
Namibia Dehorns Damaraland Rhinos to Thwart Poachers

The Namibian Directorate of Nature Conservation (NDNC) decided to dehorn black rhinos that roam the remote, parched, red-gravel desert region known as Damaraland. The dehorning, which Mr. Brian Jones, a NDNC official, describes as “drastic”, was done to discourage poachers who early this year killed five of the 100 or so Damaraland rhinos and 11 in Etosha National Park.” “There seems to be a new wave of poaching and we decided, because of the desperate situation, that this action had to be taken” Mr Jones added.

In addition to concern about poaching simply for money, conservationists said dehorning was also prompted by fear that, as Namibia gains independence from South Africa, white farmers resentful of black majority government would leave the country and poach rhinos as a last defiant gesture. But Blythe Loutit, founder of Save the Rhino Trust in Namibia, describes dehorning as a last resort after her organization failed to raise funds to hire more guards and to purchase a new plane for anti-poaching activities.

Dehorning has been widely debated and this is the first time it has been used as a measure to protect rhinos. Can a rhino without horns live as a rhino? The horns are used in courtship and for defence. Unlike the social elephant, a species in which the young enjoy the protection of all the adults in the family group, the solitary rhino has only its horn to shield a calf from predators; the black rhino uses its horn to pull or break branches to gain access to browse and also to clear a way through thick bush.

Except in Damaraland black rhinos live in thick bush-land. In that kind of vegetation a poacher is unlikely to be able to see the whole animal and one would not expect him to waste time, or risk entering a thicket, to check whether the quarry has horns or not. One may argue that, being a desert, Damaraland allows the poacher to see easily that a rhino has no horn. But Damaraland has riverbeds, conical hills, rocky outcrops, gulleys, etc.

It is no wonder then that, in order to increase the chances of success of dehorning, Namibian authorities have tried to create the impression that all the 100 or so rhinos were dealt with. The number of rhinos that were operated on has not been disclosed officially, but conservationists involved said that about 12 animals had been dehorned. The sawn-off horns have been cached in an undisclosed place for fear of theft.

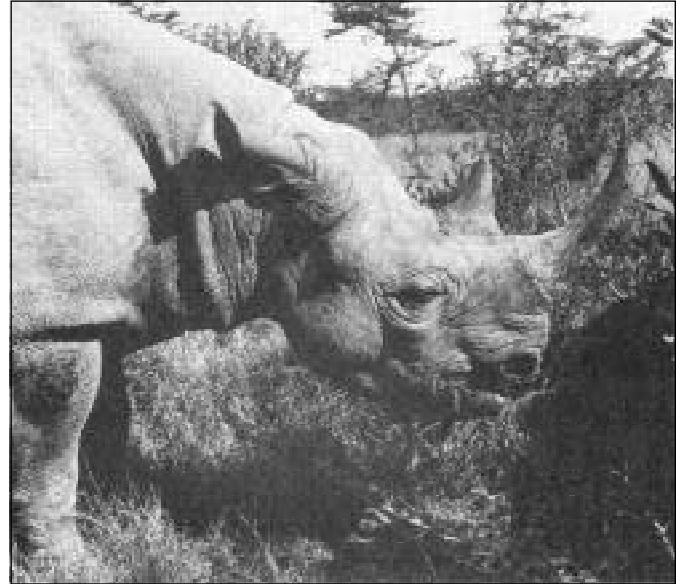
There is also the problem of horn regrowth. The need to remove newly grown horn every two or three years would mean repeatedly subjecting the rhinos to all the hazards of the operation. Besides that, it could lead to a race with poachers to see who removes the horn first.

Another facet which has been ignored is that rhinos' hide, bones and nails also can be sold. Presently their value is minimal compared to that of the horn but can we be sure the poacher will not kill rhinos to get these other products?

Blythe Loutit is confident that the hornless rhinos will fare well. But Brian Jones says “We are going to have to monitor, to see what effects there are on their social life”.

Information and ideas from the monitoring of the dehorned rhinos should be made available to facilitate future active rhino management in other parts of Africa.

New York Times C.G. Gakahu



Black rhino browsing

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Dehorning Rhinos in Damaraland - A Controversial Issue

Earlier this year poachers killed five of the rare desert black rhinos in Damaraland. After much discussion and deliberation we decided to undertake the drastic step of dehorning some rhinos, not as an experiment, but as an urgent necessity. We believe they have more chances of survival without their horns than with them - until we obtain enough funds to have an effective anti-poaching operation.

The first rhino dehorned was Tammy, a pregnant cow; she has been re-sighted a number of times and her behaviour is normal. Another cow, Petra, also dehorned, has a small calf known as Little Richard; they have been seen again three times and are doing very well. A cow and a bull, Hilda and Zak, together for the last three weeks, had their horns removed, and are still with each other. The project will continue along with careful monitoring.

Dehorning causes no pain because no nerves or blood vessels are cut. The horns take a long time to grow back, and, hopefully, this period will provide opportunity to raise the funds to pay for men on the ground and buy the radios and aircraft which we so desperately need.
