designed capture and translocation equipment proved its value under extreme conditions and ensured furthermore that the operation could be conducted without the use of any heavy trucks and equipment. Modifications will now be completed before the remainder of equipment is manufactured. This system will furthermore prove its value as a quick reaction unit. Ultimately it is hoped the enabled colonisation of new areas of suitable black rhino habitat will allow optimised population growth rates and thus further entrench the survival of this endangered subspecies. √

