

Black Rhinos arrive in Zambia

There's nothing quite like the smell of fresh rhino dung early in the morning, the sound of contact calls and munching on browse or the feel of rough, fissured hide to get the senses reeling from a week culminating in five black rhino arriving at North Luangwa airstrip, 28th May 2008.

It all started a couple of months ago with the SANParks capture unit darting 5 Black Rhino (*Diceros bicornis minor*) in Marakele and Kruger National Parks. Since then, they have been nurtured and carefully looked after by Alison Kennedy-Benson (professional rhino handler) and monitored for health and veterinary import measures by the SANParks vet teams. A main focus of this period worked towards getting the animals relaxed and adapting to lucerne, and other treats such as sweet potatoes, to ensure a smooth and trouble-free flight to a new life in Zambia.

With permits and health checks completed, the journey began at 0000hrs 28th May. The animals were loaded into their transport crates and lifted onto the back of crane trucks. From the bomas they were driven to Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport where a SAFAIR C-130 Hercules awaited them.

In the early dawn, the 5 crates were loaded into the belly of the plane while preparations were being finalised a few thousand kilometres away in Zambia.



Two of the rhino crates awaiting loading at KMIA

In North Luangwa, dawn broke and feelings were generally calm. After weeks of phone calls, letters, permissions, shopping, practice runs, crossing off lists and trying to imagine every conceivable requirement, there was not much more to do. The crane trucks had arrived two days before and practiced moving a crate, filled with 30 bags of cement, onto and off trucks and up to and away from boma doors. Pipes, winches, ropes and all manner of equipment had been assembled and *a lot* of food and drink prepared for all the visitors and dignitaries coming to witness the arrival of the black rhino.

We found out the take off time and were working out the ETA in between greeting cars and planes carrying sponsors and donors as well as local and international VIP's. A radio call came through that one of the scout patrol groups had heard a very large plane fly over! We checked our watches and sure enough saw a large dot on the horizon.



Lubanga Airstrip from the cockpit of the Hercules

Seeing a very big plane land on a very small bush airstrip is quite a moment to live through with hearts in mouths and collective sighs of relief when the wheels hit *terra firma*. Everyone there will agree it was an awe-inspiring sight. The SAFAIR pilot, Capt Clive Davis, had visited Lubanga Airstrip a week previously and was happy with the conditions. The first fly- by confirmed his preferred direction for landing.

And finally at 1321hrs, after many months of organising and last minute changes of plan the rhinos were in North Luangwa...



The Capt's eye-view of Lubanga airstrip



As soon as the engines stopped, the ground teams moved in to begin the offloading – first bales of lucerne and bags of feed cubes...



then 'Bat' (the Load Master) set to work with the ground crews in gingerly extracting the precious cargo; first, onto a tractor-trailer combo and then by crane onto the back of waiting trucks.



Meanwhile, the ZAWA scouts were saying 'hello' to their new charges.

By mid afternoon, the convoy was ready to travel the few kilometres to the rhino bomas where the rhinos will spend the next 2-3 weeks getting use to their new surroundings, eating the local vegetation and being constantly monitored for any signs of ill-health.



Getting ready to open the crate doors and release the first rhino into the bomas

The offloading went as well as hoped and each rhino touched Zambian soil for the first time. As the day drew to a close and the sun set, the last of the five new black rhino for North Luangwa National Park was released into her boma.



Kruger bull

And that brings me back to how I started this piece and visiting the bomas the following morning to let sink in what had just been achieved by so many people for these endangered beasts. Their journey will be long and interesting. We will implant radio transmitters and release them from the bomas soon. Thereafter they will be monitored for adaptation to local browse, behaviour and social interactions. And ultimately, the sanctuary fences will be removed once their security can be ensured and black rhino will roam free in the Luangwa Valley once more.



The North Luangwa Conservation Programme, on behalf of the Zambia Wildlife Authority, would like to thank:



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The reintroduction of black rhinos into North Luangwa National Park has so far been an international conservation initiative between the Governments of Zambia, Namibia and South Africa, under the umbrella of the SADC Regional Rhino Programme. In 2003, the first translocation of 5 animals took place and 2 of the females have subsequently had calves – the first Zambian bred black rhinos in nearly two decades. In 2006, 10 animals were released and a pregnant cow produced a calf a few months later. The translocation described above is the penultimate in bringing a founder population of 25 animals to Zambia.

The North Luangwa Conservation Programme is a Frankfurt Zoological Society project working in partnership with the Zambian Wildlife Authority in North Luangwa National Park since 1986.

