

Q: What costs 4,000 South African Rand/\$1,500 and is good for twenty-four hours?

A: An accidental life insurance policy for a drug-darted white rhino.

Q: What costs \$70, has no clip or recoil, and you only get one?

A: A drug-loaded dart-bullet for a white rhino.

Q: What costs one-tenth of a \$40,000 white rhino hunt in South Africa?

A: A rhino-darting safari where at the end of the hunt, the trophy walks off into the African sunset.

Q: What's all the fuss about?

A: A minor revolution in sport hunting that started in 1990 when South African Professional Hunter Tony Tomkinson and hunter Chris Kinsey of Shreveport, Louisiana finally accomplished their two-year mission: To demonstrate that a thrilling rhino darting safari could substitute for a costly rhino kill, and also be a potential source of revenue for hard-pressed game departments.

A WHITE RHINO

DARTING SAFARI

by
CHRISTOPHER
M. KINSEY

Here's how it all began: "I'd seen rhinos darted for capture and translocation in nature programs on tv. And I got to thinking, why couldn't a sportsman track a rhino down, stalk him, and shoot him with a dart gun in the same way that you would with a rifle?" says Kinsey, a highly-motivated 34-year-old hunter who's always on the look-out for new ways to make hunting work for conservation. "I originally wanted to hook up with a game department capture team and volunteer my services, and pay the relocation costs of an animal they were going to move anyway. I thought the game department could benefit financially from a free relocation while I got the opportunity to experience the excitement of a rhino hunt."

The innovative Tony Tomkinson, a former Chief

Ranger with Natal Parks Board with twenty years experience in game management and hunting (and already an advocate of both bow and handgun hunting in RSA), had a similar idea cooking for some ten years: "A rhino-darting safari seemed a fantastic way for game departments to earn much needed revenue because they must dart rhinos on an annual basis anyway for translocation and population control. I saw it as an opportunity to tie a sportsman into the normal removal of rhino," explains the crinkly-eyed PH who typifies one's image of a "terribly British" game warden.

In 1929, a mere 120 white rhino in Natal Province's Hluhluwe/Umflozi Park Complex — the only original naturally occurring white rhino population remaining in Southern Africa. The white rhino

faced extinction when in the early 1960's, effective capture techniques were developed by a team of inspired individuals at the Natal Parks Board, which led to translocation of rhinos to hundreds of private ranches or game preserves in southern Africa, and to 200-plus zoos around the world. Breeding herds were established, the number of "surplus" rhino grew, and over the years game managers darted more than 3,300 rhino.

Now, South Africa's rhino population is around 4,000 with close to 1,500 in Kruger Park alone while the world zoo population approaches 700. In fact, the rhino recovered so substantially, authorities placed the species back onto the South African hunting license after an 86-year ban. Since then, more than 300 have been bagged by sport trophy hunters willing to pay the price: sometimes as high as \$40,000 for a top specimen.

Despite the enthusiasm Tomkinson generated for his proposal with game department capture program staff, senior level decision-makers hesitated on rhino darting by hunters, and denied permission for darting safaris on government land. Their reservations ostensibly stemmed from having to

Rob Wood with his darted rhino



integrate a sportsman's schedule, requiring time-consuming tracking on the ground, into a regular capture schedule where darting is done with military efficiency by crack shots from helicopters.

Finally turning to Drs. Anton van Eeden and Hennie Boshoff, private landowners with a ranch within driving distance of Pretoria, the project got a green light — on several conditions. "There is a 5% chance of losing a rhino during a capture procedure, so we had to insure the beast. Of course, agents thought we were mad to dart something, take some pictures, and let it get up and walk away," recounts Tomkinson who eventually located a willing South African company. The policy required the presence of an individual qualified in the administration of immobilizing drugs. Brian Thring, a former PH with over 1,000 darted rhinos in his past, was just the man.

As for any hunting safari, Kinsey insisted on practicing with his weapon, a German-manufactured dartgun with a Co2-driven propulsion system to throw the dart containing a dose of 25 mgs of Etorphine Hydrochloride. "I trained with some empty darts shooting them at a propped up seat cushion until I was comfortable with the

Giving the wake-up shot to a sedated rhino



ballistics of this rig — and a Holland & Holland it is not," says Kinsey, narrating the events of the safari, which started with some difficulty in locating the rhino in the ranch's vegetation-rich valley.

The moment of truth came when we tracked the rhino down and Thring loaded the gun, charged the cylinder with gas, and handed it to Kinsey. Easing to within a mere 15 feet to have a clear shot through the brush, "I stood up to shoot, taking aim just below the nuchral hump on the shoulder. While squeezing the trigger, I was very conscious of Tony intently watching this whole process. Instinctively, he stuck his fingers in his ears to prevent the muzzle blast from deafening him!" retells Kinsey with a good-natured Southern laugh. "Then the gun goes 'phuuut' ... and we watch this little dart sail on its way."

Nailed right in the hump, he sprang to attention and the hunters hit the ground hoping to disappear into the grass. Not knowing what hit him, the bull looked around in bewilderment, took a sniff ... and thundered off.

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"We laughed and giggled with excitement like little kids. We couldn't believe we actually did it! We whacked him!" exclaims Kinsey. "It's a totally different emotion than I've ever had when pulling the trigger."

Whenever I've shot an animal, I'm very intent that the shot placement is good and the animal is anchored, mortally wounded, he's going down, he's not going to get up, or going to run away. You re-load. You advance forward quickly to assure a humane kill. You're very aggressive," says Kinsey acting out the gestures of a seasoned hunter who earned his stripes on six previous African safaris across the continent.

Letting the animal go off some 500 yards, the hunting party caught up to the staggering rhino. But he didn't drop as planned. "We later determined the needle just wasn't long

enough to go through the rhino hide and deliver the drug into the muscle. It penetrated more or less subcutaneously so eventually the animal started to metabolize the drug and break it down as quickly as it seeped into its skin. So he got drunk, but needed a little extra booster to get him to go down," explained Kinsey.

Thring decided to hand-deliver that little extra booster into the rhino's tail. On film, a Laurel & Hardy scenario unfolds: Just as Thring comes within perfume-smelling distance, the sleepy bull snaps into life and plows after a scampering Thring. Realizing things are getting serious — especially when Thring trips and disappears into the grass — Tomkinson loads a round into the chamber of his back-up rifle and runs, shouting and waving his arms, towards the rhino. Thring pops up, zaps the rhino, and the heavy monster finally goes down.

This is not the end of the story ... Kinsey covered the rhino with the rifle while Tomkinson measured the silver-class/87.5 SCI horns, and "gets off" one photo — the one and only photo! Just when everyone is lining up for the team shot — *the real trophy of this safari* — the rhino starts jerking and quivering. Then suddenly he's up "and we broke like a covey of quail — pow! — with people dropping equipment and falling over stones. The rhino took off like a torpedo and ran about 50 yards before wedging in the fork of a tree," recounts Kinsey.

The safety of the rhino was the hunting party's only concern now, so we dispensed with the photos and Thring administered a shot of the antidote M-99 in the tail, and almost by the time the needle was out, the rhino recovered. "I expected him to be a bit groggy at first, but he just marched straight ahead, splitting

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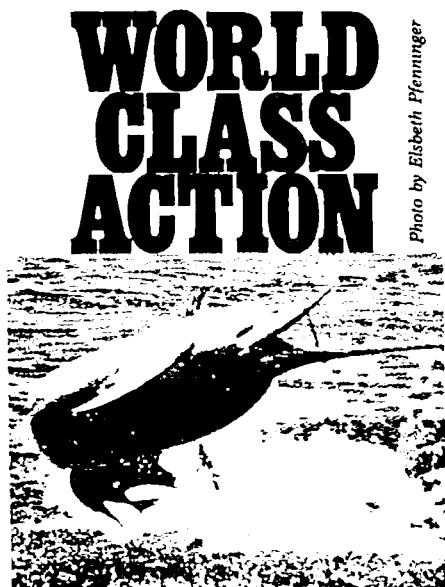
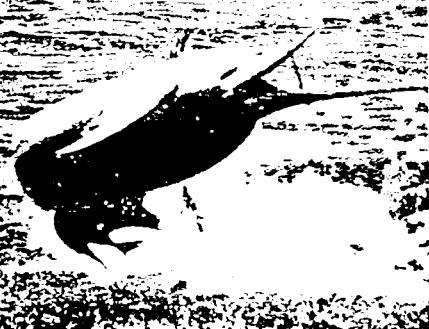


Photo by Elisabeth Penninger

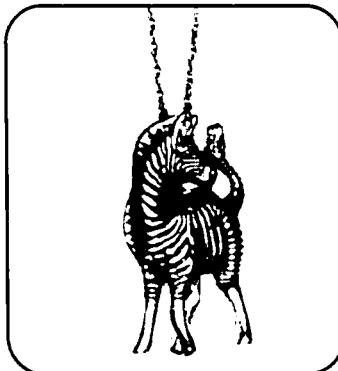
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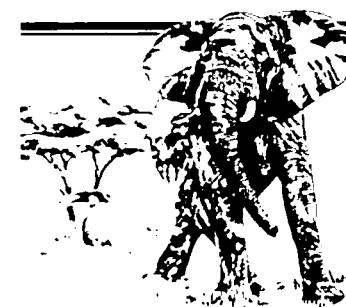


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the tree in half, and headed for the bush. We stayed with him until the danger period passed," said Chris, holding up the single fuzzy photo of his trophy bull.

"It was wonderful, seeing him come back to life, and watching him walk away towards the sunset with the Cape turtle doves cooing in the background. The rhino lived to enjoy the next day although we had completed a successful stalk and delivered a well-placed shot.

"It was a powerful moment for me," says Chris. The newness of this feeling even moved the professional hunter. "You're free from that moment of remorse after a kill, especially for one of the planet's large animals, that tinge of sadness even though you've enjoyed your fun and your success."

Because of the stalk and close "shooting" distance required. Tomkinson describes darting as a cross between bow and rifle hunting, "and it's just as exciting, and maybe a little more dangerous because you only irritate and not kill the animal," adds Kinsey. Pointing out that darting safaris are appropriate only for several species of game like rhino, elephant, buffalo or lion, "It's not meant for springbuck or impala or kudu because the distance they could cover in the time it takes to fall asleep makes it unlikely you could find them, in which case they might even die under sedation. It's just not practical," says Tomkinson. Asking whether darting would solve the anti-hunting problem, for example with elephant, "Remember, darting is not meant to replace other forms of hunting because hunting also serves as a population management tool, to reduce numbers in a particular area."

The success of this initial 1990 hunt led to a second darting safari, but this time with the blessing of the Gazankulu tribal

homeland's Nature Conservation Department. In November, 1991 Rob Wood of San Francisco paid \$5,000 to dart a rhino at Manyaleti Game Reserve in Gazankulu which borders Kruger Park.

Yes, there are probably some good arguments against darting safaris. One critic states if a species cannot "afford" to be on the hunting license, like black rhino, then the 5% risk of losing the animal is too great: "If it can't be hunted and killed, then it shouldn't be disturbed at all!"

Nevertheless, conservation organizations like the RHINO AND ELEPHANT FOUNDATION are "seeking new concepts in game management ... such as the harmonious blending of conservation and the utilization of rhino and elephant," says Kruger Park research scientist Anthony Hall-Martin. His often controversial and practical attitudes towards the necessity of "game earning its way" to guarantee its place in the earthly Ark, would likely support carefully monitored revenue-earning darting safaris as an integral part of a game management program.

Hunters genuinely want to participate in conservation, and are convinced that income-generating game utilization will work to preserve individual species, and act as an incentive for private land acquisition. This conserves wildlife habitat that might otherwise disappear under the plow or hooves of cattle.

If we wish to further increase white rhino numbers in South Africa, translocation of existing rhino is imperative. It shows potential for ranches and preserves where too few bulls are present to stimulate breeding, or for areas with inadequate range (three square miles per rhino!). And if hunters want to get on the bandwagon — and pick up the tab — that's fine by me!

On that note, Chris Kinsey and Tony Tomkinson hope to accomplish another First: an elephant darting safari in 1993. Please stay tuned ... ■

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