BLACK RHINO RANGE EXPANSION PROJECT

Black rhino appear to be breeding well in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. That's the encouraging verdict from Craig Reid, Conservation Manager of iMfolozi, after Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff carried out an ear-notching programme on the critically endangered animals recently. They ear-notched 19 black rhino.

Ear notching is a vital monitoring and security tool as it enables staff to identify individual animals and monitor the overall population more accurately. Knowing as much as possible about numbers, territories, calving intervals and the age at which calves leave their mothers makes it possible to make informed decisions about black rhino management.

In addition to the notching, rhinos are marked with invisible microchips. This is an anti-poaching measure, which makes individual rhinos identifiable and traceable.

The ear-notching programme is funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) through the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project, which aims to increase numbers of the critically endangered animals by increasing the land available for their conservation, thus reducing pressure on existing reserves and providing new territory in which they can breed up quickly.

Once an un-notched black rhino is spotted from the air, the notching process is swift and efficient. The animal is darted, then "steered" by the helicopter to make sure it runs into an area that is both accessible to staff and not dangerous to itself. Once it has fallen asleep, the helicopter lands nearby and staff run to the animal and quickly notch its ears with a distinctive pattern. As soon as it's done and everyone's up a nearby tree and the helicopter safely airborne, the antidote is administered and the rhino wakes up, none the worse for wear, and runs off. The whole process takes less than 10 minutes.

Jeff Cooke of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife prepares to ear-notch a darted black rhino.

CLONING CAN HELP SAFEGUARD ENDANGERED WILDLIFE SPECIES

It is widely agreed that banking of cells and tissues from rare and valuable animals should continue, and the necessary techniques, where practical, be developed that could one day be used to the benefit of wildlife species, said Dr Paul Bartels of the Endangered Wildlife Trust of SA, at an AfricaBio Convergence breakfast.

"Cloning technology is developing fast within the human and domestic livestock arena. Conservationists may be able to piggyback on these developments, allowing these technologies to become more economical and readily available to the benefit of selected wildlife species.

"If used for conservation purposes, cloning would only benefit a select few wildlife species. Some of them would probably be keystone species within specific habitats, which could influence the protection of a wider range of habitats and therefore species," Dr Bartels said.

He emphasised that cloning was the only technology that could potentially be used to get genetic representation from remaining individuals that no longer had the ability to contribute naturally to the total population's make-up. Secondly it could get gene diversity back into genetically impoverished populations. Theoretically this was the only way of creating "new" gene diversity within critically endangered species.

2064