MARCH-APRIL 2006

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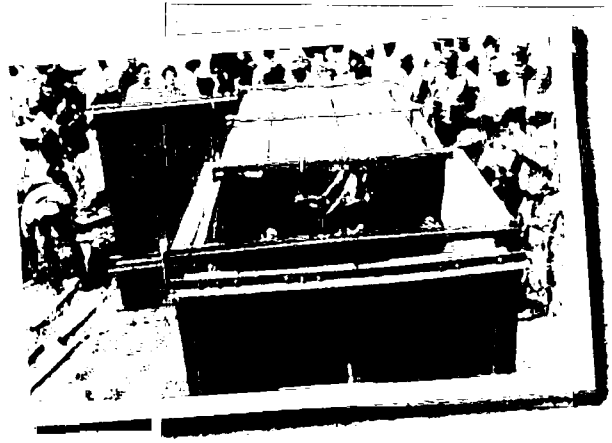
In KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa's resurgent black rhino population has found another new home. Malcolm Smith **discovers how conservationists have dragged the animal back from the brink of extinction**

Out of the red and into the black

Two visitors on the lookout for elephants, wildebeest, rhino and other creatures in the impressive Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, we must have looked like a bunch of off-road 4WD junkies. It certainly felt that way. Crashing through thorny acacia scrub, hurtling across the bleached savanna grassland, we did our best to keep pace with the Land Rovers as they dodged the taller trees and swung wildly through head-high scrub. And, after 10 minutes of this adrenaline rush, we experienced the surreal feeling of standing cheek by jowl with one of the world's largest animals – a tonne or two of dark grey, leathery black rhino lying sedated on the ground, surrounded by a team of vets and conservation workers.

This one – an eight year-old female – had been darted by a marksman from the capture team's helicopter, which dodged and ducked perilously low over the stately acacias. By the time the powerful sedative had reduced her to collapse, the rhino had run for 3km through the scrubby savanna. ➤

'Because the park is fenced, the population has reached the land's carrying capacity. We have young bulls that have no territory. So we plan to offer spare rhinos to landowners.'



Gently does it: vets and rangers prepare a rhino for transportation (above and below right)

So here she was, on a steep grassy slope scattered liberally with thorny acacias and mimosas. A cloth was tied over her head and plugs inserted in her ears as soon as the Zulu team, led by its *nduma* (foreman), Philemon Ndwandwe, got to her. To minimise distress, it is better that the animal can neither see nor hear; while sedation causes extreme calm, the animal still retains its senses.

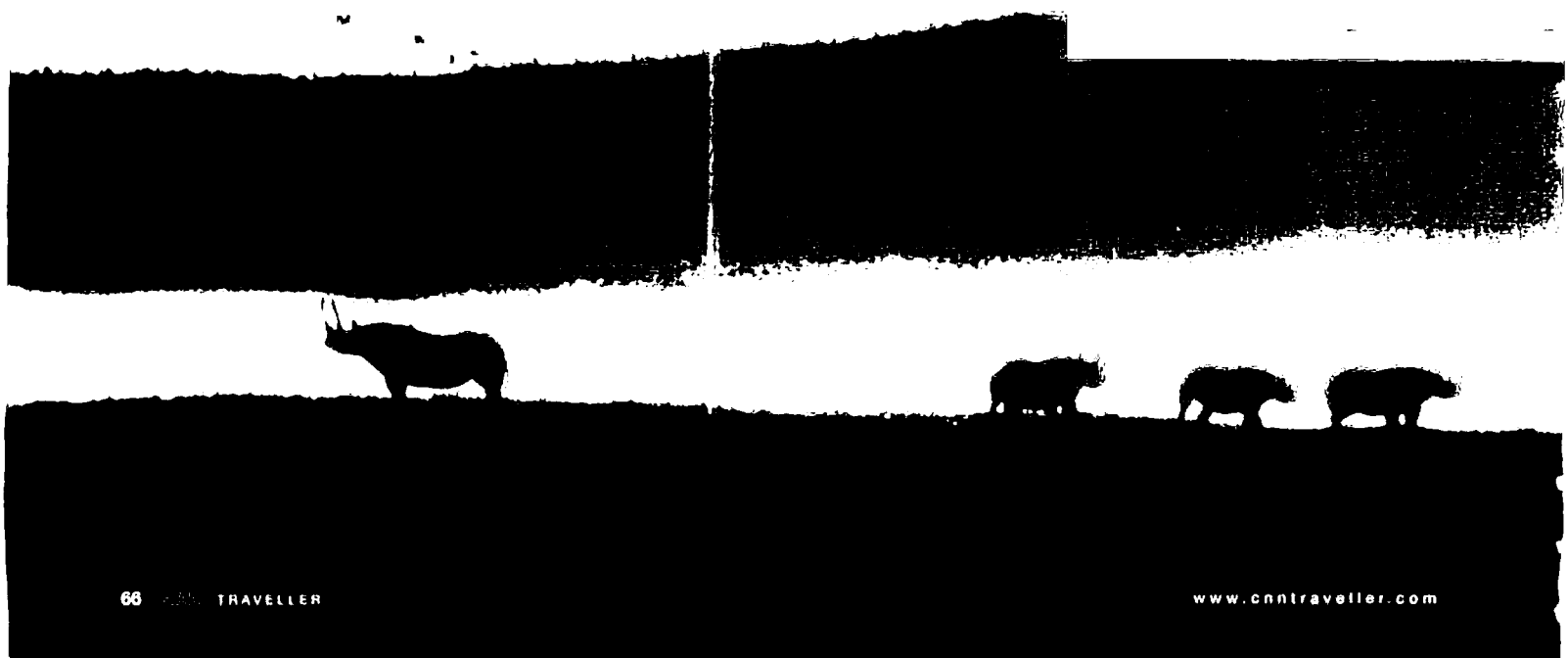
Capturing black rhino is not done for the adrenaline rush. Thanks to strict protection and a good breeding record in state-owned game reserves such as the 960km sq Hluhluwe-Imfolozi, these animals have done so well that there are now more of them than these reserves can accommodate.

'Each bull needs a territory of about 500 hectares, which it defends against other males,' says Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife's media manager Jeff Gaisford. 'Because the game park is fenced, the population has reached the land's carrying capacity. We have viable young bulls that are failing to nail a territory. So we've come up with a plan to offer spare black rhinos to private landowners who have sufficient land that they'll guarantee for conservation. It has to be fenced and it needs to be around 20,000 hectares to be viable.'

The first rhinos were transferred last October to what has been named the Zululand Rhino Reserve, nearly 26,000 hectares of former farmland under 18 different ownerships in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The internal fences between the farms have been removed, leaving just the perimeter fence.

'Twenty-one black rhino were released here, and they seem to have settled very well,' says Clive Vivier, the owner of Leopard Mountain (one of 38 properties in the consortium) and a conservationist. 'The land was previously used for cattle and game ranching, and a few farmers had crops. The black rhino project has been the catalyst that finally welded together our idea of creating a reserve. To the north and south of us, pristine bush has been taken over by monoculture crops and cattle farming. Our wilderness is disappearing. It's so wrong, and what we are doing with the help of the project is so right.'

Not only the black rhino will benefit. We have already started on a leopard tortoise



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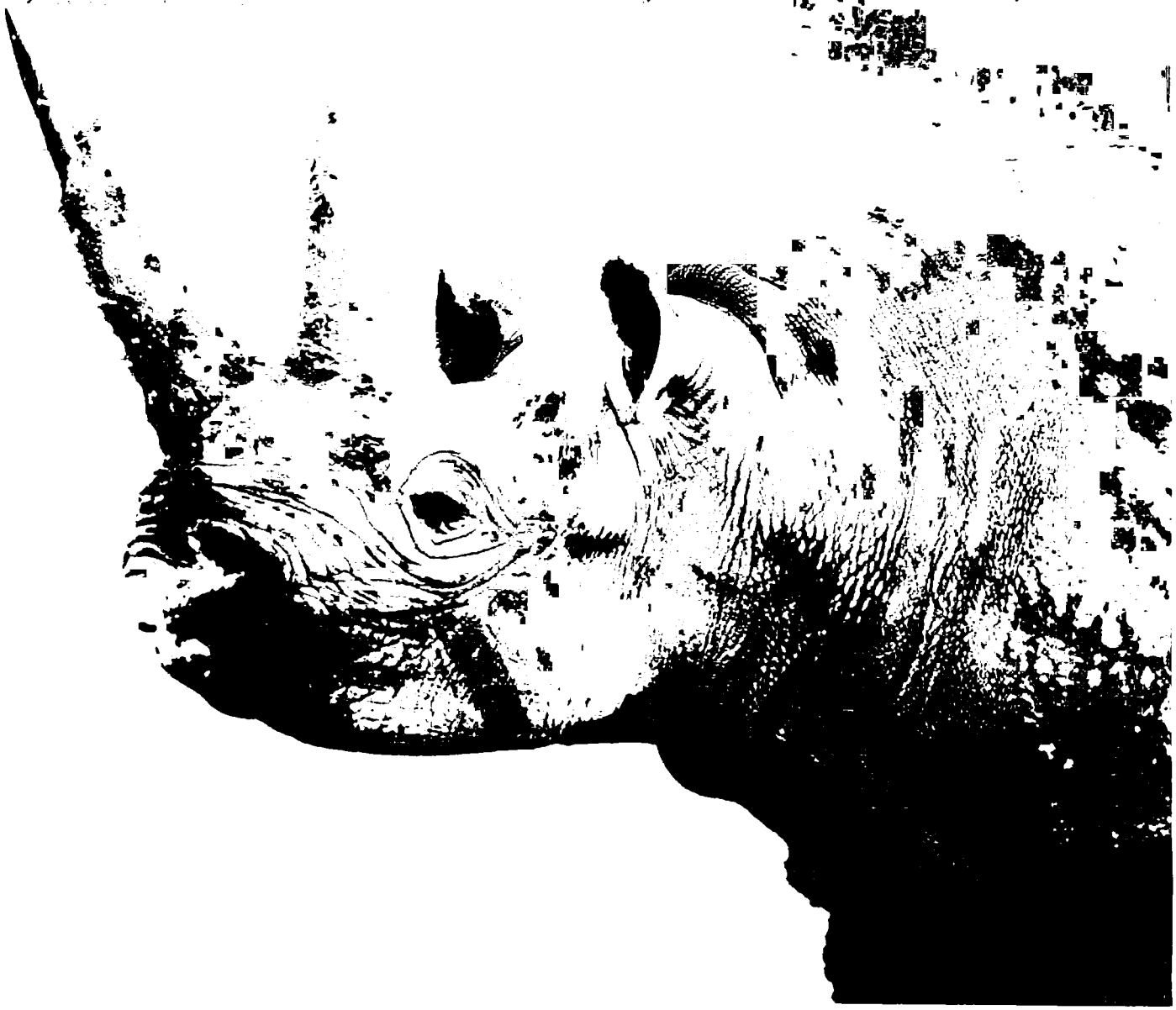
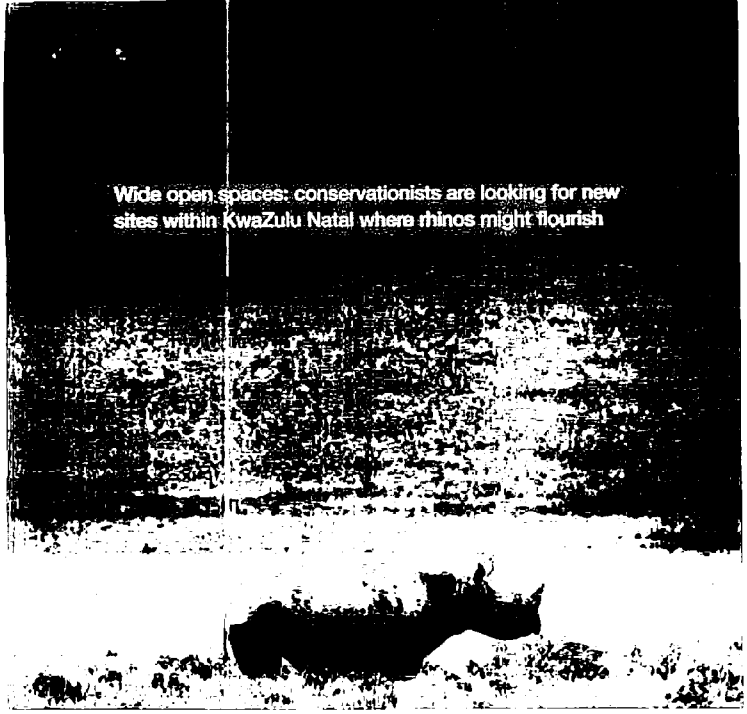


reintroduction and hope to add birds such as ground hornbills and rare mammals such as African wild dogs. As we find endangered species for whom it's suitable, we'd like to introduce them here,' adds Vivier.

The founder populations of black rhino remain the property of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and are looked after on a custodianship basis by the landowners. 'In case of any drop in standards of management or care, we retain the right to move them elsewhere,' says Pamela Sherriffs, WWF South Africa's communication manager for the project run jointly with Ezemvelo KZN.

Another transfer is currently on the cards. 'We've funded the fencing of the ➤



Wide open spaces: conservationists are looking for new sites within KwaZulu Natal where rhinos might flourish

Emakhosini Ophathe Heritage Park in the heart of the Zulu kingdom, in northern KwaZulu-Natal,' says Sherriffs. 'It's over 20,000 hectares of state-owned land, so it will be a celebration both of Zulu culture and wildlife. We're hoping to release black rhino there this year and make it a major tourist attraction that will create jobs and economic growth and help conserve the province's biodiversity. We are also in negotiations with other private and community landholders. Initially, the focus of the project is on finding suitable sites within KwaZulu-Natal, but once these have been saturated, we'll look further afield in South Africa,' she adds.

So what is the incentive for landowners to give up traditional farming? Some will be investing in tourism ventures such as safari lodges, vehicle-based safari trips and guided bush walks. It is also possible to sell venison and other legally killed game. But for others, such as Vivier, the overwhelming interest is in conservation and replacing some of the animals that have been lost.

But capturing and transferring these huge mammals is not without its problems. 'Once an animal has been darted, we use the noise of the helicopter to try and make it run towards a track or other accessible spot,' says Dave Cooper, the vet supervising this capture and a veteran of many more. 'The team has a difficult task: making sure the animal stays sedated and suffers as little stress as possible, before it is roused and moved into the carrying crate to take it away. Black rhino have a tendency to run into cover on low ground to hide once they've been darted. Places such as that are impossible for us to work in so we have to administer the antidote to rouse it, then chase it out. That's a dangerous business for the people involved.'

The purpose of much of the frenetic human activity around a sedated rhino is to find out more about the stress it suffers. 'We take blood samples from their ears to check on stress hormone levels and for a pregnancy test. We monitor their blood pressure and general condition and we take a sample of faeces,' says Dr Jacques Flamand, the project leader for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and WWF.

Rhino poo is not as bad as it sounds. The animals are vegetarian, devouring huge quantities of scrub, twigs and leaves, so their faeces are grassy green and comparatively ➤

▶ On a charge: South Africa has given the go-ahead to reintroduce strictly limited hunting of black rhino, to the anger of conservationists

fragrant. 'We measure stress hormones in the dung, and these are related to levels in the blood. We also collect dung from sites where the animals have been released and test it for the hormones. By knowing more about the animals' stress levels, the team can improve their understanding of what's going on and perhaps improve techniques for future captures and reintroductions,' adds Flamand.

Last year, after an epic verbal battle at a key meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, the South African government got the go-ahead to reintroduce hunting of up to five black rhino per year. It was a controversial decision that the WWF and others opposed. The South Africans had argued that such trophy hunting could bring in huge funds that would be channelled into conservation without affecting rhino populations. Figures of $1.8m per animal have been mentioned.

KwaZulu-Natal has not yet decided whether to take up the option, but other provinces in South Africa have – at least one black rhino has already been felled by a trophy hunter. The province is adamant that hunting is not an option on black rhino range expansion sites.

This emblematic animal is proving to be the key to putting more large areas of land in South Africa over to wildlife conservation, thereby guaranteeing the survival of a wide variety of other plants and animals too. And promoting green tourism creates jobs, which are a much-needed commodity in today's South Africa. ○

A THORNY PROBLEM

Before the 19th century, hundreds of thousands of black rhino roamed Africa. Sadly, they proved large and easy targets for 19th- and 20th-century weapons, and by the 1950s only 65,000 survived. Poaching in the 1970s and 1980s – the result of demand for rhino horn for dubious medicines in the Far East and for dagger handles in the Middle East, together with economic and political chaos in many African countries – decimated the species.

ON THE BRINK

By 1992 just 2,500 black rhino remained, almost all in heavily protected reserves. Their future survival looked bleak, but conservation efforts slowly paid dividends. There are now roughly 3,600 black rhino in the wild, around 1,340 of them in South Africa (450 in KwaZulu-Natal). The rest are mainly in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

WHITE OPEN SPACES

There are 12,000 white rhinos in Africa today. They too were rescued from near-extinction. No one knows for sure how white and black rhinos – both are grey – got their names. One theory is that 'white' is a corruption of the Dutch *weidt* (meaning 'wide'), which early Dutch settlers might have used to describe the white rhino's flat, wide mouth. The other species, with a curved mouth, became known as the black rhino.