



# Moving to save

*Clive Walker*

It is 04:00 on 30 September 1989 and a bright moon bathes the ground with a luminous light. A fierynecked nightjar calls repeatedly in the dense bush and an owl hoots mournfully somewhere in the gloom. There is a faint snoring from the man sleeping next to me as I lie in my stuffy sleeping bag. The determined assault of squadrons of mosquitos that seek me out to assure me that I am not totally alone with the night sounds of the Ndumu bush. The others too, hear the sounds but they are not plagued by these little winged creatures for although there are twelve of us sleeping under canvas, only two of us are without mosquito nets.

As I anticipate the events ahead, I forget the mosquitos, nightjar and owl and concentrate on what will take place once dawn breaks. Mike Landman of the National Parks Board and I are on a rhino capture operation deep in the northern Zululand game reserve of Ndumu, on the Mozambique border. What makes this operation so special is that we are to witness the capture of black rhino which are in very dense bush dispersed among the numerous pans which are such a spectacular feature of Ndumu. Darting and capturing rhino under these conditions is certainly not without hazard.

Our camp is located on the extreme east of the sactuary in dense bush which, unless you are a rhino, or prepared to travel on all fours, is almost impenetrable.

A single track runs past our camp from the gate down to a game guard camp and then continues onto the flood plain and around its edge. The only other access is along the boundary fence. Somewhere in the bush are an estimated ten black rhino, the object of this operation mounted jointly by the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources and the staff of the Kruger National Park. I am here representing the Rhino & Elephant Foundation who are providing the funding for the helicopter flying time. The ten black rhino are to be captured and removed from Ndumu which has become a very sensitive area situated as it is, on the Mozambique border. The fact that this country is being torn apart by internal struggles and is suffering horrific food shortages, adds to the vulnerability of Ndumu Game Reserve.

The decision to relocate the rhino in the Kruger National Park must be stated for it takes foresight and common sense to both address and pre-empt the problem rather than wait for a poaching incident and lose rhino. These animals

have become so valuable that we cannot afford the loss of a single animal which would bring the species one step nearer to extinction. Recognizing the problem, the next step the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources took was the choice of a suitable area well away from the threat facing the rhino. The Kruger National Park is large, suitable and has a trained field force, good communications and the means to provide protection. This does not imply that any game reserve is inviolate these days against determined poachers bent on killing the last remaining rhinos of Africa.

06:00 and our camp is astir. We are well taken care of for the army has provided the capture team with three large rectangular tents, one of which is equipped as a mess tent with the luxury of a corporal who is a dab hand at cooking. The KwaZulu team is led by Ian Thompson and Graham Wiltshire, warden of Ndumu and staff from his reserve which includes some very well turned-out game guards, armed, I notice, with automatic weapons. The 303 rifle is still to be found in African game reserves but they are hardly a match for a poacher armed with an AK47. It has been said that the arrival of the automatic weapon in Africa has largely contributed to the demise of rhino and ele-



*Photos/Foto's: Mike Landman*

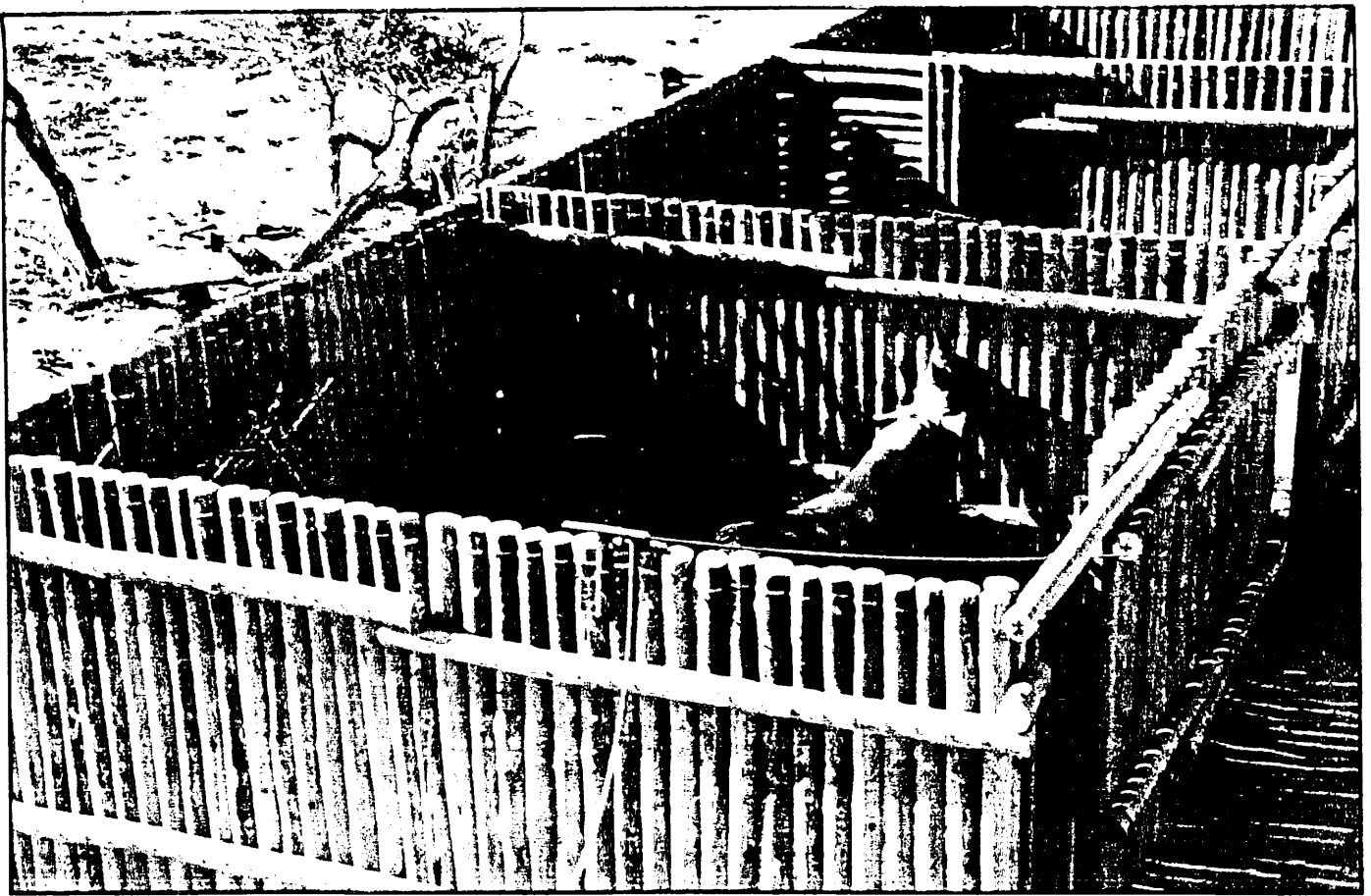
# the black rhino

phant. It is ironic that this type of weapon is now being used against those who risk penetrating wildlife sanctuaries. One wonders whether the automatic weapon is the ultimate solution, for elsewhere in Africa it has not prevented the decline of the rhino. Clearly it is necessary to be suitably armed but conservation of rhino must go beyond sheer firepower. The 'Hearts and Minds' approach must be considered and this is a fundamental principle in the approach of the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources. It is also being practiced elsewhere in South Africa and parts of Southern Africa. This story, however, is about the capture of rhino and I shall leave these other aspects for a future article.

The helicopter, a Jet Ranger piloted by Hugo van Niekerk, chief pilot for the National Parks Board, has climbed into a stiff north-easterly wind. This is likely to give him a hectic time for the bush is very dense. The fever trees, sycamores and the mahogany rise upwards from ten to fourteen metres in height and this requires precision flying, something for which Hugo is noted. With him is Graham Wiltshire and Johan Kloppers, head of wildlife management, who leads the National Parks Board team. Ground preparations are well under way with the

three 4-wheel drive vehicles for the ground staff and a Ford tractor and tip trailer specially constructed to carry the crate. We stand around in small groups waiting for the call to move. When it comes, it will be instant action for there is a good deal of water on the western side in the pan area known as Polwe. Rhino, when darted with the immobilizing drug, plunge forward regardless and cannot be turned by the helicopter. We cannot afford an error for to have a single animal drown would be catastrophic. The ground force is made up of a team of ten Tongas who will pull on the ropes around the rhino's head. They are armed with pangas with which to chop a passage through the bush for there is every possibility that the rhino will go to ground in very dense undergrowth. The game guards will help and Graham Wiltshire will be assisted by an expert National Parks Board team: Dr. Kobus Raath — Veterinarian  
Dr. Vossie de Vos — Head of research  
Johan Oelofse — Ranger: Tshokwane  
Louis Olivier — Ranger: Crocodile Bridge  
Douw Grobler — Veterinarian on secondment from S.A.D.F  
Johan Malan — Research technician  
Danie Pienaar — Rhino & Elephant Foundation

After nearly two hours flying, in an ever-increasing wind, with Ian Thompson taking over from Graham Wiltshire, we get the call 'rhino darted' and the entire force springs into action. The chopper gives a running commentary as to where the rhino is running. It has headed toward the pans and at breakneck speed we crash over hippo pot-holes, duck around trees or cling on for dear life as we come to a halt along the water's edge. The drug has taken effect and our rhino is now high-stepping like a chorus girl in his drunken state. He's down and the chopper directs us further along the track and circles directly above as all hands grab equipment, ropes, water, spray and containers, and drug boxes, and off we plunge into the 'Hlatine' as the Zulus describe this dense bush. We are all at a run, peering and searching around for the rhino. A voice to our left tells us that the rhino is down and the chopper is now hovering directly above us. We all converge in great excitement with a degree of apprehension — especially the Tongas who are not accustomed to this sort of work. The black rhino is a formidable creature at the best of times and we all have a healthy respect for him — a fine bull, about twelve years of age. At first, all appears to be confusion but this is due



*The rhinos were transported from Ndumu to bomas in the Kruger National Park where they were released at first light the morning following their arrival. • Die renosters is van Ndumu na bomas in die Nasionale Krugerwildtuin vervoer waar hulle die oggend na hul aankoms teen dagbreek vrygelaat is. Photo/Foto: Mike Landman.*

more to the excitement of getting to our first rhino and each person knows precisely what is required of him. No time is wasted and within forty minutes he is ready to be woken from his drug-induced sleep. His ears have been cut with a coded mark, he has been measured and generally checked over by the attendant vets and we are now ready for the antidote which has been administered into a vein behind the ear. An exact amount has to be given for he is not to be brought around fully but sedated enough to be led to the now chopped-out tunnel through the bush. The tractor and crate which has been making its way slowly to where the vehicles are parked, is in position near the water's edge. We have a 200 meter march ahead of us and in no time, with the assistance of an electric prodder, our rhino bull, still blind-folded with a towel, is up on his feet. All hands are tensed on the ropes, vets and assistants on either side and a few people are at the back. With a lot of puffing, we set off at a good pace. Dust swirls and once or twice our rhino, left hind leg secured by a stout rope, loses his balance and he and a few assistants go down. The

Tongas and game guards hang on at the front and as the entourage nears the now off-loaded crate, he thunders in. Last out is Kobus Raath who unties the nose rope while someone else attends to the rear end rope. The crate door is banged shut and the crate is loaded onto the back of the trailer. The entire operation has taken 55 minutes and we are one down with nine to go! We head back to base where the helicopter has landed and refuelled, ready for the next capture. We go on to capture a beautiful female and her twenty-months-old bull calf.

15:00 and the two transport vehicles are ready to depart on their fourteen hour journey to the rhino's new home within the Kruger National Park.

Mike Landman and I will follow them to record their short stay in the holding bomas near Leeupan and leave the capture team to continue with their important task of rounding up the rest.

The great success of the capture is due, in no small part, to the excellent team effort by all concerned — not least Hugo, who contended in the helicopter with such strong winds, and Johan,

whose darting required split second timing in that very dense bush. To save the black rhino is going to take a concerted effort on the part of many organizations, including the private sector, and here we must thank Elliott International for providing the funding required to fly the helicopter in the capture operations. Moving an animal as large as a rhino is a costly operation and it is in this field that a non-governmental organization such as the Rhino and Elephant Foundation can make an important contribution.

The entire operation was most successful with the capture of five cows and five bulls. These were safely transported to the holding bomas under the care of section ranger Johan Oelofse. Johan escorted the first three rhino to their new home and released them in the early hours of Wednesday 20 September. The introduction of these ten black rhino into the Kruger National Park will make an important addition to the ever-increasing population. This is most encouraging for one often finds the reverse to be the case with endangered animals.

# Tien swartrenosters vir

Die is 04:00 op 30 September 1989 en die helder maan baai die grond met sy stralende lig. 'n Naguil roep herhaalde-lik uit die digte bos terwyl die gehoe-hoe van 'n uil droewig vanuit die duisternis opklink.

Die naguil en die uil verdwyn egter uit my gedagtes soos ek aan die verwagte gebeurtenisse van die volgende paar dae dink. Ek en Mike Landman van die Nasionale Parkeraad is op 'n renostervang-ekspedisie, diep in die Ndumu-natuurreservaat in noordelike Zululand, op die Mosambiekgrens. Om renosters onder hierdie omstandighede te pyl en te vang is sekerlik nie sonder risiko nie.

Êrens in die digte bos ver in die ooste van die reservaat waar ons kamp opgeslaan het, is daar tien swartrenosters, die doelwit van hierdie ekspedisie, gesamentlik aangepak deur die KwaZulu Buro van Natuurlike Hulpbronne en die personeel van die Nasionale Krugerwildtuin. Die helikopter se vliegtyd is deur die Renoster-en-olifantstigting gefinansier. Die doel van die ekspedisie is om die tien swartrenosters te vang en uit Ndumu weg te neem, weens sy sensitiewe ligging op die Mosambiekgrens.

Hierdie ekspedisie is aangepak omdat daar besluit is om die probleem vooruit te loop eerder as om te wag vir 'n strooptog met die gevolglike verlies aan renosters. Die verlies van slegs 'n enkele renoster sal beteken dat die hele spesie een tree nader aan uitsterwing sal wees.

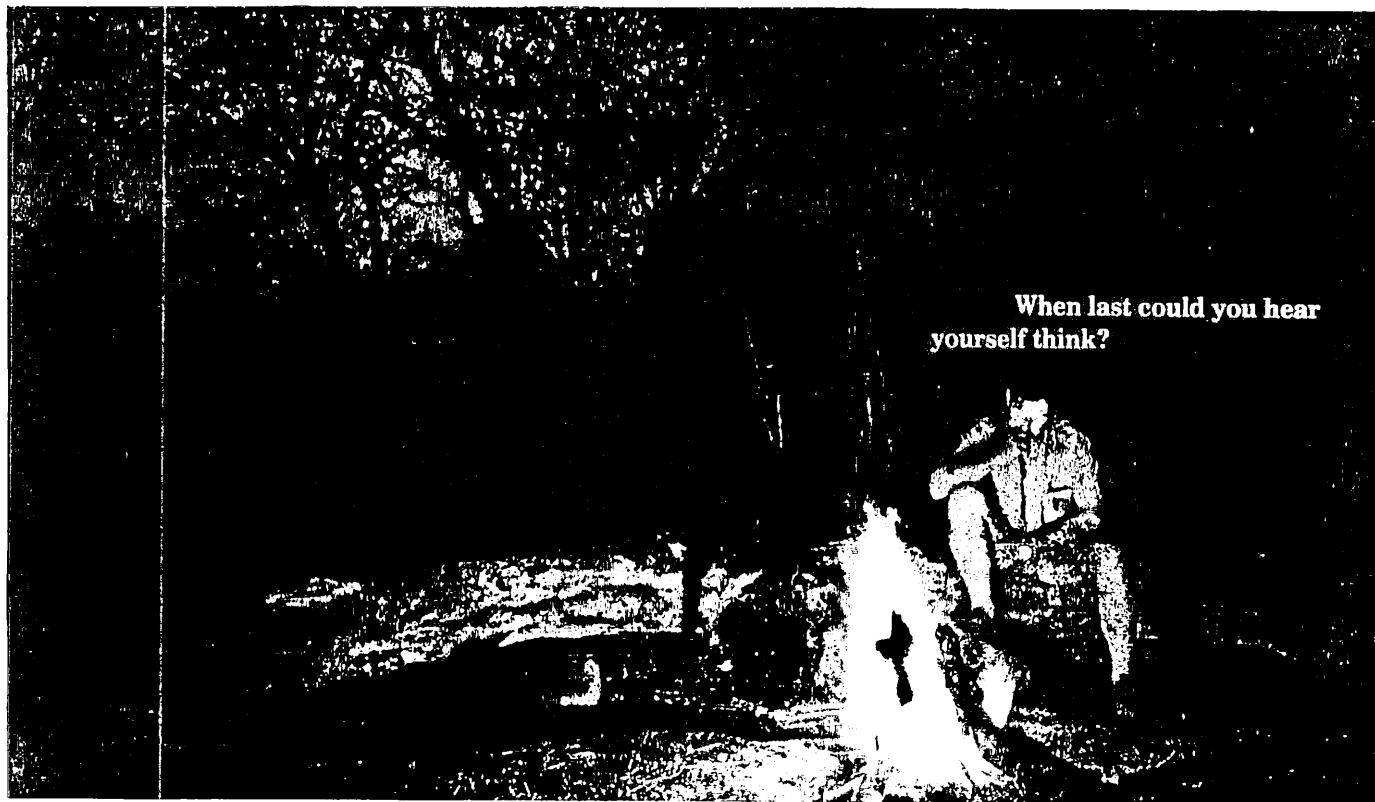
Teen 06:00 is die hele kamp in rep en roer. Die KwaZulu-span, onder leiding van Graham Wiltshire, parkhoof van Ndumu, en Ian Thompson, bestaan hoofsaaklik uit Ndumu-personeel. Hoewel hulle met 303-gewere gewapen is, is hulle nie opgewasse teen 'n wilddief met 'n AK47 nie.

Voorbereidings op die grond is alreeds onderweg. Die grondspan bestaan uit 'n groep van tien Tongas wat toue om die renoster se kop sal trek. Hulle is met pangas gewapen waarmee hulle 'n paadjie deur die bos sal kap, ingeval die renosters in die digte bos neerval, aangesien renosters, wanneer hulle met die doofmiddel gepyl is, onwillekeurig vorentoe tui-mel en nie deur die helikopter op koers gehou kan word nie. Die veldwagters sal ook behulpzaam wees, en sal bygestaan word deur Parkeraadpersoneel, onder leiding van Johan Kloppers, hoof van natuurbestuur. Ons staan in klein groe-pies rond en wag vir die teken om te begin.

Na amper twee ure in die lug, en 'n wind wat in sterkte toe-neem, neem Ian Thompson oor by Graham Wiltshire. Ons kry die oproep "renoster gepyl!" en die hele mag gaan oor tot aksie. Die helikopter verduidelik aan ons waarheen die re-noster op pad is. Hy beweeg in die rigting van die panne. Ons jaag in dolle vaart agterna, terwyl ons langs die pad deur see-koeislaggate stamp, onderdeur bome duik of aan die takke vasklou vir al wat ons werd is, voor ons langs die kant van die water tot stilstand kom.

Die doofmiddel begin werk en ons renoster is nou besig om dronkweg in die rondte te dans. Dan lê hy en die helikopter beduie vir ons verder af in die paadjie en sirkel nou direk bo ons terwyl alle beskikbare hande na toerusting, toue, water, sproei en houers, en teenmiddelhouers gryp, terwyl ons deur die 'Hlatine', soos die Zulus hierdie digte bos noem, ons pad vind.

Ons is almal aan die hardloop op soek na die renoster. 'n Stem aan ons linkerkant laat ons weet dat die renoster lê en die helikopter is nou reg bo ons. Ons kom almal in groot op-



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# Wildtuin

gewondenheid bymekaar. Daar is 'n mate van vrees teenwoordig, veral by die Tongas wat nie aan hierdie soort werk gewoond is nie. Selfs in sy beste bui is die swartrenoster 'n formidabele dier, en ons het niks minder as die grootste ont-sag vir hierdie groot twaalfjarige bul nie.

In die begin lyk dit soos die grootste verwarring, maar dit is meer as gevolg van die opgewondenheid om by die eerste renoster uit te kom, as enigiets anders, en elkeen weet presies wat om te doen. Elke oomblik word ten volle benut en binne veertig minute is ons reg om die renoster vanuit sy bedwel-mende slaap wakker te maak. Sy ore is gesny met die geheime merk en die geleide-veearts meet hom en gaan sy algemene kondisie na. Ons is nou reg om die renoster die teenmiddel toe te dien.

Die hoeveelheid teenmiddel moet baie noukeurig uitge-meet word omdat die renoster nie by sy volle bewussyn ge-bring moet word nie. Hy moet net kalm genoeg wees om tot by die uitgekapte tunnel deur die bos gelei te kan word. Die trekker en die krat wat stadig na die plek waar die voertuie geparkeer is, gebring word, is nou in posisie naby die kant van die water. Ons het 'n 200-meter-tog voor ons, en sommer gou-gou, met behulp van 'n elektriese porstok, is ons renos-terbul, nog deur 'n handdoek geblinddoek, op sy voete. Die toue word met gespanne hande vasgehou, en met 'n groot ge-hyg van alle kante is ons tussen die stof deur teen 'n goeie pas op pad.

Die renoster se linker-agterbeen is met 'n sterk tou vasge-maak en een of twee keer verloor hy sy balans en sleep 'n paar assistente saam met hom grond toe. Die Tongas en veldwagters hou voor vas, en terwyl die groep die afgelaaide krat nader, storm die renoster in. Die deur van die krat word toegeslaan en die krat agter op die sleepwa gelaai. Die hele operasie het 55 minute geneem en daar lê nog nege renosters voor.

15:00 en die twee vervoertuie is reg vir hul 14-uur-lange huiswaartse tog na die renosters se nuwe tuiste in die Nasio-nale Krugerwildtuin. Ek en Mike Landman sal die renosters volg om hulle kort verblyf in die vangkraal naby Leeupan te notuleer, en ons los die vangspan om met hulle belangrike werk, om die res van die renosters te vang, voort te gaan.

Die groot sukses van die vangs was as gevolg van die uitste-kende spanpogings deur al die betrokkenes. Om die swart-renoster te red, sal 'n gesamentlike poging van baie organisa-sies verg. Om 'n dier so groot soos die renoster te verskuif, is 'n baie duur operasie, en in hierdie opsig kan 'n organisasie soos die Renoster-en-olifantstigting 'n groot bydrae lewer.

Die hele operasie was baie suksesvol, met 'n uiteindelijke vangs van vyf koeie en vyf bulle. Onder toesig van veld-wagter, Johan Oelofse is hulle veilig na die vangkrale ver-voer. Die hervestiging van hierdie tien swartrenosters in die Nasionale Krugerwildtuin sal 'n belangrike bydrae lewer tot die toename in die swartrenosterbevolking. Dit is baie be-moedigend, aangesien die teenoorgestelde meer dikwels die geval is.

— Clive Walker



Top: Water helps to regulate the sedated rhino's body temperature. • Bo: Water word oor die verdoofde renoster gegiet om sy liggaamstemperatuur te help reguleer.

Bottom: A beautiful specimen ready to be released in the Kruger Park • Onder: Een van die tien renosters gereed om in die Wildtuin vrygelaat te word.

Photos/Foto's: Mike Landman

## Inhoud ○ Contents

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Cover photograph: Black rhino by Anthony Hall-Martin.  
Voorbladfoto: Swartrenoster deur Anthony Hall-Martin.

|                                                      |    |                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Briewe                                               | 6  | Letters                                                         |
| 'n Tweede kalf vir Blompot                           | 10 | Another rhino born at Augrabies                                 |
| Verlore goedere: Wildtuin trots op eerlike personeel | 14 | No hut keys for Kruger Park                                     |
| Plascon-reeks: Kleur in voëls                        | 16 | Plascon series                                                  |
| Familie-album                                        | 18 | Family portraits                                                |
| Sleutelgrasse in Wildtuin                            | 20 | Key grasses in Kruger Park                                      |
| Tien swartrenosters vir Wildtuin                     | 24 | Moving to save the black rhino                                  |
| Visvrektes in Olifantsrivier-ravyn                   | 30 | Cold water kills fish                                           |
| Operasionele navorsing help met natuurbestuur        | 34 | Operations Research plays important role in wildlife management |
| Kinderhoekie                                         | 42 | Just for kids                                                   |
| Bome van die Krugerwildtuin: sandkroonbessie         | 45 | Trees of the Kruger Park: sand crown berry                      |

### Volgende uitgawe

Van kleins af word kinders geleer dat daar net een goeie slang is en dit is 'n dooie een. In 'n reeks van sewe artikels wat in April begin en al om die ander maand geplaas sal word, probeer Jo Lynn om die vrees vir slange en die wolhaarstories wat oor dié reptiele vertel word, die nek in te slaan. Ook slange moet bewaar word.



### Next issue

Man is brought up to believe that the only good snake is a dead one. In a series of seven articles, starting in April and running in alternate issues, Jo Lynn will try to place the fear of and tall stories surrounding snakes in perspective and show that conservation applies to them too.