

Rhino Watch

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Rhino Survey

South Africa has gained international acclaim for its efforts to conserve both black and white rhinoceroses, which have not only brought these animals back from the brink of extinction, but have also enabled official nature conservation agencies, especially the Natal Parks Board, to sell surplus white rhinos to private land owners since the 1970's, and black rhinos since 1990.

Rhino populations on private land can make a considerable contribution to overall conservation strategies, and the Rhino and Elephant Foundation contacted Daan Buijs in 1987 to conduct a survey on white rhinos outside official conservation areas. All translocations of white rhino from Natal Provincial Game Reserves, Bop Parks, and private sales were traced and recorded. Contrary to popular (and often official) belief, a substantial number of these translocations were not as successful as expected. Various reasons for this were identified, and the findings were instrumental in the revision of Natal Parks Board allocation and pricing strategies.

In the last few decades, black rhino numbers in other

African countries have declined alarmingly, and the few remaining animals enjoy intensive protection. As tougher anti-poaching measures were implemented in protected areas, poachers have turned their attention to rhinos on private land.

Many white rhinos have changed hands through auctions and private sales, and their present status on private land is thus largely unknown. Before the 1987 survey, no black rhinos were present on private land. Since 1990, however, groups of five black rhinos have been auctioned annually by the Natal Parks Board to selected bidders.

These populations are increasing and active management of the earlier founder populations will soon become necessary in order to remove mature bulls and rectify skewed sex ratios. This would also prevent mortalities caused by breeding-related aggression.

These factors, as well as the build-up to the next CITES meeting in 1997 - where the listing of rhinos and trading in rhino products are sure to be discussed - have necessitated a new survey to establish the present status of rhinos on private land. AROA initiated and undertook to obtain sponsorship for the 1996 survey.

It aims to contribute to rhino conservation through the establishment of rhino management guidelines, to gauge the opinion of rhino owners on responsible utilisation of both black and white rhinos, and to provide official nature conservation authorities, IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group and the South African CITES authority, with accurate information.

The Mazda Wildlife Fund has kindly provided a vehicle for the duration of the project and the Rhino & Elephant Foundation, Lapalala Wilderness, the Natal Game Marketing Association, WWF and Thabo Tholo have made generous contributions to AROA for the survey.

Daan Buijs of the African Wildlife Management Unit of the ARC - Range and Forage Institute will again supervise the project, with the help of Theo Papenfus who will conduct the field work. The institute will provide the infrastructure and computer facilities for the survey.

Field Ranger Training Programmes

During the past year, four courses were conducted by the Mpumalanga Parks Board, under the direction of Clive Poultney and his highly dedicated team.

The long-awaited 50/50 programme focusing on field rangers is complete and AROA Chairman, Clive Walker, has seen an advanced copy.

This should be screened soon and, if time permits, we hope that we will be able to notify members timeously of the screening date.

As it transpires, the programme is, in effect, about the aims and objectives of AROA and was excellently directed by Mariaan van Heerden.