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Chris v.d. Merwe

'Operation bicornis'

A case for dehorning

Independence-related political instability, growing economic hardship at the grass roots and insufficient means to combat escalating rhino-horn poaching have given rise to Namibia's 'Operation Bicornis'. A response to a national challenge, the exercise included dehorning — a "crisis management" action which may have far-reaching implications for nature conservation world wide. Photo-journalist ***Chris van der Merwe,*** *involved in a major conservation fund-raising programme that included a 780 kilometre hiking expedition mainly through the Kaokoland wilderness in April last year, joined Namibia's game capture unit for the final week of 'Operation Bicornis'.*

Aesthetics weigh heavily with many people, whether they are for or against dehorning. This should surprise no one. The sight of a massive, dehorned beast which had survived with hardly a change in profile for 40 million years or more — only to be brutally diminished within an evolutionary microsecond of contact with man — is to some even more shocking than the decaying carcass of an animal ravaged by poachers.

Says Rudi Loutit, chief conservator of Damaraland and the prime mover behind Namibia's selective dehorning programme, "There are people who are affronted that someone has presumed to remove the symbol of the rhino's supposed machoness." Dehorning has been met with a barrage of questions, criticism and outright condemnation. Some of the objections have come from internationally respected conservationists and have probably been as well intended as they have been meant to be taken seriously. Others have been downright puerile.

The response from Namibia's conservationists can be summed up with: rather hornless rhino than no rhino at all . . .

Blythe Loutit, Rudi's wife and a recipient last year of the prestigeous David Scott Merit Award for her rhino monitoring and data collecting work in Damaraland, had to do a great deal of answering after the start of dehorning in mid-May. In charge of intensive monitoring of the affected animals since their horns were removed, she continues to operate at the centre of a controversy that may be expected to continue with varying intensity as the aftermath of dehorning either vindicates or damns its proponents.

"To answer all the questions and criticisms," comments Blythe, "one has to be half a rhino and half a wizard. It is a worrying thought, though, that many people who are speaking up against it did not raise their voices with quite as much indignation when the rhinos were killed and had their horns hacked out with a panga, possibly before they had breathed their last breath."

A major criticism has been the possible "desocialising effect" of dehorning. Another has been that it would render the rhinos more vulnerable to predators besides man.

The conservation authorities in Damaraland and their non-government funded collaborators such as Blythe and her staff are in a particularly strong position to answer these charges. The monitoring of the critically endangered Namibian subspecies, *Diceros b. bicornis*, of which the territory has 97 percent of the total world population, has been going on in Damaraland for over five years. Every rhino either dehorned or translocated to an unspecified "less vulnerable" area (with limited carrying capacity) during "Operation Bicornis" has an "identikit".

Among the main responsibilities of patrolmen who track rhino on foot is contributing to a central rhino "identikit" register.

Babies are photographed when first sighted and given a name. The locality is noted. As they grow up, they continue to be photographed. Ear notches — made after animals are darted — are entered in the register. Horn sizes are measured and so are footprints. Movements are mapped. It is understandable that the death of any one of these animals due to poaching may produce a real sense of loss among many of those collaborating on the ground to assist the survival of this species.

"People ask what would happen if a dehorned rhino encountered a horned one," says Blythe. "Well, this is unlikely, as dehorning is confined to groups which have very limited interaction with other rhino. In any case, we have not seen any evidence of heavy fighting among our rhinos in all the years we've been monitoring.

"And predators? There are very few in Damaraland. We also hope that the sheer bulk, offensive attitude and noise made by a rhino when threatened would be a strong enough deterrent."

Rhinos do use their horns to get to some of their food. But the vegetation in arid Damaraland is usually short and within reach of rhinos at about shoulder height and less.

Particularly irksome to the Loutits and their colleagues is the often heard dismissal of dehorning on the grounds that poachers would shoot even for what may be left of the horn, or to obtain other body parts.

"The poacher who will shoot a rhino without horns would be a very stupid

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'Grog', a bull in his prime, is being prepared for dehorning. With a good pair of horns like his he would have been a choice target for poachers. When down, an immobilised rhino is cooled down with water to compensate for disturbed natural thermoregulation. • 'Grog', 'n renosterbul in sy fleur, word voorberei vir onthoorning. Met 'n paar horings soos dié sou hy 'n voorkeurteiken vir wilddiewe gewees het. Sodra hy lê, word 'n verdoofde renoster met water afgekoel om te kompenseer vir sy versteurde termoregulering.

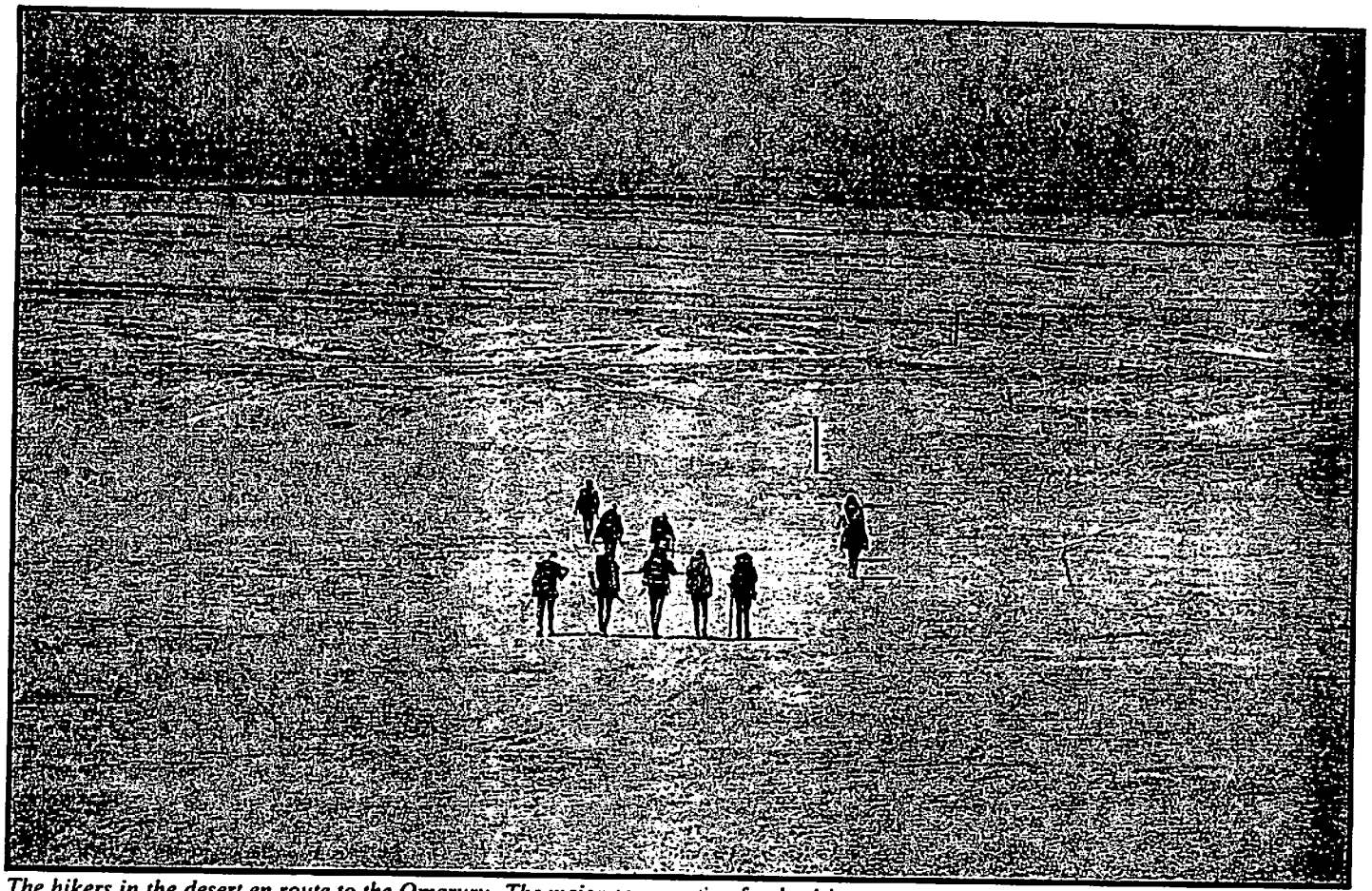
Photograph on page 24/25:
A very important Namibian has arrived. A dehorned rhino, Mathilda, has given birth to a male calf named Tito. The newcomer is the first calf to be born to the group of Damaraland "desert" rhino dehorned as part of a controversial anti-poaching "crisis" management excercise, 'Operation Bicornis', seven months ago. The calf has been named after a local tracker who discovered the pair. "Tito's arrival shows that the rhinos continue normally despite dehorning. And what is more, we have not had a single incident of rhino poaching in Damaraland since 'Operation bicornis'. This may be ascribed at least in part to dehorning," says Blythe Loutit, founder of Namibia's Save the Rhino Trust Fund and long-time monitor of the Kaokoveld black rhino population. Tito's suspected father, 'Grog', was also among the rhino dehorned early last year.

Foto op bladsy 24/25:
Die onthoringde renosterkoei, Mathilda, en haar bulkalf, Tito. Dit is die eerste renosterkalf wat in Damaraland gebore is nadat dié gebied se renosters vroeg verlede jaar onthoorn is.

Far left: Making absolutely sure there is as little horn left as possible. • Heel links: Daar word seker gemaak dat so min horing as moontlik oorbly.

Game capture unit veterinarian's daughter, Cheri Morkel, with what used to be 'Grog's' most valuable asset. • Cheri Morkel, dogter van die wildvangeenheid se veearts, met wat eens op 'n tyd 'Grog' se waardevolste bate was.

Photos/Foto's: Chris van der Merwe



The hikers in the desert en route to the Omaruru. The major conservation fund-raising programme included a 780 kilometre hiking expedition, Namibia Trek, mainly through the Kaokoland wilderness. • Voetslaners in die woestyn op pad na Omaruru. Die reuse-fondsinsamelingsveldtog ten bate van bewaring het onder meer 'n staptog van 780 kilometer deur die Kaokoland-wildernis ingesluit. Photo/Foto: Marek Patzer.

person," argues Blythe. "The fines for shooting a rhino are much heavier than those for trading in horn."

The they-will-shoot-anyway objection could yet prove to be valid. Even if no dehorned rhino are poached in Damaraland, critics could merely point to stepped-up vigilance as being the crucial factor. Still, nobody can ignore the fact that poaching — at great risk to the offender's life in at least some countries these days — for drastically diminished returns is a decidedly less attractive option. There is a black market trade also in rhino skin. However, these sell for only a fraction of horn prices. And skinning a rhino is not nearly as expeditiously done as robbing it of its horns. The more time spent at the scene of the crime, the greater the risk of having to face armed and angry conservation staff.

"What worries us more," says Blythe, "is that the heaviest fines possible in terms of existing legislation are not being imposed — when penalties are ludicrously light as it is."

Another complaint has been that tourists could be "disappointed" by the sight of hornless rhino. In Damaraland, rhino are one of the main drawcards. A local safari operator has vehemently condemned the exercising of the dehorning option. Blythe has reason to chuckle over tourists' supposed "disappointment". "One of the first things they ask when they arrive in the area," she says, "is where they can take photographs of these animals."

At least 16 black rhino — five in Damaraland, with a population of less than 100, and 11 in the Etosha Game Reserve to the north-east — were known to have been poached in the six month period that preceded "Operation Bicornis". The official disclosure of figures that showed a sharp increase in poaching, followed by the announcement shortly afterwards that dehorning was under way, suggested to many observers that Namibia's conservators were "panicking". This does not seem, in fact, to have been the case.

Towards the end of last year, anticipating an "onslaught" particularly on the territory's black rhino and elephant populations, leading Namibian conservationists met to draft a strategic response. The prospects for conservation in an independence period coupled with the statistical realities of rhino decimation throughout Africa inspired a national rhino strategy that is today still largely secret. One of the "drastic" measures proposed to meet the threat of Namibia's becoming the target of poaching syndicates as rhino populations dwindled elsewhere, was dehorning.

Namibian conservators had every reason to be anxious. In the early 'eighties, the total black rhino population of Africa was between 14 000 and 15 000. The total today is below 4 000. In several countries, the black rhino has become extinct in this period. Only in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia itself have populations been increasing.

The reason for dwindling black rhino numbers lies principally in their horns. Used for exotic dagger handles in North Yemen and as an ingredient of Oriental popular medicines — including a supposed aphrodisiac — illegally acquired rhino horn has been commanding prices of up to $22 000 a kilogram. Local people recruited by the syndicates' middle men to do the poaching typically end up being paid only a fraction of the black market value of the goods they deliver. However, there is ample proof that they consider the risks of their profession worth taking. In Zimbabwe alone, dozens of poachers have been killed in skirmishes with conservation staff over the last twelve months — and still rhino are being poached. Two senior Zimbabwean conservation officials attended part of "Operation Bicornis" as observers. It is reliably understood that Zimbabwean conservators had seriously considered the option of dehorning in their own country, but that permission was withheld at the last moment.

The Loutits do not regard dehorning as an "experiment" — as it is still commonly referred to.

"It is a drastic measure to keep the rhinos as safe from poachers as we possibly can while faced with a lack of funds," emphasises Blythe.

Above: Veterinarian Pete Morkel applying 'Stockholm tar' to 'Grog's' stumps. This prevents cracking and if the quick has been touched (which happens rarely) the tar prevents infection. • Bo: Die veearts Pete Morkel besig om 'Stockholmteer' op 'Grog' se stompies te smeer. Dit keer dat dié sensitiewe gedeeltes bars as daaraan geraak word (wat selde gebeur) en dit voorkom ook infeksie. Below: Game capture chief, Louis Geldenhuys, and Cheri Morkel with the dehorned rhino, Nane. "We are not telling anyone else what they should do with their rhinos," says Mr. Geldenhuys. • Louis Geldenhuys, hoof van die wildvangeenheid, en Cheri Morkel met onthoringde renoster, Nane. "Ons skryf nie aan ander voor wat om met hul renosters te doen nie," sê Mnr. Geldenhuys. Photos/Foto's: Chris van der Merwe.

"The horns do, of course, grow back, like fingernails. However, this takes a long time and this may give us time to get the radios, ground staff and aircraft which we so desperately need."

The insufficiency of funds for conservation generally begs the question: why not sell rhino horn to pay for the protection of rhinos and much else besides? Then there's the follow-up: why not selectively harvest rhino horn, if the Namibian experience shows that dehorning does not significantly prejudice the survival of the animals in the wild at least under natural conditions such as those that prevail in Damaraland? Dehorning is painless and horns do regenerate. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) outlaws any trade in rhino horn. But here are persuasive arguments being offered by respected conservationists in favour of selling stockpiled horn that has been legally acquired. Those lobbying for a re-think at CITES on this score believe that a lifting of the ban would restrict control of the market from the ndicates and put it in the hands of onservationists. At the same time, they

y, intelligence work should be inten-

shed world wide to expose and punish . The slaughter of rhino

virtually everywhere in Africa lends credence to the argument that CITES has failed and that nature conservation challenges in a Third World context require greater strategic flexibility than is presently possible under CITES constraints. South African headquartered Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) director, John Ledger, insists that "gentleman countries who look after their rhino should have the right to sell their horn." An option for them could be to withdraw from CITES and negotiate directly with major client countries for an agreement on controlled trade in rhino horn.

Farming rhino for their horn and their survival may yet turn out to be an entirely viable option and a morally defensible one. This need not happen first in Namibia, although the prospect of that happening somewhere, sooner or later, was the subject of animated speculation during "Operation Bicornis."

The decade old world conservation strategy of the IUCN has enshrined the principle of sustained utilisation of natural resources — which include wildlife. Selective "farming" of rhino would not be at variance with this. If rhino farming should ever become accepted international conservation practice, everyone who cares about the survival of this species would have to salute the courage of those who first dared to dehorn and let live.