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AFRICANA

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KENYA TAKES ACTION ON ITS RHINO WAIFS

TO WIN A MODERN WAR, you need modern weapons. Nowhere is this more true than in Kenya's battle for its black rhino, heavily poached because of the insatiable demand from Asia for rhino horn as an aphrodisiac — a belief unfounded by science but undiminished.

Jaded Orientals however may soon have to look elsewhere, for the Kenya Game Department's Capture Unit has now evolved a battle technique which is going to make the poacher's life much more difficult.

The plan is simple: Move as many rhino as possible out of areas where they can be reached by poachers.

The plan is not new. First you immobilise a rhino by darting it, then carry it off to a national park. But it is only comparatively recently that the benefits of veterinary knowledge, scientific research and advanced technology have been allied with outstanding success to make the Capture Unit — King's Commandos, as they are called — a really effective spearhead in the fight to save the rhino.

For the first time, the unit is led by a qualified veterinary surgeon, Dr. John King, a Doctor of Philosophy on loan to the Kenya Government from the British Ministry of Overseas Development.

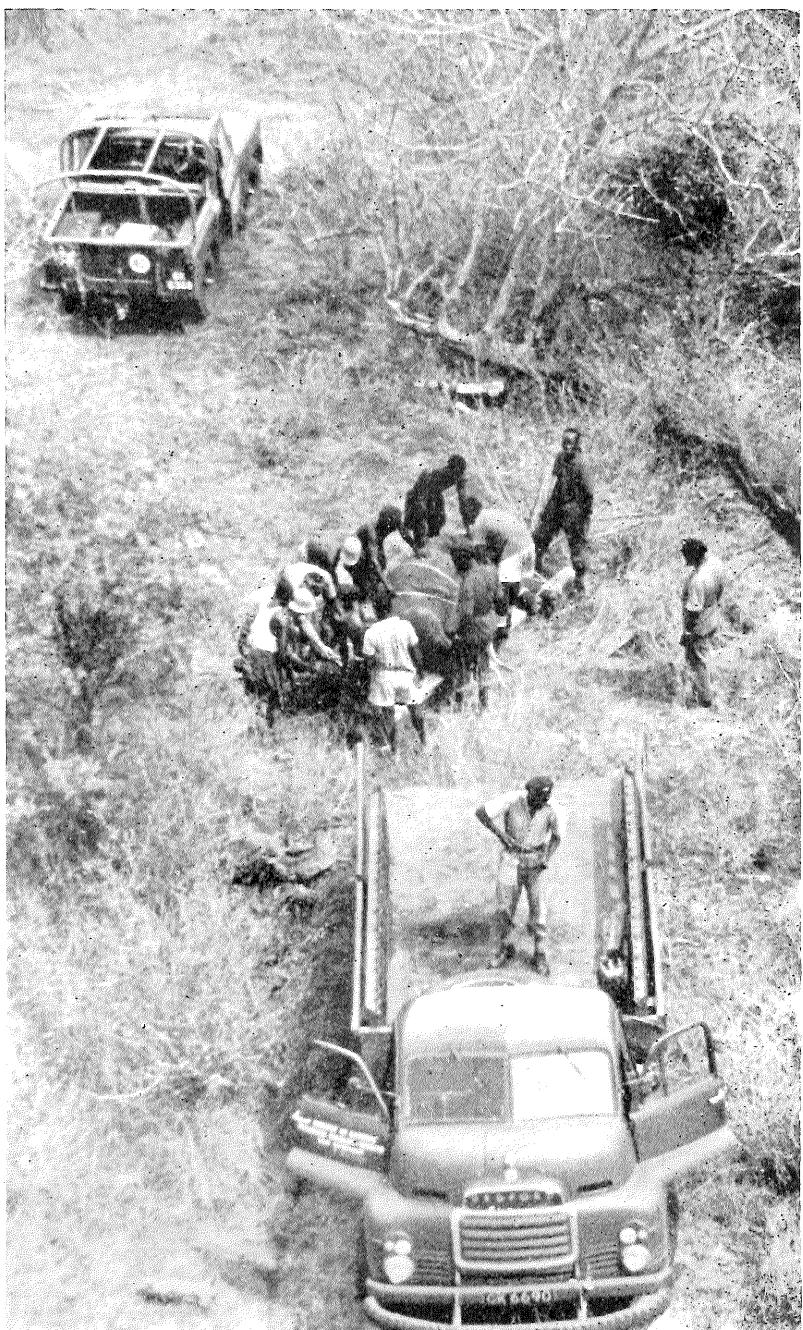
Dr. King is among the first to acknowledge the value of the work of Nick Carter and the late Barry Chappell, who led the unit before him; but neither had the advantages of veterinary training — a knowledge vital if darting with drugs is ever to grow beyond the hit or miss stage.

For the future of rhino and wildlife in general, research must be conducted, and for the first time, organised research on the effects of drugging the black rhino is being undertaken professionally in the bush — the only place where reliable results can be obtained, since captive animals react differently.

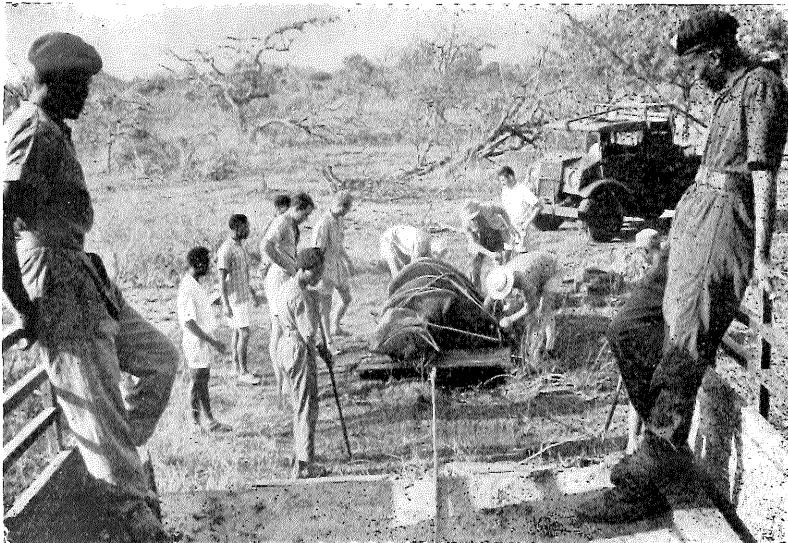
Scientific research has now reached the stage where the narcotic compound M99, used with

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by
**NICK
RUSSELL**



(Right) An aerial shot of the Commandos in action, lashing a darted rhino to a sledge. (Above) Barry White takes advantage of the rhino's pause for breath to try to rope one of its feet, but thick bush thwarts the attempt.



ROCK-A-BYE rhino. Fast asleep, a rhino is roped to a sledge which is then winched on to the lorry up roller ramps.



Dr. King injects the antidote to the M99 into a vein in the rhino's ear — much the simplest place on the thick-skinned animal to find a suitable spot.

KENYA TAKES ACTION

(Continued from page 33)

a backing of scientific knowledge, is stable enough to provide the ideal method of immobilising rhino.

Developed over a number of years it provides a wide enough margin of error to allow two doseages to be used, with an appropriate reaction variation, for all sizes of adult rhino.

In other words, the man with the dart gun has now a much easier task.

He now no longer has the almost

impossible job of judging the weight of a rhino in the bush — judging it, perhaps, from a glimpse of a rear end disappearing into a lugga — so that he can decide the dosage it can safely take.

Now he carries at the most four variations in the strength of the compound. An enormous bull gets the "big bullet"; a small cow a weaker dose, and there are two calf doseages.

The actual dart has been a problem since darting first started in 1960. Basically, it must fulfil a simple function — to penetrate one-and-a-half inches of rhino hide with the hole uncluttered, so that the drug can get to work. But experience posed a number of problems.

It had to be able to be discharged accurately so that the darter could aim his weapon with a reasonable assurance that the dart would go where he pointed it. It had to be discharged with just the right amount of power — so that it would penetrate but not bounce out again by its own impact.

The crossbow was tried and a variety of cartridge methods, some more successful than others, until today, Dr. King, drawing on the experience of the past and on his own previous visits to Kenya, has evolved a shaft of special steel, fired by a cartridge, with a small barb on it.

The hole through which the M99 is injected is on the side of the hollow shaft to prevent it becoming clogged on impact. It is now

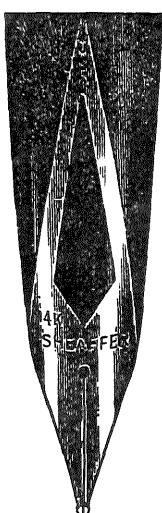
sufficiently accurate for him to be able to put three darts — each within four inches of the other — into a rhino at a range of 25 yards.

Perhaps the greatest weapon yet to be brought into use in the battle for the black rhino is the helicopter. It has brought about a revolution in rhino catching — at the cost of £28 an hour. Fortunately, the Game Department has allies who appreciate that it is money well spent.

The East African Wildlife Society finances the helicopter, chartered from a local airways company for its vital role in preserving this endangered animal.

There is little doubt about it, the helicopter has proved invaluable for this type of work, and many experts feel that, equipped with an adequate number of helicopters, poaching could very quickly become a thing of the past — not the little man who hunts for meat, but the rhino and elephant killer with a commercial market in mind.

But helicopters at present are far too expensive for the Department or



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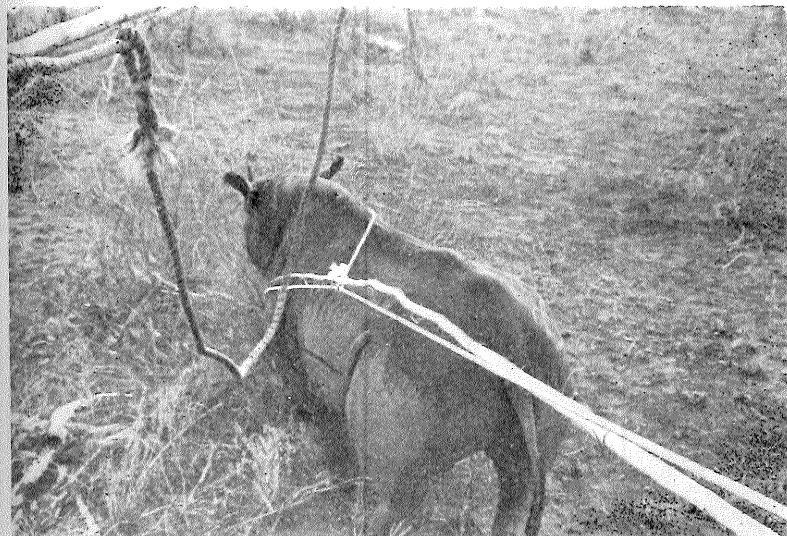
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A real example of harambee. Traditional rhino trappers, National Parks and Game Department men struggle to get a sleeping rhino through a pen gate. (Right) Once in the pen, the ropes are removed. Last to go, for obvious reasons, are the hobbles. Barry White (standing) holds the front ropes as Tony Parkinson unties the rear ones.



An example of co-operation between old and new methods of catching rhino. After being successfully darted and as it staggered about, this rhino was roped to prevent possible damage. Loosely-wired to a guiding pole, the rope

the Government to afford. It would take an extremely wealthy patron to provide this sort of capital.

The Capture Unit's battle plan is simple: Swoop into a suitable area for a short period, build pens, dart rhino, then transfer them to the national parks. The present stage of the unit's development makes the carrying out of the whole operation so smooth and efficient that the plan really is as simple as it sounds.

For eight days recently, I became an unofficial part of King's Commandos on an operation in Kenya's Darajani area, between Kibwezi and Mtito Andei, the area known as Hunting Block 29.

Because of the size of the operation, outside help was called in. Traditional animal trappers, with long experience of rhino, the John Seago outfit, was asked to help organise the pens and the rhino handling, with payment in the form of live rhino.

The entire convoy met at Buffalo Bend on the Athi, three miles upstream from Kitani ya Ndunu, and pitched camp. Three days of

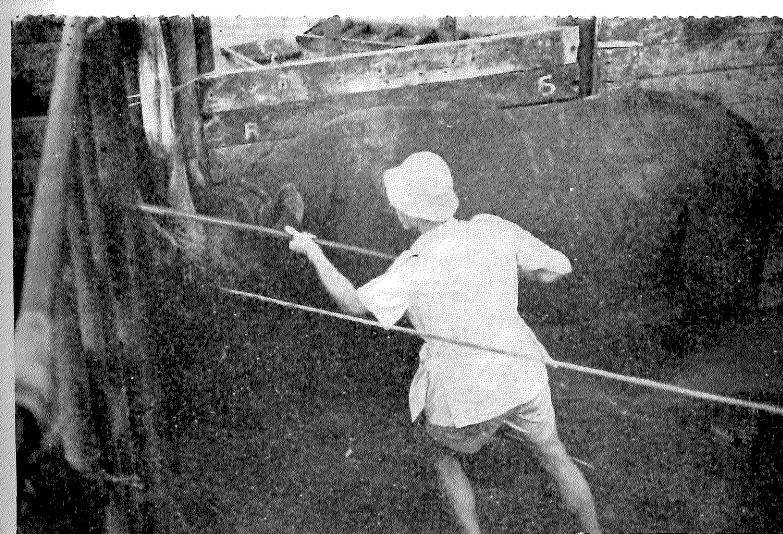
hot, back-breaking work went into building eight pens strong enough to hold eight surprisingly agile rhino. After that, the actual capture work was comparatively easy.

For ease of handling and what might be termed "post-operative care", the bag limit was set at two a day. The helicopter arrived on the Sunday. At dawn on Monday the ground crew of two four-wheel drive lorries, a Land-Rover and a catching car left camp and headed into the thick bush to a rendezvous.

Fifteen minutes later (after a second cup of tea), Dr. King and the helicopter pilot took off and established radio contact with the Land-Rover, which in turn was in radio contact with one lorry and the catching car.

Within a matter of minutes the radio crackled: "Helicopter to Kiboko (the Land-Rover), I have just darted a cow rhino. The drug seems to be taking effect. Move slowly into the area. Over."

In single column, with Kiboko in the lead, the four vehicles moved through the thick bush towards the



Drugged rhinos have a habit of pushing anything they encounter. To avoid damage to either the rhino or the pens, they have to be persuaded to keep moving. Here, Dr. King risks 27 inches of horn through him — to free the same 27 inches from catching in the pen corner.



is jerked clear, once in position. Unceremoniously up-ended, (right, above) a baby rhino, chased and caught undarted, struggles with its captors, the John Seago trapping unit. It was soon hobbled.

chosen victim, clearly marked by the circling helicopter.

"Helicopter to Kiboko. The rhino is down. Come in as quickly as possible."

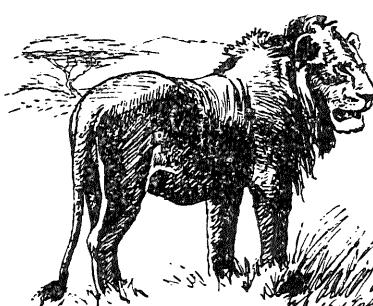
There is now a sense of urgency. The rhino must be hobbled safely before its vital statistics are taken — respiration, pulse, length from base of neck to tip of tail, heart girth, width of fore and rear feet, length of horn.

All these are much more easily taken when the animal is immobile. Just you try it with one on its feet and wide awake!

So effective is the drug that eighty per cent of the rhinos are out to the world before the cars reach them. Once hobbled, Dr. King lands to take the measurements and then administer part of the antidote — a prophylactic measure which aids the rhino's recovery although it would recover fully without it.

The commandos then swing into action, rolling the rhino on to a special sledge, roping it securely, protecting its head and eyes from damage, and then winching it up roller ramps on to the lorry.

(Continued overleaf)



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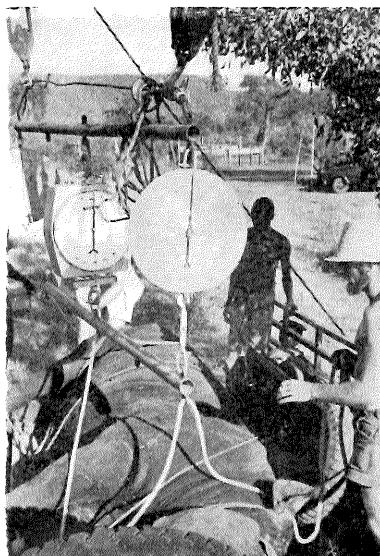
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AFRICA IS MORE INTERESTING WITH JOHN ALEXANDER SAFARIS



David Woodhead one of the helicopter pilots without whose skill the work of the Capture Unit would be severely hampered. Stuart Whitehead shared the pilot's seat for much of the operation. Here David watches a rhino being loaded on to a lorry.



For the first time, a live rhino was weighed accurately in the bush. It took three spring balances, two blocks and tackle, a baobab tree and a lot of "pulli-heevi" to do it. (Right) Another view of rhino-weighing. A double block and tackle rig takes the weight from three evenly distributed spring balances.



KENYA TAKES ACTION

(Continued from previous page)

With one lorry on its way back to camp, the helicopter takes off again for a second rhino, and a smooth repeat performance.

Back in camp, in the meantime, a pen has been prepared for the first visitor. For the first time, rhino were weighed accurately in the

bush. Three separate spring balances were arranged between horizontal metal bars on two blocks and tackle from a nearby baobab tree. The lorry and rhino were then driven underneath and the rhino weighed on its sledge. Subtract the weight of the sledge and you have the

weight of your rhino. Simple but effective, and capable over a few months of giving Dr. King vital information to use for working out relationships between other "vital statistics".

The lorry carried the rhino over to the pens, where it was winched off, swabbed with insecticide and visible wounds treated with healing oil. The hole made by the dart was injected with an antibiotic. After a halter was attached, the rest of the antidote was injected into an ear vein.

Depending on how long the rhino has been "out", it can take effect in ten minutes or ten seconds. The speed at which you climb the pen wall has the same variation.

The pattern is repeated with each rhino, but the very absence of incident is one of the sure hallmarks of the operation's success. Eight rhino were captured in four days, filling all the pens; but by the fourth day, the rhino caught on the first day were ready for transportation to national parks, thus clearing pens for catches on the fifth day.

Given sufficient funds to charter one of the two helicopters available in Kenya for an indefinite period, the capture unit could clear any area of its endangered rhino. The unit's effectiveness is limited only by lack of helicopter availability.

Rhinos are on the Game Department's "forbidden" list, and can be hunted only in the Maralal area and then only on foot or horse safaris. Traditional trappers — and there are no others — are rarely these days given permission to trap rhino. But when they are, it is a different story. The success tally is one a week, not two a day.

Gruelling days must be spent locating the rhino in thick bush, tracking spoor across country fit

only for rhino. Then it must be chased, at great expense to vehicles and men, roped and transported.

Perhaps the finest tribute to the unit came from Tony Parkinson, manager of John Seago's animal trappers.

Tony was paid for his men's contribution to the unit in live rhino. "It is the easiest rhino we have ever had," he said. "It really makes the whole thing look ridiculously easy."

"Some day, perhaps, when the techniques are really perfected, traditional trappers like ourselves may be allowed to operate with M99. In the meantime, we know that at this stage you need a trained veterinary surgeon in charge, and we are quite happy to come along and learn what we can, and help in any way we can."

"For the time being, the biggest improvement we could make to our own operation would be something in the nature of a helicopter to cut out the big time consumer — finding the rhino."

"From the ground they are invisible, but from the air you can spot them quite easily. Perhaps something on the lines of a one-man auto-gyro would be our best answer. It is certainly worth thinking about."

The difference between the two methods was brought home to me quite clearly during one capture session. Trappers find a readier market for young animals than for full grown ones. Dr. King decided to look for a cow and calf, dart the cow and bring the catching car up to deal with the youngster.

Sentimental considerations of course, would have been out of place. It poachers reached the cow, the calf would either have been left to die on its own, or speared out of hand.

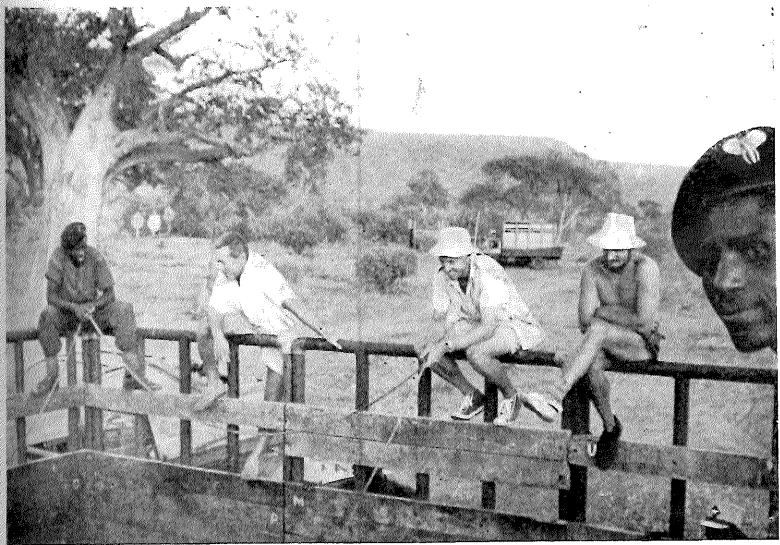
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The sweet smile of success. Helicopter pilot Stuart Whitehead, Dr. King, and Barry White, of Seago's Lancers, relax on the pen edge after another successful rhino capture.

Once the cow was darted, the catching car would have to be on the spot quickly in case the calf left its "dead" mother and wandered off into the bush on its own. "Seago's Lancers" prepared their ropes, but, having in the past tackled full-grown bulls, a young calf offered them no great excitement.

Tony Parkinson had the catching car cruising round the area ready to move in. The bush, grey and leafless, looked thin from the air. From the ground it was thick, riddled with holes and stumps.

As soon as word came through from the helicopter Tony spotted the calf ahead. The chase was on.

The two ropers, nooses held ready at the end of long poles, swayed and ducked as the catching car whined low-gearred through the bush after the disappearing calf. Closer and closer came the galloping backside as the bruised vehicle leapt from hillock to stump. Suddenly it swerved in front of the car. The brakes slammed the vehicle to a halt, as a muttering driver spun it round a bush and off again after the vanishing tail.

Suddenly it was there again, a determined little rhino with a big heart, facing its pursuer. It charged. Tony swung the vehicle out of its way, to stop possible injury to the calf. Then back round behind it. For once it was in just the right position. Muneke's noose appeared over the edge of the cab, dropping neatly over the rhino's head. With a jerk, the rope was free from the loosely-wired guiding pole and pulled tight.

As he braked, Tony swung the catching car's rear towards the captive. With one end of the rope fixed to the car, the job was now to get another rope over the rhino. Once

held between two ropes, it could be hobbled and capsized.

Experts as they are with a lasso, the thick bush snagged many attempts to get another noose over the rhino. Finally, Barry White darted in to seize its tail, gaining enough time for Tony to slip a noose over a very angry head.

Held immobile, it was a moment's work to rope the feet together. Another joint pull had the calf on its side — complaining bitterly at the offhand treatment. I kept a nervous eye on the surrounding bush in case its elder brother decided to answer the plea.

"This is only a calf, but you can see what it would have been like with a full-grown bull", Tony remarked as the calf was winched on to a waiting lorry.

"It shows you what a difference M99 makes. The calf is not subjected to any more injury risk this way. It just makes it a great deal more difficult to get him, and there's much more chance of damaging the vehicle.

"No doubt about it, helicopter and M99 — that's the answer," he said.

Judging by the Darajani operation, the rescue of rhino from danger areas is now down to a question of time and money — time required to get them out before the poachers get them, and money for the helicopter.

At the almost unbelievable rate of two captures a day, the unit is making full use of the limited time they have with the helicopter.

If the Unit — or even the Game Department — owned its own helicopter, the work it could accomplish would be staggering.

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT, reproduced by kind permission of the *East African Standard*, shows the significant part the Society plays in the rescue of endangered animals and the value of the special Animal Rescue Fund specially set aside for this purpose:

"Plans are being made for a new large-scale operation to move rhino from areas of Kenya where their presence could interfere with settlement to places of safety. If it succeeds it will be the biggest operation of its kind undertaken in Kenya.

"The plans, which have been put forward by Dr. John King, of the Game Department, are being considered by the East African Wild Life Society, which has already assisted Dr. King's 'rescue' operations by providing money to pay for a helicopter to be used in his rhino hunts.

"At its last meeting, the Society voted an immediate grant of £1,000 to provide helicopter transport and, since then, Dr. King has captured two rhino in the Nyeri forest using a helicopter, and another at Kiserian, near Ngong.

"By coincidence, the helicopter pilot on the Kiserian capture was Mr. Stuart Whitehead who, during his service with the British Army in Kenya, flew a helicopter for Mr. Nick Carter, of the Game Department, during his early experiments in the capture of rhino using drugged darts. He is now flying for Wilken Air Services in Nairobi.

"The Chief Executive of the Wild Life Society, Mr. Michael Sawyer, said that the helicopter had really proved its worth in this type of operation, since it greatly reduced the time needed to search for animals.

"He said the Society had been asked for £2,500 for helicopter transport and for a much larger operation and was studying the request carefully.

"The rhino, a large cow, did not share his enthusiasm. After being drugged she seemed very groggy, but when Mr. Sawyer and a Nairobi

photographer, Mr. Ray Robinson, went forward for a closer look at her she had sufficient strength left to make a determined charge and gave them a few nasty moments before Mr. Michael Carr-Hartley saved the situation by driving his vehicle straight at her.

"Dr. King said that he hoped to mount a large catching operation in the Darajani (near Mtito Andei) and Kiboko areas to move a significant number of rhino to areas where they would have access to permanent water.

"Rather than try to save a particular area, we are trying to stock areas where we know there is water. There is no danger at the moment of the rhino population dwindling significantly in the parks, but there is still room to stock areas which have recently acquired permanent water — such as the Aruba Lodge area."

"If other countries' rhino populations were as good as Kenya's, it would be possible to try to get the animal off the rare mammals list. Dr. King said that, at a later stage it might be possible to export Kenya rhino in exchange for other animals. Kenya, for instance, had lost its Uganda Kob and was short of Roan Antelope.

"The black rhino has been on the list of animals in danger of extinction for some years and Kenya is generally regarded as the main stronghold of the species.

"Last year, the Government stopped the issue of licences to animal trappers to catch rhino and of hunting licences, except in special circumstances. Since then, the main emphasis has been on the trapping of rhino in areas around settlements and their removal to national parks," the *East African Standard* concluded.

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