

NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER

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Dear clients,

Temperatures are rising, summer is on its way! We hope the rains will follow soon ☺ In this newsletter you can read why we always want immobilized antelopes to be in a sternal position. We tell you all about our recent DRC game translocation, and we have an article on rhino horn trade. We would love to hear your opinion and questions! We hope you enjoy the newsletter! Kind regards, the Wildlife Vets Namibia team

KEEP IMMOBILISED ANTELOPES (RUMINANTS) STERNAL

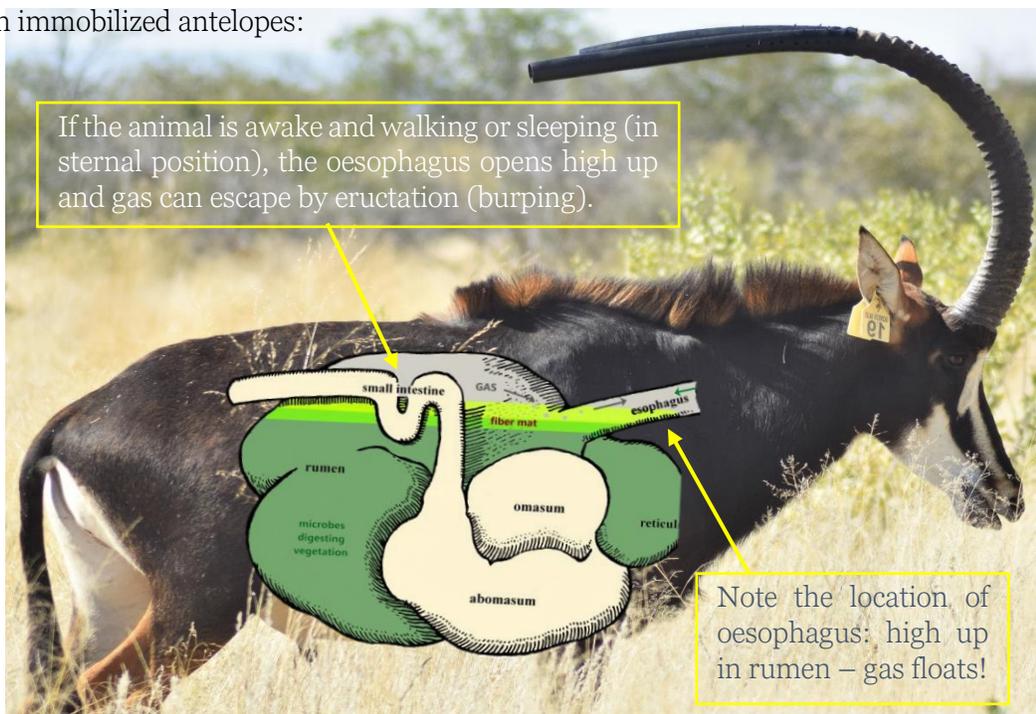
When we work with immobilized antelopes, we always request the farmer and workers to make sure the antelope is lying in sternal position – on its belly, with the head up, and the nose down. Why?

There are two main reasons why an antelope must lie in a sternal recumbency. The first important reason is to prevent loat. The immobilizing drugs we use not only makes the antelope sedated, but it also influences the eructation (burping) reflex. The micro-organisms present in the rumen produce large amounts of gas. CO₂ and methane are formed, and the antelope gets rid of these gases by eructating (burping). The eructation reflex is normally stimulated by the pressure of gas on the rumen wall. The immobilizing drugs however interfere with the part of the brain that coordinates eructation – the antelope burps little or not at all. If the antelope than also would lie on its side, the escape of gas will be blocked. Gas builds up in the rumen, and this pressure can become so large that it interferes with the antelopes' breathing. Lying in a sternal position is the closest to their natural standing position.

Another important reason why an antelope must lie in a sternal position is to prevent aspiration of rumen fluid. When an antelope is immobilized, saliva continues to be produced, and the animal might regurgitate (small amounts of food is brought up from the stomach back into the mouth). When the animal's position is not correct (e.g., nose is up in the air), saliva and/or rumen content is likely to end up in the lungs. This could lead to an immediate death, or death after a few days caused by a severe pneumonia. As said before, when the animal lies on its side, gas cannot escape. Increased pressure from the rumen eventually forces rumen fluid up into the oesophagus → increasing the risk of aspiration pneumonia.

In conclusion, when working with immobilized antelopes:

- 🐾 Keep the antelope in sternal position (on the belly). This is a near-normal body position which allows for ruminal gas to escape.
- 🐾 Keep the head higher than the level of the rumen, to prevent regurgitation.
- 🐾 The mouth/nostrils should be lower than the throat (and pointed downwards) to allow saliva and rumen fluid to drain out.



Correct way of holding an antelope
© M. Bijsterbosch



DRC GAME TRANSLOCATION

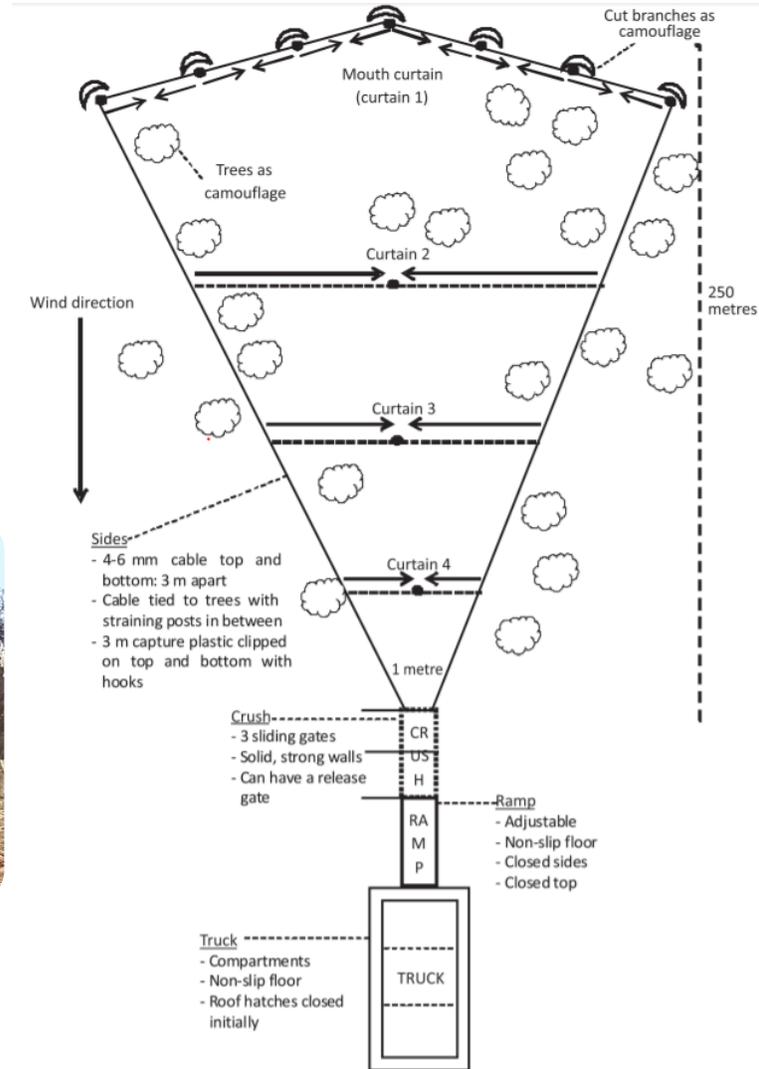
During the last days of August we went on a big mission... We translocated blue wildebeest, sables, impalas, nyalas and giraffes over 3200 km; from Namibia, through Zambia, all the way into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)! Read our story here!

The capture

We started off with capturing blue wildebeest, impalas, sables and nyalas. The blue wildebeest and impalas were captured via a *mass capture boma*. This is the most widely method of mass capture in southern Africa, and is ideal to catch a whole herd of animals. A helicopter herds the animals into a funnel-like structure which is made of special nylon sheets (boma curtains). As the animals are herded into the boma, curtains are closed behind the animals, and the funnel becomes narrower and narrower. The animals are led into a crush, where they can be sorted. For such long translocations, we like to take young, strong animals. Young animals travel easier, and adapt better in new environments.



Impalas coming into the boma © all photos in this article from M. Bijsterbosch, unless stated otherwise



Example of a mass capture boma. © Laubscher, Pitts, Raath & Hoffman (2015)

Once the impalas and wildebeest were in the trucks, it was time for the sables. They were also herded into the boma, and from there we dart immobilized young individuals. The next species were the nyalas, they were dart immobilized from the car. The animals were then all moved to a holding boma for a few days.

Then it was the day to start travelling! We loaded all the animals from the holding boma into the trucks, and went to the next farm for the last species, the giraffes. The giraffes were also captured via a mass capture boma. We took 4 young heifers. For these long translocations it is important not to load too many animals in a compartment. They must be able to lie down comfortably and move around. Once the giraffes were loaded, the big travel could really begin!





The drive

After the giraffes were captured, we drove straight to the Katima Mulilo border post. We thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated our Namibian roads which allowed us to cover the first 1000 km (33% of the trip) in 16 hours of driving. While driving through the Zambezi region at night, we saw sables and elephants! We stopped close to the border, and could get a few hours of sleep in. The next morning we crossed into Zambia! Since the border process took a long time, we could not make many kilometres into Zambia that day.



On such long translocation as this one we have to limit stress for the animals, and make them as comfortable as possible. We take several precautionary measures to achieve this. First of all, when the animals are captured they all receive a long-acting tranquilizer. The tranquilizer we use relieves anxiety/stress and reduces excitement, and improves appetite. Secondly, we ensure that all the animals have enough space. We do not load the animals tightly; they must be able to lie down and move around comfortably. We give them a thick bedding of hay to lie on. Thirdly, we give the animals plenty of good quality food. Ideally, we feed the animals at night. After the animals are being cared for, we would eat our dinner and then take a nap. The animals use this time of quietness to eat and drink at their own time. The first feeding session is obviously a bit scary for the animals, suddenly people are walking over the roof of the truck, throwing food down. Fortunately the animals get used to this quite quickly. We feed the animals with A-grade teff hay, lucerne and camel thorn pods. One of our trucks carries 4 tanks with a total of 4000 litres of water, so we know we have more than enough to sustain the animals throughout the trip.



The drive through Zambia was a long one. Some roads were in good condition, others... well not so much... We encountered deep potholes, and sections of road half- or even completely missing. This meant, especially with the giraffes, we had to drive very slowly. Many times our average speed was only between 20-40 km/h, you can imagine that its quite frustrating when you know there is still >1500 km to go!



During the drive we stop regularly to check on the animals. Not far from the border we got a little surprise... A nyala lamb was born! Not ideal, we actually don't want to take highly pregnant animals on such long translocations, but somehow this nyala ewe hid her pregnancy well! To our relief the lamb was doing very well and was strong. Unfortunately not long after one of the nyala ewes looked weak (not the mother). We still treated it, but not long after she died.

After 2960 km in six days, we reached the Congolese border. We had to cross a big river with a pontoon, what a sight! Now it was not long anymore... At least we thought...

The road in the DRC was extremely bad, so we had to drive very careful and slowly. We were happy that the giraffes were relaxed enough to lie down during the bad parts. It took us 8 hours to drive 180 km!



Eventually we reached the tarred road, and could make good progress to the first reserve! We arrived late at night at the reserve. Normally we want to offload the animals as quickly as possible, but since it was such a hard day on the animals, we decided to rather let them rest, eat and drink before we offloaded.

The release

The best moment of any translocation is the moment when you open the doors and the animals are released. Finally, the animals are able to roam free, and enjoy fresh grass and leaves! At the first reserve we offloaded one giraffe (to supplement the resident cow and bull), the wildebeest, part of the impalas, sables and nyalas. All the animals got off in a relaxed way, looking around, and making their ways into the bushes. What a great sight! The nyala lamb stayed behind initially, and our animal whisperer Romario carried the lamb out. We were all quite nervous as the lamb kept on walking in the wrong direction, but eventually Romario managed to get it close enough to the herd that the lamb joined its mother and the herd. A big relief!





Once all the animals were released, we went on to the second reserve, this is the place where we brought animals to last year. Here we offloaded the three giraffes, and three impala rams. The rams should enhance the genetic diversity in the resident impala herd.



The next day we drove around, and saw most of the animals we released here last year, what an amazing sight! The animals are in great condition, very satisfying to see that hard work does pay off! Tired, but above all we were proud and happy that all the animals (except the one nyala mortality) were released and able to roam free in these beautiful reserves! It was quite a trip, over 3200 km in seven days over bad roads (and some good 😊), massive potholes, rivers, floodplains, forests and open grasslands!

While driving through Zambia and the DRC the extreme degree of environmental degradation is a sad sight. The rate and number of trees that are chopped down for charcoal production results in vast areas of deforestation and habitat destruction. Electricity is in short supply so that even in the cities most cooking seems to be done by using charcoal. This goes hand in hand with extreme smog pollution – from 16:00 there is no more sunshine! The sun appears as a blood red disc in the sky – much like we experience when observing the last 30 minutes of a Namibian sunset on a windy day. In both countries (with the exception of Kafue NP and the Zambian flood plains), we saw very little wildlife and very few birds. This clearly demonstrates the importance of conserving nature – much education is needed in this regard. The creation and maintenance of national parks, reserves and private game farms is essential in this regard since these can then be used to demonstrate to the local population how and why preserving a natural habitat is important for their future.



A game translocation is not something one does alone – this truly is a team effort. We want to thank our drivers and all others involved – from the Namibian, Zambian and Congolese involved ministries and the state veterinarians, those arranging permits, clearing agents and of course to the game farmers supplying these wonderful animals. A special word of thanks to the owners and management of the reserves for their support and trust in our services. Thank you – Baie dankie – Merci!



Click [here](#) to watch our video about this trip!



RHINO HORN TRADE – WHAT DO YOU THINK?

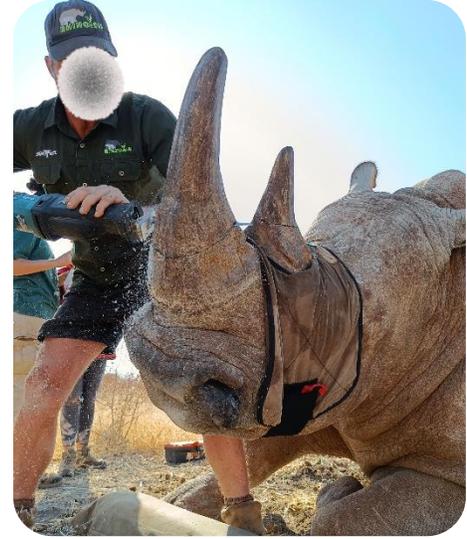
On 22 September 2022 it was World Rhino Day. A day to remember and celebrate an iconic animal. But is there much to celebrate?

We probably all know that it is not going well with the African rhino population. Poaching is rampant in South-Africa, and recently Namibia has been hit hard as well. Due to the increase in rhino poaching in Namibia, we have been busy with several dehorning operations. A sad measure, especially if you think that rhino horn is similar to a horse's hoof – with no medical value at all!

To dehorn a rhino, we must immobilize it first. For this we need a helicopter, a vet, immobilizing drugs, a ground team, equipment etc, etc. You can imagine that such an operation is very expensive. The game farmer does not get funding from the government, and has to finance this all by himself. By dehorning a rhino, which is nowadays more often called *horn trimming*, we take off most of the horn. Stubs of the horns are left behind. Like your finger nail, it will be very painful for the rhino when we remove too much of the horn. While the rhino is immobilized, we also take DNA samples. These samples are sent to Onderstepoort, SA, where they have a rhino database called RhODIS. When one day the police finds a horn at for example Johannesburg Airport, they can match the DNA of the horn with the DNA that is stored in the database. From there they can backtrack where the horn comes from, and hopefully by this backtracking can catch the perpetrators.

What we hear on the ground from Namibian farmers is scary. Some want to get rid of their entire rhino population, or reduce their population drastically. At the moment, a rhino is a liability, rather than an asset. The rhino owner must protect the rhino (hire an APU team, dehorn it on a regular basis) and it must take care of the rhino (e.g., feed during a drought). The farmer is also responsible to safely store the horn harvested from rhinos – this further adds to the costs incurred and carries considerable risk. If a farmer's stored rhino horn gets stolen (armed robbery a real likelihood) the farmer automatically becomes the prime suspect in the criminal investigation! There are thus lots of costs and risks to rhino keeping which far outstrip the income generated. Many farmers therefore want to reduce their rhino population – a tourist will be happy if it gets to see 2 rhinos, one does not need 15 rhinos for that. Rhinos are thus threatened not just by the seemingly uncontrollable poaching but, as a direct consequence to that, also a severe shrinkage of habitat. No species can survive without a suitable habitat and the size of habitat available dictates the number of a species that can realistically survive.

Much money is being raised, many anti-poaching techniques are being used, but somehow we are fighting a losing battle. We believe its urgently time to start thinking about opening up the legal horn trade. The legal trade would provide give rhino owners with an opportunity to actually make an income out of rhino ranching. This will immediately provide an incentive to land owners to purchase and keep rhinos (price for living rhinos sold has dropped by around 70% in the past 6 years). Positive spinoffs are an increased value of the rhino, more money becoming available to enable farmers to improve their APU units and make use of modern technology, and thus ultimately to become more effective in the anti-poaching effort. Needless to say, new habitat will be available for rhino keeping. All these are positive effects of the legal trade in rhino horn.



Immobilized white rhino bull that just has been dehorned © M. Bijsterbosch

The CITES ban on the trade in rhino horn has achieved nothing towards protecting the species, on the contrary, it has been the driver pushing up the value of rhino horn on the black market. This provides an extra incentive for crime syndicates, as well as their client base. These are frequently wealthy business people who buy illegal rhino horn as a status symbol. It does not only show they are exceedingly wealthy; it also shows that they are above the law and can get things done!

The legalisation in rhino horn trade is often compared to the ivory trade. After the ivory trade was opened and stockpiles ended up on the market, there was an increase in elephant poaching. However, ivory and horn are two completely different things, that should never be compared:

- 🐾 Ivory can only be harvested from a dead elephant – this is thus a non-renewable resource.
- 🐾 Rhino horn is harvested from immobilised rhinos – this is a low risk and painless procedure. For as long as a rhino lives, its horn never stops growing. Rhino horn can thus be harvested say every two years without any ill effects but a very definite benefit. The benefit is not just financial for the owners, as the anti-traders like to point out, the indirect benefit is for the rhino itself (more effective anti-poaching methods employed, increased habitat etc.).
- 🐾 Rather than elephants and their ivory, we must compare it to other species such as the vicuña, a South-American camelid. Vicuñas reduced from millions to about 10,000 due to the poaching of their wool. When the government granted local communities the rights to shear the wool of vicuñas, a dramatic recovery in vicuña numbers was seen. The communities now had an economic stake in the species' survival. Another example is the crocodile.

People opposed to the trade opening up suggest that the legal trade in rhino horn will increase the demand in horn and thus have an increased poaching pressure as result. This certainly is a possibility, so strict measures and legislation need to be implemented. A carefully controlled legal marked (with DNA monitoring (e.g. RhODIS), owner's certification etc.) could certainly provide a realistic alternative.

Maintaining the status quo on rhino conservation will most certainly lead to the extinction of the species:

- 🐾 Since the trade ban was introduced, the value of rhino horn on the black market skyrocketed - resulting in increased poaching pressure on the rhino.
- 🐾 Trying to educate and convince literally billions of people that their long held beliefs in traditional medicines and values are wrong will take decades – we don't have that time!
- 🐾 There are many vocal and emotional anti-traders, most accusing the rhino owners who want to open trade of being greedy and doing it all for money yet, we have never heard a single good workable alternative suggestion from these people. It is also interesting to know that there are very few (if any) of these people who actually invest their own money in rhino ranching – why not?

To be honest, we don't like to see the rhino as a 'milking cow', whereby one 'harvests' the horn for a useless purpose. We want to see rhinos with their magnificent horns. BUT, we also see that action is needed. For how many years people have been trying to protect the rhino, to implement demand reduction strategies, education? Unfortunately, time is a luxury that we don't have anymore. Poaching and the loss of available habitat is leading to the extinction of our African rhinos. Currently a rhino literally is worth more dead than alive (horn more expensive than buying an adult live rhino) – this needs to be turned around!



Listen [here](#) to a very interesting and insightful voice message – *Why legalizing the trade in rhino horn is our only hope* - from Alex Oelofse, owner of Mount Etjo Game Reserve. It is well worth your time! A website which is also worth to visit is the [Rhino Elders website](#), where you can find several questions and answers regarding the horn trade.

We welcome you to ask us any questions you might have, a first step is to get the debate going!



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