

ELEVEN RHINOS DIE IN RUSHED RELOCATION IN KENYA



A PROBE SHOWED THAT THERE WERE AREAS OF CLEAR NEGLIGENCE THAT OCCURRED AFTER TRANSLOCATION BY JOHN NYAGA

A rush to relocate critically endangered black rhinoceros from Nairobi National Park to Tsavo National Park ended in catastrophe when all 11 pachyderms died soon after arrival because the habitat, with saline water, was ill-suited.

The deaths triggered recriminations within Kenya's conservation circles as the Cabinet Secretary in charge of Tourism and Wildlife, Najib Balala, attributed the deaths to "multiple stress syndrome that was aggravated by salt poisoning, dehydration, starvation, opportunistic bacterial infection of the upper respiratory tract, gastric ulcers and gastritis."

Former KWS Board of Trustees Chair, renowned palaeontologist and conservationist Richard Leakey, had voiced concern over high water salinity in Tsavo and had thrice blocked the translocation during his tenure, which ended in April of 2018.

On August 23, Leakey told Kenya's parliamentary Environment and Natural Resources Committee that Balala himself, and acting director-general of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), must be held accountable for the debacle.

"The Cabinet Secretary, Principal Secretary and the acting Director-General are responsible [for the death of the rhinos]. I don't think they can escape from this because it can't stop with the veterinary officers or the wardens because they did not attend the meetings that made the decision to move the animals," said Leakey.

Balala had suspended a number of senior officials of KWS, saying investigators had found "unacceptable professional negligence" among six senior officers, most of them veterinarians.

However, between 2005 and 2017, KWS successfully translocated 149 rhino to other area of the country.

"The results of the water assessments were hardly considered before execution of the operation," Balala said. After a truck load of fresh

water sent to the sanctuary broke down, there was a delay of four days before more fresh water arrived.

"The animals were thirsty and they drunk and drunk the salty water ... it is crazy and very shameful experience to the country," Leakey said.

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-Kenya), the donor that funded the construction of the new rhino sanctuary in Tsavo East National Park, sought to distance itself from the decision to move the animals. "We supported the rhino translocation to Tsavo East, which was managed by the Kenya Wildlife Service as the mandated government wildlife institution, as part of broader efforts to protect the critically endangered species. Decisions in relation to the timing and technical aspects of the translocations were made by KWS," WWF said in a statement.

However, WWF said it had initiated an independent review into its role and responsibilities as the project donor. "The recommendations from the review will be used to improve our internal processes where necessary, so that we can continue with our work to ensure the survival of the species," said Mohamed Awer, the WWF-Kenya CEO.

Leakey told *The Daily Beast* "... WWF spent a lot of money building this sanctuary. They wanted the rhinos released in it so they could tell donors 'job done,' 'ribbon tied,' 'more money please.' ●

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JOHN NYAGA is the editor of Swara Magazine.

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FACT FILE

BLACK AFRICAN RHINO

DICEROS BICORNIS

HABITAT: The highest densities of rhinos are found in savannas and in succulent valley bushveld areas. Black Rhino favour small Acacia's and other palatable woody species as well as palatable herbs and succulents.

DIET: They are also known to dine on succulents and tasty herbs that they can pull out by hooking their upper lips around the plant and tugging.

THREATS: Loss of habitat, conflict with humans and poaching of their horns.

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CRITICALLY ENDANGERED