

## Found: The last rhino in Rwanda

In early 2003, reports from herdsman began to filter through of rhinos seen in Akagera National Park, Rwanda.

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At that time I was working with the GTZ-funded PRORENA project (Projet de Protection des Ressources Naturelles), and was immediately excited when I heard this news, as we had thought that the Rwandan rhino population had become extinct.

In 1958, some black rhinos (the eastern subspecies) had been moved from the Korogwe region of Tanzania (across the river) to the Akagera National Park. This was probably the first rhino translocation in Africa. The animals did well in the Park, and numbers rose to around 90. However, during the civil war beginning in 1990 and followed by the genocide in 1994, poaching became rife, and most of the rhinos were killed. In addition, Akagera's size was reduced by about 70% to provide land for refugees returning from Uganda and Tanzania with their cattle.

These days, the situation in Rwanda is much improved. The Park, although much smaller, is still a viable size. The government is committed to making a success of Akagera and has developed the infrastructure. The boundary is now clearly demarcated and herders are no longer tolerated. Even more important, the Park contains good black rhino habitat. Perhaps there was still a chance that some rhinos had somehow survived?

So in August 2003, at the suggestion of Raoul du Toit in Zimbabwe, we invited



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Dr Pete Morkel, a veterinarian and rhino specialist from the Frankfurt Zoological Society, who is based in Ngorongoro, Tanzania, to visit Rwanda to help look for any remaining rhinos.

Dr Morkel began his visit by meeting my Rwandan colleagues at PRORENA, officials from the Rwanda Office of Tourism and National Parks (ORTPN) and senior government representatives, all of whom pledged their support for the mission. Once in Akagera, Pete met with Park personnel, and explained the purpose of his visit: to find any rhinos, dart them and implant horn transmitters. He rehearsed the function and tasks of the crew on the ground with them, and also demonstrated the use of the dart gun, radio transmitters and antennae that would be used.

Pete also inspected two rhino horns that had recently been confiscated at Kigali market. Dr Morkel classified the horns to be from a black rhinoceros, probably a bull, older than 15 years at the time

of his death. He also found that the animal had already been dead for at least a week before the horn was taken, as the complete horn had been torn off in one piece rather than being sawn off. Both horns were sawn into two pieces, probably to facilitate their transport and to make them easier to hide. This seemed to indicate that the person trying to sell them was not a professional poacher, but had most likely just chanced upon the rhino carcass and collected the horns. Rhino horn loses a lot of value when it cannot be sold in one piece. Nonetheless, this reinforced the urgency of trying to find any surviving rhinos.

For the next few days, Pete Morkel and the Park staff conducted aerial and ground surveys, focusing on an area where tracks had been seen. Although they didn't find any rhinos during this week-long reconnaissance, they did confirm the presence of rhino tracks, which was immensely encouraging news. Akagera National Park offers excellent



ANTHONY MILLS

**k female Rhino  
VLTM eligible male  
meaningful, lasting  
transmitter fitted and  
nature!**

habitat for black rhino and, were rhinos to be found, it would be of immense value - financially and as a tourist attraction - for Rwanda.

Before Pete returned to his normal job in Tanzania, we agreed to bring some experienced rhino trackers from Zimbabwe and Tanzania to Rwanda to assist the game guards in the Park with their search. Raoul du Toit offered to send up Jackson Kamwi, his most experienced tracker from Zimbabwe, while Pete arranged to send Rees Williams, who works in Serengeti in Tanzania.

We had an amazing boost when, on 22 August, the rangers saw a rhino in the Park (limping) and a tourist sent me a video of a rhino they'd seen. At this point Save the Rhino International came forward with a grant of US \$1,400 to help pay for airfares and costs, while numerous other people and organisations offered donations, expertise, help with logistics and in-kind support. This was to be a truly international effort.

Jackson and Rees began intensive tracking on 1 September 2003 with Park rangers; I joined them two days later. That morning, we received a report of a sighting that very day and quickly headed over to the area where it had been seen. Jackson picked up the spoor and, after tracking for about an hour and a half, we found the rhino - the last rhino

in Rwanda. It was about 100 metres away, standing close to a group of trees and almost completely hidden by tall grass. Since the rhino had not yet noticed our presence, we moved quickly and quietly away in order not to disturb it unnecessarily.

We radioed Pete Morkel who immediately flew back to Rwanda. Meanwhile, the trackers stayed close to the rhino. All the necessary equipment - the dart gun, a generator to provide power for the drill, a water tank to provide water to cool the rhino down during anaesthesia - was transported to the location of the last rhino sighting in two PRORENA project vehicles.

Pete approached the rhino to dart and immobilise it. The two vehicles with all the equipment then moved in, and Pete began the procedure of fitting the radio transmitter into the larger one of the rhino's horns. The rhino turned out to be a young female, aged approximately nine years. She had a two-year-old snare injury at her right tarsal joint, which was causing her quite considerable pain and discomfort, and was no doubt the reason for her limp. Blood samples were taken and later analysed, as well as hair and horn samples for DNA testing. Since the rhino was showing quite a high heart rate during the whole anaesthesia, it was decided to wake her up immediately after

the transmitter had been fitted, rather than trying to collect further samples and measurements. We did not want to impede her well being or even to risk her life.

After administering the antidote, the rhino woke up quickly and was standing again after less than five minutes. After curiously gazing at the humans in the tree above her for ten minutes, she wandered off. Pete checked the radio receiver and a clear signal could be detected from the transmitter in her horn. A successful operation completed.

During the last six months the rhino has been radio tracked and followed at regular intervals. She is doing fine. We are now trying to bring a bull up from South Africa, in the hope that they will breed and form a new population of rhinos in Rwanda.

**Save the Rhino contributed  
US \$1,400 towards the cost  
of getting Jackson Kamwi up  
to Rwanda from Zimbabwe  
and field expenses.**