



Left: The capture team risk injury to control a semi-immobilised rhino so that its spell under the drug is kept to a minimum.

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In June this year, North West province gave its neighbour, Botswana, an unusual gift.

Text and pictures by Conrad Spamer

Strange sort of gift

When North West province recently presented its neighbour Botswana with a gift, there was no fancy wrapping and ribbons – just five custom-built steel crates, each containing a white rhino.

For many years the principal threat to Botswana's extraordinary wildlife areas has been cattle farming. The tsetse fly/dieldrin spraying fiasco, controversial plans to dredge the Boro River, the notorious buffalo fence – behind each of these has been the pressure to open more land for cattle.

But while the war to protect wildlife habitats in Botswana continues, so do important battles to protect endangered species.

Hardest hit has been the rhinoceros family. When the South African-based Rhino and Elephant Foundation conducted an aerial survey of northern Botswana in September 1992, local wildlife officials were in for a shock. Instead of an estimated 200, only nine white rhino could be found. It was simply too dangerous for rhino to live in Botswana's ordinary game parks any longer.

A second operation was then mounted to bring the remaining few to a place of safety. Four were darted, but for another the rescuers had arrived just too late – it subsequently died from bullet wounds sustained hours before capture. The surviving three – a bull, a cow and her 18-month-old calf – were later sent to the Khama Rhino Sanctuary at Serowe, which had been hastily established to provide special protection to the species.

Microlight aircraft sorties, continuous foot patrols by the Botswana Defence Force and observation posts equipped with machine guns have

since been the order of the day at Khama.

Under such intensive protection, seven calves have been successfully bred, and there has not been a single poaching incident in the sanctuary.

In direct contrast to the Botswana experience, wildlife areas in South Africa's North West province have been expanding into cattle country. Since Pilanesberg was established in 1976, more than 100 000 hectares have been reclaimed for conservation. Moreover, from a seed population originally donated by the Natal Parks Board, North West Conservation has built up a healthy total of 500 rhino in the province's various reserves.

In the light of efforts by its neighbour to create a successful rhino breeding programme, and the need for a larger gene pool to achieve that objective, North West decided to share the fruits of its success.

The five white rhino – a bull, cow and calf from Mafikeng Game Reserve, and a cow/calf pair from nearby Botsalano – were translocated to the Khama sanctuary on 20 June.

The accompanying photographs tell the story of an incident-free operation, carried out by the specialist game capture outfit Thaba Manzi. ■

Below: One vet's hand monitors respiration while another administers oxygen as a third member of the team bores into the rhino's horn to insert a microchip tag.



The whole gang is here, where are you?

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