

TURNING IN CIRCLES

The story of rescuing an orphaned rhino calf, by John Bassi.

Reaching out to answer the phone, the all too familiar name flashes away. My heart skips a beat, knowing the call can mean only one thing. The helicopter, always ready to respond, is fully fueled and carries two extra jerry cans. It is a Sunday night. We'll be leaving at first light.

Two more rhino have been found dead, horns chopped out of the bone, an adult cow with her 26-month-old female calf lying bloated 120 meters away. Sadly it has been almost four days since their deaths and identification confirms that somewhere in the nearby bush, a very desperate year-old calf is alone.

I approach the reserve on Monday morning just as the sun starts warming the earth. Vultures have started to use the thermals and are hurriedly pouring in from above, feet outstretched in anticipation for claiming their spot on rotting flesh. I begin my search in the usual manner, circling around the dead cow in widening arcs 150 meters apart and avoiding the frenzy of white backs. In a clearing with short grass and a mud wallow, I see the calf standing, head down. We are all so relieved just to find him alive.

It's a small victory as we prepare ourselves for the next step: to get close to him and assess his condition. Flying in, I approach him gradually, ready to pull away if he is too stressed. He does not move. It becomes obvious even from a distance that the little rhino is in trouble. Bringing the helicopter closer has no effect on his posture. He stands motionless, head hanging low, tears clearly wetting his dry, mud caked face. Coming in to a hover ten meters from the calf we see he is dehydrated, has lost muscle tone in his legs and is clinging to life. Only when I cautiously land ten meters away does he begin an aimless plod, stepping in a mindless circle, round and round. His distress and trauma is now obvious.

After shutting down the helicopter a safe distance away, we move slowly towards him. He continues his labored plod, walking in a tight aimless circle to the left. The ground is worn bare in a circular patch from days of this little rhino's desperate walk. Standing a few meters from him has no effect on his state; I gradually move closer reaching out to touch him gently on his little hump. His skin is loose and caked in hard dry mud but he feels the touch, responding with desperate high-pitched squeals as he calls in fear for his mother. I respond with a rubbing motion on his face, allowing him to push against my leg, hoping the contact will calm him. Within minutes he responds with his deep throated coughing, snort and stops walking, letting me rub his ears and neck, resting his body on my legs. He stands, head down, alone and exuding a feeling of total defeat. The vultures continue circling silently above, casting flashing shadows over us below.

Dr Charlotte Moueix arrives and we all stand looking at her, praying that she can make a miracle happen. The calf has been trying to drink mud, his mouth is packed with grey sticky clay, deep to his throat and he is so dehydrated that his eyes have ceased to lubricate, rendering him blind.

He stands calmly; motionless allowing us to rub and touch him, then with no apparent cause, he squeals out and urgently resumes his circling plod. We walk him into the shade of a tree where we manage to comfort him long enough for Charlotte to inspect him and administer the first of many saline drips and painkillers. We water him



down, cover his swollen infected eyes and muff his ears, wash out as much of the mud in his mouth as possible and treat his wounds. After a couple of hours the little bull lies down next to us and falls deeply asleep. Charlotte goes through all the options and starts formulating a rescue plan, organizing transport, the crate and looking for a home with facilities that will give the little rhino the best chance of survival.

Eventually the little bull awakens. As if from a nightmare he immediately starts his loud squealing and resumes his circling plod, but with renewed vigor after his fluids and rest. His strength is remarkable and we have a glimmer of hope. Permits are in place and Charlotte decides on the rhino's new home. She sits with him, calming him gently until he sleeps again.



15 December 2010. It has now been thirteen days since the rhino calf's ordeal. Against all odds and thanks to the dedication, tender care, tube feeding and all-night vigils of the Hern's (Rhino and Lion Park), it seems that he may have a chance. The damage to his eyes remains a big concern. (Please see page 3 press release.)

A note from StopRhinoPoaching.com:

When poachers kill a breeding rhino cow, they not only steal her life and her horns, but also the contribution she has been making to the continuation of her species. More often than not, within the wombs of these mothers have been perfectly formed fetuses, while alongside her body or somewhere close by her older calf has either been shot – or is slowly starving to death. To the teams of people who play a role in searching for and treating these youngsters, and to their tireless substitute “mothers” who then nurture them back to life – THANK YOU.



John Bassi is a well-known helicopter pilot specializing in wildlife work in South Africa. John has personally come face to face with 78 rhino carcasses in 2010 alone, not to mention the number of rhino he's been called out to locate for treatment of gunshot wounds.

Dr Charlotte Moueix is a wildlife veterinarian and has been responsible for treating numerous poaching-related injuries in rhino.

Together, their dedicated contribution to helping rhino in this cruel and heartless fight is highly commended.

Today, the first day of John's story appearing on the website, we received the following press release:

17 December 2010

Press release from Lorinda Hern, Rhino and Lion Reserve.

It is with deep regret and great sadness that we have to inform you that Vusi, the rhino poaching orphan in our care, died here during the course of last night, 16/17 December 2010. It would have been foolish of us not realize that Vusi was a very ill little rhino, and that his chances of survival were always going to be slim, but we had willed him to live for almost two weeks before it all finally became too much for the frail little creature to endure. Based on feedback from visitors about the conditions under which Vusi was being kept, the SPCA had instructed us to move him into a quarantined enclosure away from the other two rhino calves, Velo and Vuma, to protect him from the recent bad weather. We believe it may have been this separation from his only form of (rhino) company that finally proved too traumatic for Vusi to handle. The Management and staff of the Reserve, especially the animal caretakers and volunteers who had devoted so much time to keeping Vusi going and had grown extremely attached to him in the process, are devastated by the loss. We find some solace in the knowledge that we did everything humanly possible in our efforts to save Vusi's life, and in the fact that right up to the very end, he was truly loved. For us all it once again served as a harsh reminder of the ugly reality about the poaching situation in this country, which continues to leave more and more helpless animals dead, maimed, mutilated and fighting for survival. All in all, it will be a very sad Christmas at the Rhino & Lion Nature Reserve indeed.

The heartbreak that comes with losing a little soul such as this one, where you have given your very best and dared to hope with all your heart that he'll pull through, is a heartache that runs as deeply as losing a member of your family. Our sincerest condolences to all at the Rhino and Lion Park. In the words of Nico Nel who forwarded the news, may the winds gently carry his spirit to that Perfect Place.