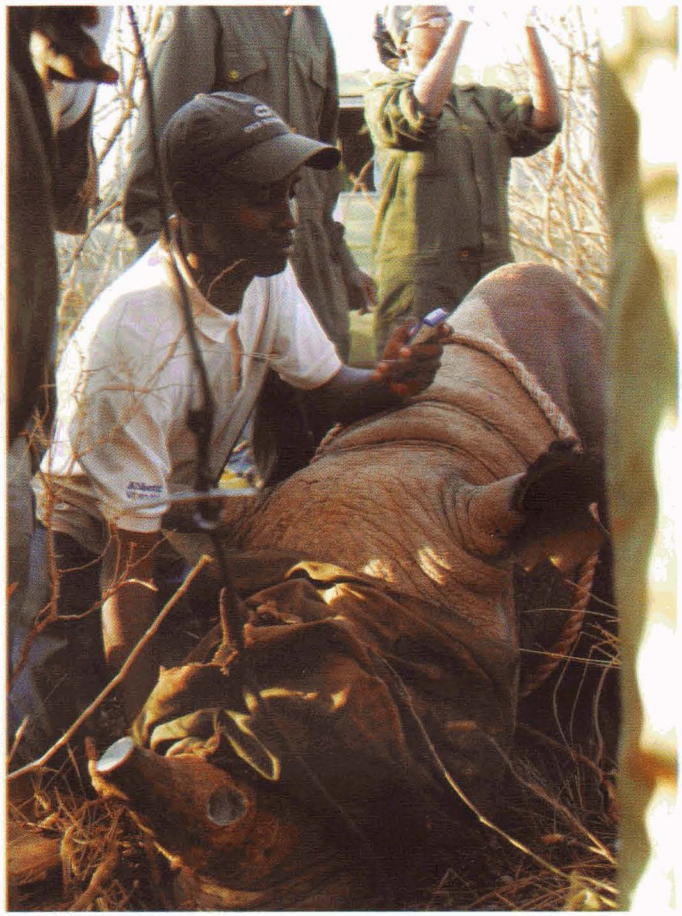
A circle completed

Story and photos by Nana Grosse-Woodley

This capture and release programme will help to reduce the rhino density within the Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary to a level below the Maximum Productivity Carrying Capacity (MPCC) and will therefore rekindle the formerly successful breeding rate. All rhinos that were captured for ear-notch marking and outward dispersal into the IPZ (Intensive Protection Zone) were fitted with radio transmitters to facilitate aerial surveillance which, ranger ground patrols, will record the dispersal of the translocated rhinos, as well as secure their safety. Please see *Swara* 31-2 for the precursor of this story.

After many months of preparation, everybody is finally on sight. All systems, machines and instrumental people are set to go; the action can start.

The wake-up call for tea and coffee comes at 4.50 am. Dark silhouettes come crawling out of tents into the still black night. As soon the sky shows the first sign of light, a Cessna 180 surveillance aircraft takes flight, seemingly signalling about twenty people in their green overalls to start running to their designated cars. A day of hard, sweaty and dangerous labour lies ahead—to spot, catch and translocate rhinos from within the Tsavo West Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary into the IPZ of the Park.



The three long days of the translocation begin when the sun is not yet showing, but just illuminating the sky enough for Tsavo West's Senior Warden Daniel Woodley, to distinguish the ground from the sky and thereby able to take to flight in the spotter aircraft. The team searches for one of the targeted rhinos and, once located, communicates its location to the helicopter on stand-by that will then carry the darting team, which consists of a vet with a loaded dart gun, an armed ranger and an officer acquainted with the individual rhinos in order to positively identify the spotted animal by its markings, sex and age.

The rhino charges off snorting, galloping and trying its best to run for thick bush cover to hide itself when the plane buzzes overhead, but the pilot does not let it get away. The chopper arrives on site and the plane peels off, circles in a safe distance, waiting for the next stage of the operation. The rhino is desperately attempting to defend itself, turning in circles to find out where the noise and danger is coming from, but not being able to discern it with its poor eyesight. Its head is held low to the ground with the horn ready to pierce anything, the back-end bouncing around. Clouds of dust created by the rhino's snorts, cover and disguise the animal, but it has no escape. The chopper is now so low that the rhino attempts to ram its horn into the underside of the metal flying machine. As the distressed animal launches itself up to hit the chopper, the dart pierces the rhino's thick skin, causing it to spin around.

The helicopter now breaks away to give the rhino distance so its adrenaline does not counter-act the tranquilizer and the much quieter spotter plane arrives back on the scene to keep the darted rhino in sight and to guide in the capture team. Soon the rhino's steps and pace slow down as it gives in to the tranquilizer and goes down. This process can take between two and twelve minutes.

The instant the rhino falls, the

capture team moves in, ties up its feet and makes sure the rhino's lying position does not obstruct its breathing. The team members cover its eyes and monitor the level of tranquiliser by judging the animal's temperature, respiration and pulse rate. Whilst the capture truck makes its way through the thick vegetation, aided by chain-saws, the capture team is working in perfectly synchronised manner—they cool the body with water, saw off the tip of the horn and drill a hole in the horn in order to infix a transmitter. They also trim the toenails of one foot so the animal later leaves a distinctive pattern to make ground patrolling and identification easier. The breathing and pulse rate are monitored at all times and the ears are cut for notching. The vets treat existing wounds from fights with other rhinos and they collect blood, stool and hair samples. All this happens in the shortest possible time by extremely capable and coordinated hands.

The capture crate is lowered off the truck and placed in front of the rhino's head. Once the medical checks are done, the head of the blindfolded animal is placed in the crate and the revival drug injected. The countdown starts: a voice calls out 'three minutes' …'two minutes' …'NOW!' The rhino's ears begin to move and twitch and as soon as muscles begin to stir, the men start pushing the rhino from behind into the crate, whilst another gang of men, positioned at the other end of the crate, pull as hard as they can on a rope attached to the animal's head to haul its mass into the crate—and it is in! Once the doors are slammed shut the rhino bellows, snorts and bucks in protest inside the crate. In addition to the revival drug, a long lasting tranquilizer is injected in order to calm the animal down sufficiently for the transport.

No cars or extraneous people are allowed at the release site. The crate door is opened and the rhino, with a transmitter in its horn and still a bit drowsy, heads straight into thick bush cover. The animal takes its first steps back into freedom! The team witnesses a black rhinoceros walking free once again in Tsavo West National Park—a circle completed. Free-releasing the Ngulia rhinos into Tsavo West had always been central to the vision of the Sanctuary's founder, Bill Woodley. Only 22 years later his dream has come true and a long, laborious endeavour has finally been accomplished, due in part to his own son's deeds.

Under the guidance of Ben Okita (Head of Rhino Programme), Daniel Woodley (Senior Warden of the Park), Rajan Amin from ZSL (Zoological Society of London) and Kenya Wildlife Service's team of vets, a total of ten rhinos (five males and five females) were captured and translocated without injury on either side, in a very orderly and organised manner. All operations went smoothly and successfully.

But the real work starts once everyone has left. The rhino's whereabouts have to be monitored on a daily basis. Maps need to be filled with coordinates for each translocated rhino showing its position and movements in relation to the release site in order to estimate each animal's new territory. Generally speaking, male rhinos take longer to calm down and settle into a new environment than females do, but they have a large enough area from which they can choose, including the old rhino settlement areas. The rangers are in place, monitoring each of the ten rhinos, guarding their life and safety and once again, visitors have a chance to meet or even get charged by a Black Rhino yet again out in the wild, in its natural environment of Tsavo West National Park.

About The Author
Nana Grosse-Woodley *has for the past eleven years lived in one or other of Kenya's Tsavo National Parks. Based for much of this time at Ithumba, in the remote northern sector of Tsavo East, she now lives in Tsavo West, where her husband, Danny Woodley, is currently the Senior Warden.*