

How do you rewild 2000 RHINOS?

Sue Watt explores the challenges faced by a highly ambitious project announced by African Parks

In April this year, 2000 white rhinos — that's 15 per cent of the entire global population — were put up for auction by the owner of the world's largest rhino breeding farm. Not a single bid came in. Nobody, it seemed, was willing to take them on. Their future looked bleak...

Thankfully, in September, following urgent feasibility assessments and emergency fundraising, conservation NGO African Parks stepped in, buying the farm and its rhinos, with an unprecedented project to rewild all the animals within ten years.

When Donovan Jooste got the call offering him the unique job as African Parks' Rhino Rewilding Project Manager, his initial thoughts were "this would be massive, absolutely daunting — but absolutely exciting," he told me from his office in South Africa. "Potentially, within 10 years, when you're in a park or reserve and you see a rhino, the likelihood is that that rhino will have links to this rewilding project, and that's amazing."

Today, it is thought only 15,942 white

rhinos survive, hence the prospect of 2000 unwanted individuals was of huge concern to conservationists. With 22 parks and protected areas under its management, spanning 20 million hectares across 12 countries, African Parks (AP) was perhaps the only organisation that had the experience, the government support and, crucially, the philanthropic donors to safeguard the future of these animals.

Their owner, John Hume, had set up his controversial Platinum Rhino farm in South Africa's North West Province in 2009, aiming to help the survival of the near-threatened species by intensively breeding them, dehorning them and selling their lucrative horn. An ardent campaigner for legalising the international sale of rhino horn, he believed farming would reduce relentless poaching for the illegal wildlife trade to Vietnam and China. But with CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) entrenched against legalising the sale of rhino horn and with Hume facing soaring daily costs of \$9800, his strategy proved

unsustainable, and his money ran out.

Two months on, Donovan's team is working with specialists to develop "a framework with guidelines and criteria that will ensure the rhinos are moved to safe protected areas," he told me. These will include locations within African Parks' portfolio and others across Africa, among them private game reserves and community conservancies. As ever with African Parks, communities are essential to the success of the project. "If community conservancies meet our criteria, we would absolutely love to see rhino safely going back into those areas," he said.

The all-important framework should be completed this year, with the first translocations probably occurring early in 2024. Whilst criteria for the new homes are still being fleshed out, they will likely focus on four key pillars: the right habitat, tight security that is "robust and adaptive", the financial ability to sustain the rhinos for the future, and responsible management that includes essential community benefit and buy-in. "If there's no tourism-generation and no community buy-in as a holistic

approach in the overall management of protected areas, it makes life a lot harder," Donovan explained.

AP is no stranger to off-the-scale translocations. Two years ago, they moved 30 rhinos from &Beyond Phinda Reserve in South Africa to Rwanda's Akagera National Park, with challenging logistics involving a Boeing 747. It was the world's largest ever rhino translocation.

Including rhinos born during their ten-year plan, AP estimates a total of 3000 animals will require translocation from

population where the rhinos are going, how long they'll travel, what they'll travel in, where they'd be born'd and the rollout period," Donovan said. "We need to ensure risks are mitigated as much as possible and generally that's done in smaller numbers. But there are protected areas able to home rhino in large numbers and we'd approach that in a pragmatic way."

There are also health risks attached to translocations. In Chad, four of the six rhinos African Parks moved to Zakouma National Park in 2018 later died due to

measures, including securing rhinos in smaller areas and daily monitoring. There'll be risk assessments and due diligence from both sides, so that any losses we might incur are minimised."

So has captive rhino breeding had its day? "That's probably best posed to farmers," Donovan replied. "But we want to see flourishing rhino populations in well-managed, open, protected areas. If we invest in the right expertise, scientific knowledge and management practices, we'll have safe spaces with stronghold populations that allow us to rewild rhinos in the future. That's a lot more valuable than saying 'When in doubt, let's just resort to farming animals'."

I asked him how he saw the long-term legacy of this project. "We've got a huge responsibility," he commented. "We've seen what happened with the northern white rhino [now functionally extinct with only two surviving females in Kenya]. This is our opportunity to ensure we never get to that position with the southern white, and also that we contribute at scale to conservation. We're starting to realise the value rhinos have in tourism and in shaping ecosystems. And with added security in place, other species present in those ecosystems benefit too."

Challenging it may be, but this project is about so much more than 2000 rhinos...

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Platinum Rhino. That's 300 rhinos every year, an ambitious target even for them.

"I definitely think that's achievable," Donovan told me. "The response African Parks has received from conservationists committed to this ambitious goal we've set has been overwhelming."

It's early days, but it's likely the costs of the translocations would be borne by African Parks, which relies on donor funding. And the number of rhinos on each translocation would be decided on a case-by-case basis.

"We'll look at the location, the current

maladaptation to their diet.

"We understand the massive potential risks associated with rewilding rhinos. We'll be guided by the mitigation measures we're putting in place, working with translocation experts and taking away from lessons previously learned," he told me.

An "added complexity" is that these rhinos come from a captive bred environment. But he remains "confident that these issues can be addressed case by case. African Parks has history in translocating animals at scale and the knowledge to put in place risk mitigation

