



THE RHINO WHISPERER

THE MAN THAT'S SAVING AFRICA'S BLACK RHINO FROM EXTINCTION

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Pickett Chabwedzeka is the Reserve Manager of Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve. He manages an intensive protection zone for the endangered black rhino and talks me through the dehorning process. This is his account of a rhino dehorning, as told to Cindy-Lou Dale.

"On D-day, there are a team of rangers on the ground who closely monitor the movements of the rhino, and send us GPS coordinates, which we pass onto the vet and pilot who immediately get airborne in the helicopter.

The growling, gyrating sound of a chainsaw sends shivers up your spine.

From the air, the vet darts the rhino. The ground team are on high alert as now the rhino is running with the chopper hovering above. The pilot, who guides the rhino to a safe open area where the team can perform the dehorning task, radios to the rangers on the ground, who rush to the location. As the tranquilizer kicks in, the ground team assists the collapsing rhino into a sitting position then folds in its front legs.

Then it's all stations go, and everyone jumps into action, performing their

relevant tasks. A ranger sprays the rhino with water to keep it cool, another puts cotton wool into the rhino's ears, someone blindfolds the rhino, and three more place a sheet of canvas under its chin to collect the horn dust.

Armed rangers guard the scene, whilst the vet moves in and measures the horns, calculating where to cut, regularly checking the rhino's oxygen levels and temperature. Moments later the chainsaw fires up. The vet, sitting on the rhino's back, starts with the rear shorter horn, then moves onto the larger one in the front.

The rhino is now of no value to poachers.

When the deed is done, a ranger marks the rhino's back with orange water-paint, signifying that it has been dehorned. The vet inserts a microchip

between its shoulders and implants a transponder into the base of the stump for tracking purposes. This is when the vet administers the antidote for the rhino to wake, and everyone gets out of the way.

Rhinos are state animals and requires a police presence during the dehorning operation. Now, the horns, the police, and National Park rangers, go to National Parks Office where the horns are weighed (including the horn dust), and inventories completed. Then the horn is transported to Harare where it is locked away in the state's vault.

The first dehorning occurs around the age of four. Then the growth rate quickens. Every three years the rhinos go through this procedure as the horns grow back.

For me it's deeply personal. Dehorning at Victoria Falls signifies an 18-year legacy of zero poaching. I've been part of this mission for eight of those years. The threat to both rhinos and rangers is real. And it saddens me that we must dehorn these creatures for their survival, but I'm immensely grateful to everyone who made this project a success."

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