

# Where the black rhino roam: the Great Fish River Reserve

**Brad Fike, Reserve Manager and Conservator, describes the successful re-introduction of black rhino into this enormous Eastern Cape heritage area.**



**T**he Great Fish River is the focal point of a conservation complex which incorporates three reserves: Andries Vosloo Kudu Reserve, Sam Knott Nature Reserve and Double Drift Game Reserve. The smaller Kat River also traverses the Great Fish River Reserve. Together the two rivers give a riparian area of over 70 kms.

The Department of Nature Conservation's policy has been to re-introduce mammal and reptile species that previously occurred according to historical records such as journals, diaries, etc. The policy applicable to the Double Drift section has differed and a wider range of animals have been introduced there, many of which were not present historically. Our re-introduction programme, however, has not included certain species such as larger predators and animals that could become problematic or dangerous if they escaped into neighbouring areas. Nevertheless, a wide range of species have been re-introduced - including buffalo, red hartebeest, eland, warthog, hippopotamus, and reptiles and amphibia such as python and bullfrogs.

The most significant re-introduction, in both size and ecological importance, is the black rhino. Historical records indicate that black rhino once occurred extensively here in scrub valley bushveld vegetation while the white rhino has never occurred naturally south of the Orange River. Even so the Double Drift section does have a small population of white rhino which are confined to the Nyathi Game Camp.

## Notes from historical records:

- Henry Lichtenstein in 1804 refers to a Philip Botha who's party on a 20-day hunt down the Fish River shot, amongst other species, some eight rhinoceros. Lichtenstein himself shot two. As far as can be ascertained these latter animals were shot within the boundaries of the present Kudu Reserve.
- In 1820 Moodie saw many rhino and buffalo along the Fish River near Trompetter's Drift, which is the area adjacent to the N2 highway between Grahamstown and King William's Town where it crosses the Great Fish River.
- Prior to this Paterson refers to rhino at Trompetter's Drift in about 1779.
- It appears that the last black rhino in the area was shot in 1842 in the Ecca Valley near the Brak River.
- Rhinoceros are unfortunately one of the species that have been specifically targeted over the last few decades to satisfy questionable demands, ranging from ornate ceremonial dagger handles to fever-reducing potions. This onslaught has been so severe that in a 22-year period, ending in 1992, the total black rhino population declined by 96%.

The decision to re-introduce black rhino to the Kudu Reserve was taken in 1978. Preparations in the form of cable fencing of the boundary of the eastern sector of the reserve got under way, as did boma construction, and in May 1986 the first consignment of four animals arrived. The next parcel of sub-adult animals was received in 1989 and by this time the Sam Knott properties

had been added, increasing the area from 6,500 ha. to 22,000 ha.

Since re-introduction of the black rhino was a relatively new undertaking both this reserve, as well as Pilanesberg learned that it is not advisable to introduce new sub-adult animals to already occupied areas. We lost four rhino mainly due to fighting and it was a lesson learned, not to be repeated.

In 1990 and 1991, three and two animals respectively were donated by the Natal Parks Board. This population has done very well and exhibits one of the shortest inter-calving intervals as well as early attainment of sexual maturity. This is largely due to ideal habitat and the low density of animals. Recent research indicates that the eating of *Euphorbia* spp. by rhino could also contribute to their good viability.

Along with the distinction of accommodating this rare species, the reserve assumes responsibility and accountability for the welfare of the population. A field ranger unit functions to ensure their security and performs regular monitoring of each animal. Annual status reports detailing the population's performance are drawn up for the Rhino Management Group, who act as an overhead co-ordinating body.

The re-introduction of the black rhino is not just a matter of moving them from one reserve to another. First they are selected and captured



**Young black rhino in a boma.**

in the donor reserve. They are acclimatised to captive conditions and must be kept in separate pens or bomas to prevent mortalities. In fact they must be kept separate during all phases of translocation. Acclimatisation takes a month or more; then they are tranquilised and immobilised before loading onto a specially designed transport truck. A veterinarian accompanies each of these valuable consignments. The rhino are off-loaded into separate bomas at the recipient reserve with as little fuss as possible.

The sides of the bomas are packed with branches of local fodder plants (the black rhino is a browser) and water is supplied. Feeding experiments were conducted with the 1990 introductions to note consumption and preferences to new plant species not available in the donor reserve. During the first approximately ten days the rhino tend to lose condition before they start to pick up again. All animals are kept for one month and then released one at a time over consecutive nights. This is simply done by opening up the boma and leaving the animal to find its own way out during the night. The spectacular gung-ho releases seen with earlier

### Places to go in the Great Fish River Reserve:

#### Sam Knott Nature Reserve

- Botha's Post cabins are situated on the Kat River. They are equipped with basic cooking and eating utensils. Bedding is also provided.

**Inquiries and bookings can be directed through the Kudu Reserve: Tel: 0461-27909 during office hours or Fax: 0461-28472**

#### Double Drift Nature Reserve

- Nyathi Game Camp has excellent game viewing; animals include elephant, giraffe and Cape buffalo.
- Picnic site on the banks of the Fish River. Picnic tables and braai drums are provided under the shade of thorn trees. Swimming and fishing is allowed but leave dogs at home. This picnic site can be reached by driving through the Kudu Reserve or the Double Drift Game Reserve.
- Eastern Cape Tourism Board has six fully equipped chalets for hire. It also has Double Drift Lodge which sleeps 10; Mbabala Lodge sleeps 10; and Mvubu Lodge complex which sleeps 8.

**For inquiries and bookings: Tel: 0401-952115 or Fax: 0401-9564019**

translocations elsewhere as people cling to vehicles and whoop each time a rhino returns to butt the crate, are strictly a thing of the past due to stress and injuries incurred by the animal.

The release of the rhino into the reserve is the start of an intensive monitoring exercise, especially during the first month, to ensure that animals are able to orientate themselves and adapt. Social interactions are noted and all sightings are recorded on a grid map of the reserve for each rhino in the population. All births, mortalities, home ranges and modifications to these are recorded, as well as any other significant occurrences.

The small population at this reserve complex is performing well and one of our objectives is to one day act as a donor reserve ourselves. This may be a rather long time considering that large animals, such as rhino, are comparatively slow breeders, and our own area to colonise is extensive.

Although the plight of the African black, and to a lesser extent, the white rhino, is overall serious, the situation pertaining to the Indian, Javan and Sumatran rhino species is absolutely critical.

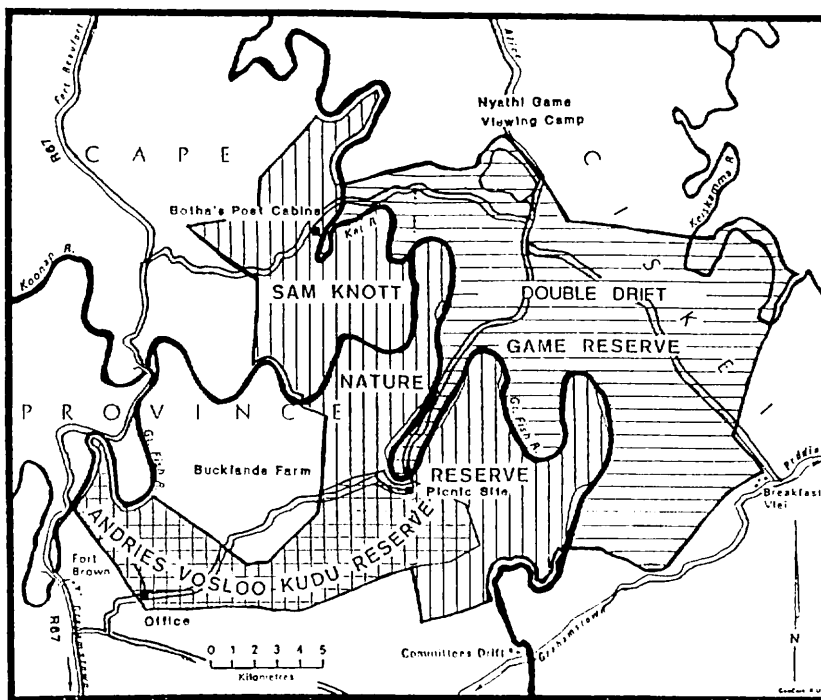
It would indeed be a sad day if, and when, due to man's greed and ignorance, or just sheer weight of human numbers, rhino, join the host of other man-induced extinct species.

The positive condition of the black rhino re-introduction is of course, reversible. Constant vigilance by all conservation role players, including the Endangered Species Unit of the S.A.

## White rhino

The white rhino is mainly found in two African locations.

- the southern subspecies *Ceratotherium simum simum*; thriving in the Umphalosi-Hluhluwe Corridor, is a great success story, largely due to the Natal Parks Board.
- the northern subspecies *Ceratotherium simum cottoni* from eastern Zaire and the Sudd region of the Sudan which is highly endangered.



Map of the Great Fish River Reserve showing the position of the component reserves.

Police force, is on-going. Pressure in the form of habitat loss and poaching by syndicated groups is still a factor to contend with and it is only in S.A. and Namibia where an increase in rhino numbers can be noted. ❖

## Black rhino

The black rhino is divided into four sub-species, namely:

- *Diceros bicornis minor* found in southern Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the eastern seaboard region of S.A., and includes the population in the GFRR.
- *Diceros bicornis bicornis* from Namibia and the drier western regions of S.A.
- *Diceros bicornis michaeli* from East Africa (Kenya and northern Tanzania). A population of this subspecies is presently located in the Addo Elephant Park.
- *Diceros bicornis longipes* is the West African subspecies (Cameroun, Central African Republic).