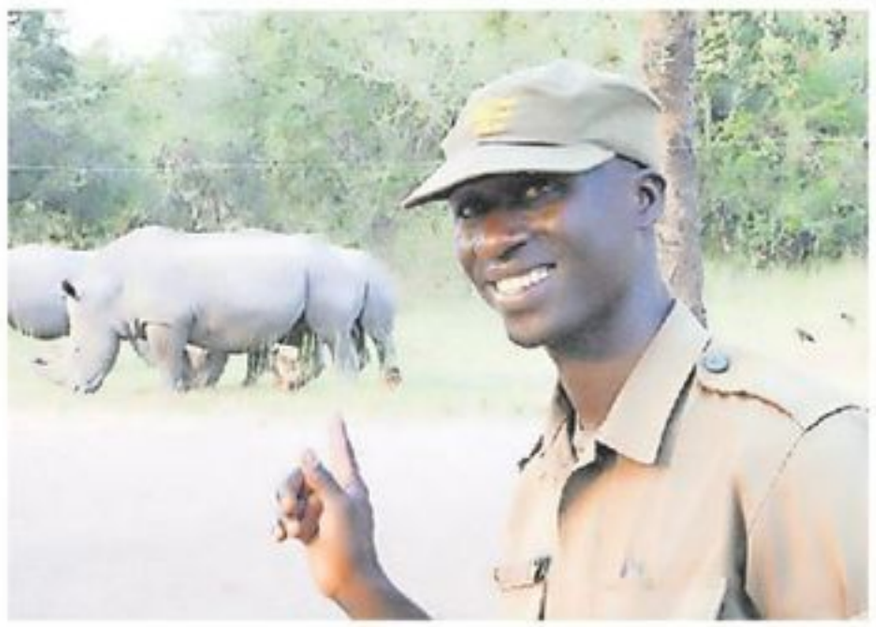
A rhino is coaxed onto the transport track at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Nakasongola District, guided by a team of expert rangers. This carefully orchestrated moment was part of the landmark operation led by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to reintroduce the species to Ajai Wildlife Reserve in the Madi Okollo District. After being wiped out from the region decades ago, this sensitive translocation marks a critical step in restoring the rhino to its historic range and rewilding Uganda's West Nile ecosystem. PHOTOS\TREVOR LUTALO.



Ssemakula's decade of living with rhinos

He was young, eager, and still shaped by the fear-filled stories he had grown up hearing about rhinos. With time, fear gave way to confidence grounded in understanding. Khalid Ssemakula learnt that rhinos constantly communicate through posture and movement.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

My visit to Ziwa Rhino and Wildlife Ranch coincided with a historic milestone, the carefully orchestrated return of rhinos to Ajai Wildlife Reserve in Madi Okollo District. Observing the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) lead this sensitive operation, I saw firsthand a major stride in Uganda's broader vision to rewild landscapes that had lost their rhinos a generation ago. The day begins long before sunrise. At exactly 5am, the ranch is already awake. In the dim light, a group of rangers moves with quiet urgency, checking equipment, exchanging brief instructions, and preparing for a task that leaves no room for error. Their mission is clear; to safely capture the selected rhinos and set in motion a journey that will end hundreds of kilometres away.

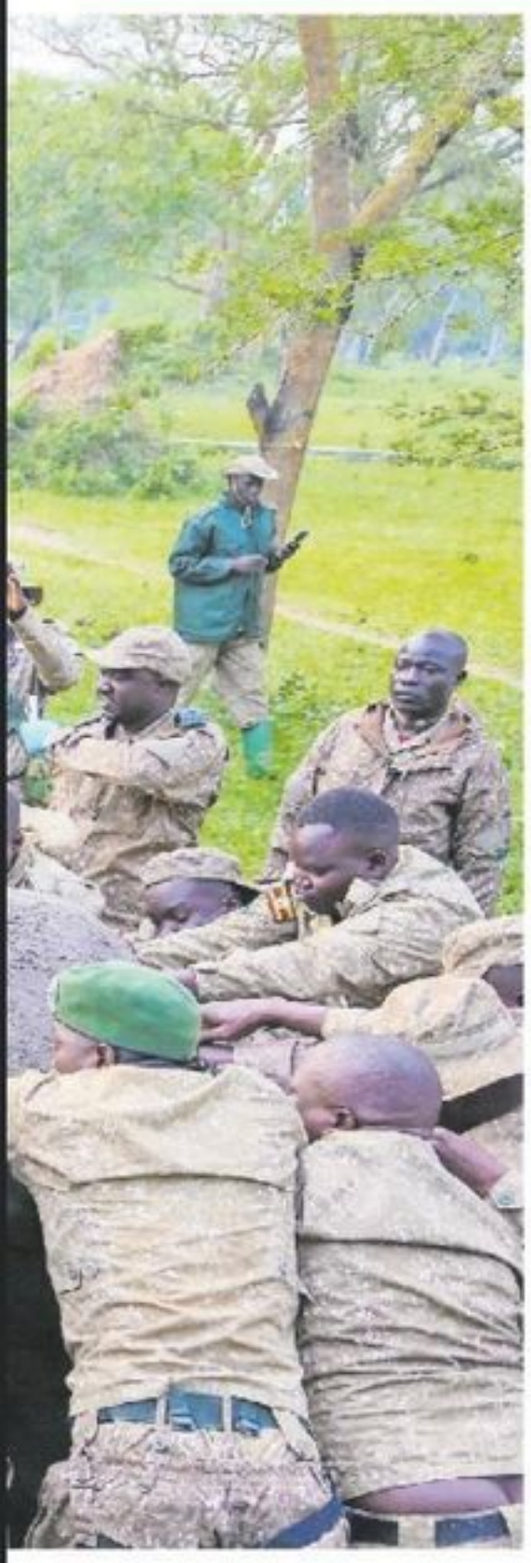
Soon, the massive animals are carefully guided into heavy metallic crates, sturdy, secure, and designed to minimise stress. With that, the four to six-hour journey to Ajai Wildlife Reserve begins, carrying with it years of planning, hope, and responsibility.

It is in this charged moment that I meet Khalid Ssemakula. Standing about six feet tall, with a calm confidence and gentle charisma, he is one of the rangers chosen to join the monitoring team at Ajai. His presence reflects both experience and quiet pride traits shaped by years spent working closely with one of the world's most endangered species.

Yet Ssemakula's journey into conservation did not begin as a career plan. When he first walked through the gates of Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in 2013, he was just a teenager on school holiday. At 19, during his Senior Four vacation, he was looking for casual work, simply something to fill the long break and earn a little money. What he found instead was a path that would define his life.

Ziwa offered that chance through a student programme that recruited young people from nearby communities. Ssemakula joined as a casual worker. His days were spent clearing fence lines, cutting through thick vegetation and helping maintain the sanctuary's vast perimeter. It was hard, physical work, far removed from the drama and prestige often associated with wildlife conservation.

The rhinos were there, but distant, huge, silent animals moving some-



RHINO FUN FACTS

A charging white rhino can hit speeds of 30-40 mph, outpacing the fastest human. They communicate in some pretty unique ways, holding "conversations" through communal dung piles called middens, which carry chemical messages about their identity and status. Their names are also misleading–both "black» and «white» rhinos are grey!

The «white» rhino's name likely comes from a mistranslation of the Afrikaans word for "wide" describing its broad, square lip used for grazing.

Their horns, are not bone but are made of keratin, the same protein in your hair and fingernails, and they are not even attached to their skull. Rhinos are ancient, with ancestors roaming Earth for more than 50 million years, and a group of them today is fittingly called a "crash."

They are tip-toe runners, walking on just three toes per foot, and have one of the longest pregnancies in the animal kingdom at 15-16 months.

Leaving Ziwa was difficult. It had become home. But Khalid Ssemakula's transfer to Ajai Wildlife Reserve marked a new chapter, returning rhinos to one of their original habitats and transferring knowledge built over the years.

A calm rhino grazes with its head down, ears moving freely, tail swinging gently.

where beyond the fence lines, more feared than understood.

More than a decade later, Ssemakula is 32 and integral to Uganda's rhino recovery journey. He has spent years walking, watching and learning from the country's only rhinos, growing alongside a conservation programme that has quietly turned extinction into recovery.

"I thought I would work here for a short time and then go back to school to study civil engineering," he says. "But Ziwa became my life."

A slow entry into conservation

After his first stint in 2013, Ssemakula returned to school for Senior Five and Six. When he came back again during his Senior Six vacation, Ziwa Rhino and Wildlife Ranch was recruiting students to work as fence cleaners. The sanctuary needed people on the ground visible, present, and engaged as part of its conservation and security strategy.

On January 7, 2016, he was recruited by Rhino Fund Uganda and deployed as a fence cleaner. For three months, he walked long distances along the electric fence line, checking for damage, clearing encroaching vegetation and ensuring the sanctuary remained secure. Then came an unexpected call.

"I was asked if I was willing to join the ranger team," Ssemakula recalls. "I accepted immediately. I really wanted to be close to these historical creatures."

Joining the ranger unit meant starting again. Before deployment, recruits underwent military-style training drills, discipline and firearms handling a necessary foundation in a landscape where armed poaching remains a real threat.

The training went beyond security. Rangers were taught rhino behaviour, rhino safety, first aid and data collection using GPS devices and digital tools. After nearly three months of preparation, Ssemakula was deployed as a junior rhino ranger under the guidance of senior trackers.

He was young, eager, and still shaped by the fear-filled stories he had grown up hearing about rhinos.

The first close encounter

Many Ugandans grow up fearing rhinos. As a child, Ssemakula heard stories that gave the animal almost supernatural qualities, such as that a rhino's horn grows when it sees a human, or that it is naturally violent and aggressive. Films reinforced the image.

His first day in the field as a junior ranger challenged those myths. He woke up before dawn, put on his green uniform, shouldered his backpack and rode nearly eight kilometres from Nakitoma to the ranger assembly point. At the morning parade, rangers were assigned their duties.

He was paired with senior tracker Diphas Lutaaya and deployed to monitor the Bella family, one of the largest rhino groups at Ziwa Rhino and Wildlife Ranch. When they took over from the night rangers near the airstrip, Ssemakula saw a group of about five rhinos.

"I remember thinking, how are two people going to manage all these rhinos?" he says.

Lutaaya's advice was calm and direct: stay composed, keep close to trees or thick bushes, and always respect the animal's personal space.

That day marked a turning point. Ssemakula realised that fear was rooted in ignorance. Knowledge of behaviour, movement, and warning signs kept rangers alive.

Learning to read a giant

With time, fear gave way to confidence grounded in understanding. Ssemakula learnt that rhinos constantly communicate through posture and movement.

"A calm rhino grazes with its head down, ears moving freely, tail swinging gently. A stressed rhino suddenly stops feeding, raises its head, points its ears in one direction, curls its tail and snorts sharply. These are not theatrical signals, but once learnt, they are unmistakable," he explains. "Sickness reveals itself more quietly, reduced feeding, excessive resting, isolation, limping, abnormal posture, discharge from the eyes or nose, or unusual droppings. Such details often go unnoticed by visitors, but for a ranger, they are critical."

A typical shift lasted 12 hours. Rangers reported for parade before 7am, collected radios, GPS units and data sheets, then moved into the field on foot or by motorcycle.

"Every activity feeding, resting, and movement was recorded hourly. Lunch was delivered in the field by a supervisor. Attention never relaxed," he says.

When things go wrong

Ten years with rhinos inevitably brings danger. Ssemakula recalls three encounters that reshaped how he works. During mating season, while monitoring a group of Rhinos, Ssemakula recalls that a dominant male suddenly charged at him, mistaking him for a rival. Ssemakula ran until his backpack fell and he stopped and attacked the bag instead.

Another day, while on patrol, he unknowingly rode his motorcycle into the path of Obama, a dominant rhino. The animal charged. Ssemakula jumped off the bike as the rhino rammed into it until the engine stopped.

The most frightening moment came at night, when a Rhino named Bella went into labour. Alongside two colleagues. "Bella suddenly chased Kageri toward us, and we scattered into the bush, thorns cutting into our bodies as we ran," Ssemakula says.

The other ranger I had hidden with called Apalya Joseph, went silent for several minutes.

"When he finally spoke, he said, 'Bella almost killed me, guys,'" Ssemakula recalls.

About 20 minutes later, Bella delivered her calf.

From these moments came hard lessons: "Never crowd rhinos during mating or labour, never assume speed will save you, and always prioritise safety over curiosity. Rhinos are wild animals, capable of changing behaviour in an instant,"

The weight of responsibility

Protecting rhinos is physically demanding, but the emotional burden is heavier. Rhino horn poaching remains a constant threat, and every ranger knows that a single mistake can cost an animal's life or their own.

"If a rhino dies on your watch, you can be arrested," Ssemakula says.

The pressure is unrelenting. Uganda's only rhinos live under their watch, attracting national and international attention. Stress becomes part of the job.

Growing alongside the herd

When Ssemakula joined Ziwa Rhino and Wildlife Ranch, there were about 15 rhinos. When he left after a decade, they were over 50. He watched calves grow into adults. He learnt individual personalities, not bonds in the human sense, but behavioural patterns that guided how close to stand, when to retreat and how to keep both animal and ranger safe.

"These rhinos are not in captivity," he says. "You don't bond with them. You learn them."

Leaving Ziwa was difficult. It had become home. But his transfer to Ajai Wildlife Reserve marked a new chapter returning rhinos to one of their original habitats and transferring knowledge built over the years.

At Ajai, Ssemakula now focuses mainly on monitoring four young male rhinos, observing how they adapt to a new landscape, climate and terrain.

A place found

Working with rhinos reshaped Ssemakula's outlook on life. The animals taught him patience, discipline and humility. He came to understand conservation not as dominance, but coexistence. "Animals can transform someone from zero to greatness," he says. "The way we treat animals is the way they respond to us."