THE KRUGER PARK

AND OTHER NATIONAL PARKS

BY R. J. LABUSCHAGNE

DA GAMA PUBLISHERS (PTY.) LTD.
JOHANNESBURG.

When the elephant ages, the trunk is one of the first organs to become impaired as a result of muscular deterioration. The animal then finds it more difficult to drink water and to breathe freely which in turn impedes movement such as clambering up banks and walking long distances. The sense of smell deteriorates and as the trunk tires of its functions so does the animal go into decline. The end is now not far off.

It is said that elephants suffer much discomfort from ants, frogs and even mice which crawl up the trunk. This is pure nonsense: an elephant can propel a cloud of dust or water for a distance of fifty feet. Which of these trespassers can resist the force of such powerful bellows?

There are many other strange characteristics about an elephant. The ear-lobe is at least five feet in diameter but the actual ear is a slit about five inches wide behind the eye. The giant ear flaps are used as fans in the hot climes where the animal finds itself. It has a relatively thin hide containing numerous blood vessels which aid blood and air circulation.

The feet are massive blocks, about fifty-six inches in circumference. They are functionally fashioned to enable the elephant to walk through water. When it places a foot in the mud, it is big and broad and when it lifts it, the foot contracts so that the animal will not become stuck in the mud. It also uses its feet to dig for water in dry river beds. If water is found, it is carefully drawn up the trunk without the head having to be lowered as in the case of other animals.

The entrails of an elephant are enormous and heavy. The heart weighs fifty pounds, the kidneys each weigh thirty-five pounds, the lungs three hundred pounds, and the intestines more than a ton. The animal has to consume a few hundred pounds weight of leaves and grass daily and to drink decidedly more than a hundred gallons of water.

The entrails always contain about forty gallons of water and on approaching an elephant one can always hear the gurgling of the water in its stomach, although one is often disposed to imagine that it is possibly one's own frantic heartbeats!

The size of the skull conveys an erroneous impression of an outsize brain. The brain is small, but the skull has to be so large to anchor the muscles of the trunk and jaws in which the giant teeth, particularly the ivory tusks occur. These are actually incisors which may weigh more than a hundred pounds each, and which are used as levers to uproot trees and even to loosen the bark from trees before it is stripped off. There are no fangs, but the molars are giant blocks which are replaced piecemeal from the rear as the front ones wear away.

Such a molar usually lasts about ten years and the final replacement emerges after the 40th year.

The elephant reaches puberty after the tenth year and the gestation period is usually twenty-two months. The calf is dependent on the cow for approximately two years. As soon as it is weaned, it accompanies the bulls to new areas which are being reconnoitred.

THE RHINOCEROS

Talk about a bad-tempered brute—this, indeed, is the two-ton rhinoceros colossus, which, contrary to popular belief, is a closer relative of the horse than of the hippopotamus.

It is, however, the black rhino which is notorious for its ill-temper. It is smaller than the white rhino with a smaller neck and head which is always held high. The snout is trunk-shaped and the lips pointed. The general posture of the head is likewise pointed. With its trunk-like lips the animal feeds principally on twigs and leaves. Another characteristic is that the calf always stumbles along behind the cow in contrast to the white rhino whose calf always runs ahead of the mother and which is usually guided by the mother's forehorn.

The white rhino is not really whiter than the black one, but it is larger and the massive neck and head with its giant broad mouth especially serve to distinguish it from the other species of rhino. The broad mouth and large flat lips are formed thus to assist the animal to crop grass close to the ground and it feeds with huge bites. A better name for the white rhino would have been the square-lipped rhino.

The great head is very heavy and is always carried low. The animal finds it difficult to raise the head and that is why it quickly drowns if it should land in deep water, while the black rhino, which holds its head up with ease, may swim through safely.

Since both species prefer bushy environments, it is not important to them to possess good sight, but their senses of hearing and smell are very well developed. If the animal is unexpectedly disturbed, it will charge swiftly and, without deviating from its direction, will overrun anything that blocks the way.

The rhino's horn is not a bone horn as is found in other animals. On top of the snout are two bone growths and on top of these a hairy horn develops. Because it is not firmly fixed to the snout, the horn breaks off easily. The animals use their horns in battle and to dig up roots.

Although the animal is aggressive, it tolerates with infinite patience the fidgeting of the rhino bird on its back, pecking at blood scabs and searching for parasites. The bird also warns it when danger threatens.

In the past few years the capture of white rhinos in Natal and their dispatch to various parts of the world, made big news. In this period white rhino were also sent to the Willem Pretorius Game Park in the Free State and the Loskop Dam Reserve in the Transvaal. The greatest project, however, was the resettlement of eighty-five white rhino in the Kruger National Park. It is possibly the greatest project of its kind in our time.

In earlier years the capture of a rhino was a great adventure. The animal was pursued by vehicles and grounded with lassoes. Unfortunately the animals suffered much from this treatment and the capture could not be made in confined areas.

The new method is something quite different. By means of certain chemicals the animal is paralyzed and anaesthetized. This method is being successfully applied today to almost any wild animal, although it is still experimental. Since we have such large game reserves and such a variety of animal life, it is obvious that South Africa can lead the world in this field.

At present a synthetic morphinous anaesthetic is used which affects the brain and central nervous system of the animal. This anaesthetic, which is still experimental, and which is difficult to import, is approximately a thousand times more powerful than morphia. It contains its own antidote which gradually counters the effect of the poison. Another characteristic is that it releases the animal from its inhibitions with the result that such an animal acts quite calmly. The anaesthetic is mixed with a special sedative which keeps the animal subdued and prevents it from showing extreme reactions. Mixed with it is also another sleeping draught which is an additional aid in calming an animal when it has to be handled. This mixture affects the pupil of the eye and that is why an animal dosed with it, moves like a sleep-walker.

A hippopotamus under the influence of this drug may be led from the water and an elephant placed in a crate.

When the mixture has been properly prepared the captors go into the veld where the animals are grazing and the one to be captured is carefully stalked since the men have to get within a hundred yards of it. Then the heavily-charged dart is "fired". Some people use a specially manufactured rifle called "Capchur", while others use a locally-manufactured crossbow.

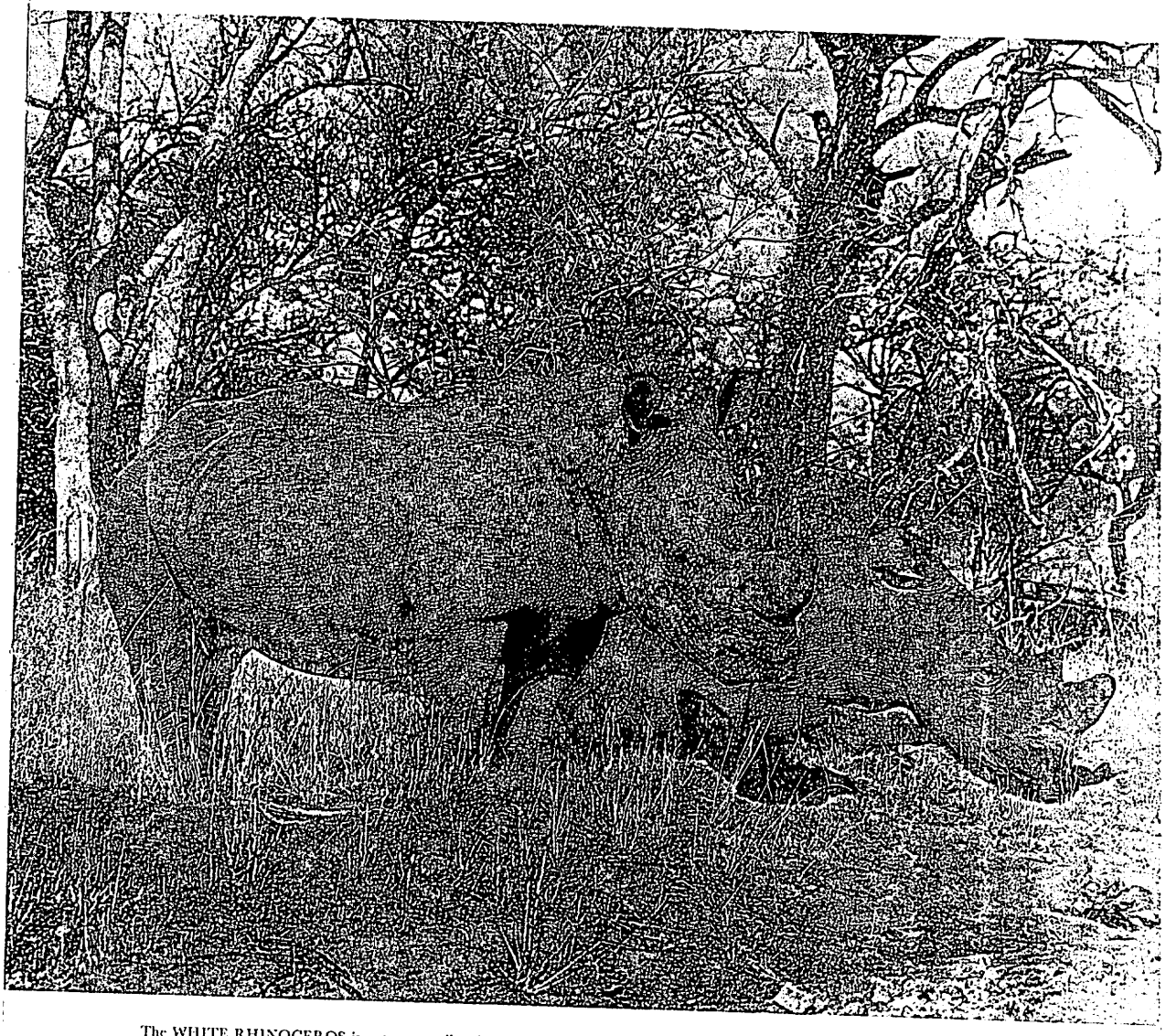
As soon as the animal is hit, it runs away. Mounted men follow the animal until it collapses and they then give the signal for the fourwheel-drive vehicles to bring the crates to the spot.

It takes only a few minutes nowadays for the drug to take effect.

The captured rhino is immediately crated and transported at a comfortable speed to its new "home" where it is released on arrival. In the process of transferring eighty-five rhino to the Kruger Park, there was only one casualty.

THE WHITE RHINOCEROS

Although white rhino inhabited the Lowveld in the previous century, not a single specimen remained when the Kruger Park was established. The Parks Board, however, tried from the day it was founded

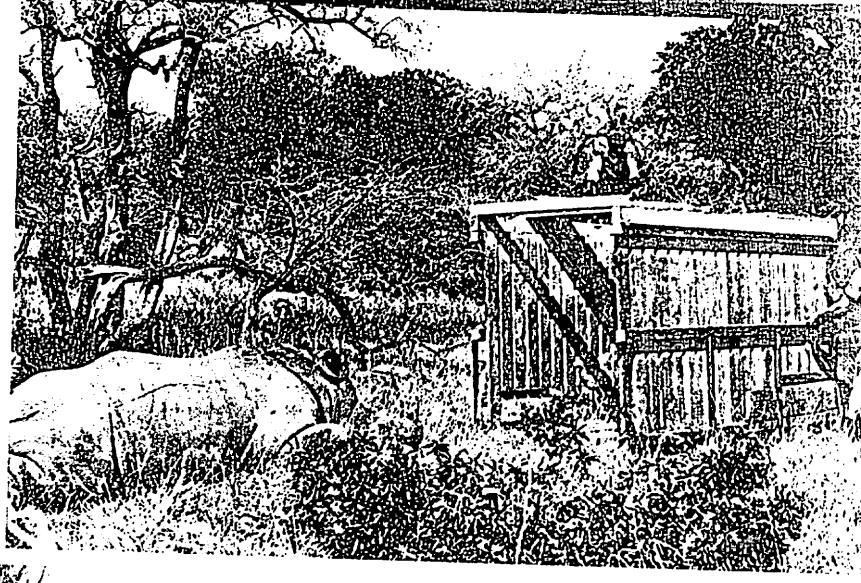


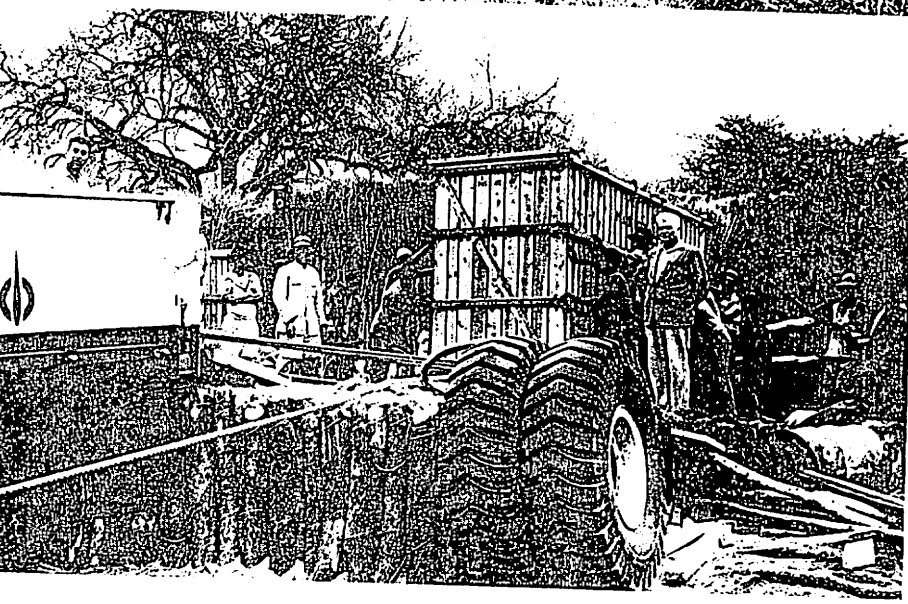
The WHITE RHINOCEROS is not necessarily white. The name "Broad mouth" is more descriptive. It is a grass-eater, and its broad, flat mouth with loose lips is ideally suited to this habit. Its head usually hangs low, even when it runs. The horn is not a true horn but a compressed mass of hair.

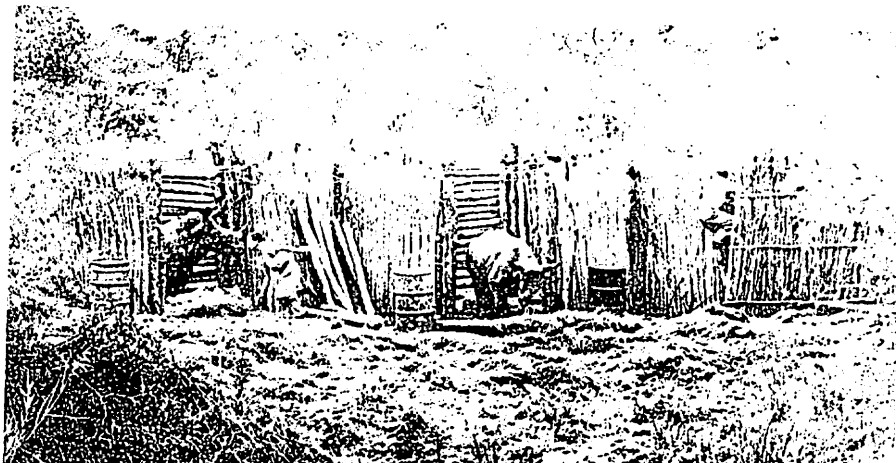
Operation Rhino

The capture, transportation and resettlement of the first WHITE RHINO in the Kruger National Park. Chief Game Warden Ian Player of Natal brings down the first white rhino with a narcoticized arrow. The vehicles approach through the dense bush.

The colossus is manhandled into the crate and the crate, with its three-ton captive, is then loaded by winch onto the truck. A 500-mile journey follows from Umfolozi to the Kruger Park, where the animals are confined in stockades before being released. It is a nature conservation epic.







in 1926, to restore the animal to its former habitat. This was accomplished only in 1961 when the Natal Administration donated the first four white rhino to the Board.

It was a happy occasion in October when the Natallers managed to subdue the foursome by means of narcotics. This was in the pioneering stage of anaesthetic methods and the transportation of such large wild animals. Fearfully the representatives of the Parks Board observed the process of capture from a distance. They were there with a whole convoy of vehicles, including heavy transporters which had been lent by the Total Oil Company for the purpose of taking the animals from Natal to the Transvaal. The capture and crating process was completed successfully and the long journey of 475 miles began. It was the longest distance that white rhino had ever been transported overland.

The convoy moved along quite slowly. All along the road control points had been established to supply food and water while radio hams were stationed at these points to advise the other points and those waiting at the destination in the Kruger Park of the progress of the convoy. There were many setbacks. The crates were badly designed and the animals frequently fell over into awkward positions and had to be righted.

This involved bringing the whole convoy to a halt while the three-ton animals were put back on their feet. They behaved badly and every half-an-hour or so tried to find some new method of committing suicide. The journey lasted through the night and the long convoy of trucks, and cars carrying veterinarians, biologists, newspapermen and other inquisitive characters presented a never-to-be-forgotten sight as the headlights illuminated the eerie bushveld environment.

After twenty-four hours of stop-and-go, the convoy turned into the Kruger Park at Malelane and for the first time in eighty years white rhinos were back in their erstwhile haunts. A few hours later they were welcomed by an enormous crowd of visitors, personnel and members of the Parks Board, in their temporary camp at Pretorius Kop. These were the first of ninety which were subsequently transported with the aid of improved techniques and crates. They are now settled inhabitants of the Park and have already selected their own grazing and breeding grounds.

The Ruminating Animals

THE GIRAFFE

The giraffe is the aristocrat of the Kruger Park. It seems strange to refer to giraffes when one is involved with antelopes, since the name does not naturally suggest an association with antelope. The giraffe is the tallest land animal and stands eighteen feet on the hoof. It has the longest neck of any mammal and yet it has no more than seven vertebrae, the same number as the field rat. It also has the longest legs of any animal without being equipped with the hock common to all other ruminants. Its incisors are double-crowned almost like those of the lion. Its horns are not exactly horns because they are bone growths on the skull, covered with skin and a tuft of hair on the tip.

It has the most watery eyes of any animal and, in addition, the eyes are so positioned that they have a wide-angle vision despite the animal's height advantage. It also has a specially elongated tongue which is expandable and thus capable of extension to serve as a gripping organ, again notwithstanding the animal's tall stature and long neck. Its nostrils can close involuntarily and completely so that it cannot be troubled by dust.

The names bestowed on the giraffe are equally interesting. The Afrikaans name "kameelperd" is a derivation from the Greek *Camelopardalis,* the camel that resembles a leopard, because of the chequered stains or spots on its skin.

This colouring is in reality an adaption of the animal to its environment since it creates the illusion of patches of shadow cast by the leaves of trees. The knob-like horn resembles small branches. The name giraffe derives from an Arabic word: Zaret. It means that it is faster than a horse. Its long legs