

BRING NKWANYANA HOME

My morning was shattered as I picked up the phone –

“Ivan, its Karen, I have bad news, we lost a black rhino last night. Mike is on his way – bring your crew.”



We arrived at the scene as Mike Toft, the local wildlife vet., was looking over the carcass. A bullet in the chest had broken up on a rib, sending shards of lead and steel into the rhino's heart and lungs.

From the tracks left on the dry earth we could see that her terrified two month old baby had remained at her side. The cow had struggled to stay on her feet, lung blood pouring from her nostrils as she staggered for 30 yards. The men had run up to her, wielding their axes. They put a second shot to her head, missing her brain but scaring the bewildered little calf into the bush.

There was nothing that could be done to save the rhino, a mature cow in her prime, forensics would later arrive and a full post mortem would be carried out. Our priority now was to locate her calf.



Within an hour the thumping of the R44 blades could be heard, Mike boarded the chopper, carrying a dart gun and a drugs bag, and the search began.

An hour became two, the chopper circling endlessly, the noise of its rotors alternately increasing, then fading. The thick dry bush was almost impossible to see into. The calf had by now been without its mother for close on 24 hours, probably hidden deep in some thicket – terrified by all the human activity. Last night's sprinkling of rain had all but eliminated sign of her tracks – it was a hot day – in the low 90s – the calf would not last long.

Stoney – gentle natured and with a rare passion for rhinos, was quietly making larger and larger circles around the carcass. With a decade of rhino tracking experience he is simply the best “rhino man” that I have ever encountered. I knew deep down in my soul that if anybody found the calf, it would be him. Indeed, more by intuition than by sight, he found the first sign, a sign so faint as to be almost invisible, one that a lesser tracker would have walked right over.

Two hours later a calm radio call came in – “Bravo 2-4, Bravo 1.*” – “Go ahead Stoney”. “I have found the baby, it's sleeping now”.

Slowly and carefully I went down to meet him, I could hardly see the small shadow deep in a thicket. How he had tracked the baby down I will never know, its tiny feet were no larger than the bottom of a coffee mug.

The chopper arrived and we indicated the location - in spite of the deafening noise and downdraft, the baby would not move. As we slowly advanced she suddenly shot out in full charge at us! She squealed, stood for a second and then barreled off into the bush – formidable courage for a terrified baby!



The heli hovered above her, and finally, with us running behind her, the dart went in, and a couple of minutes later she was wobbling. "Cody give me your shirt". Cody, the cameraman with us, stripped off his tee shirt, I grabbed it, ran up to the calf and covered her bewildered eyes.

Mike was soon on the scene. He gave her a stabilizing shot of reversal drug and inserted an IV into her ear vein, partly to reduce the stress that she had been subjected to, and partly to rehydrate the little body that had been without any liquid or nourishment for 24 hours.



The baby rhino was loaded onto a landcruiser, and the "ambulance trailer" from the rhino orphanage was dispatched to meet us halfway.

We arrived at the orphanage in a tremendous windstorm, I guess fitting to the wildlife storm that was raging around us. As Mike squeezed the syringe, the reversal drug flowed through her veins and in less than a minute she stood up, snorted and butted the side of the trailer – aggression is in a black rhino's nature - We quietly and very quickly exited.

There are few things in life that can beat a black rhino calf for sheer cuteness. A large lump rose up in my throat as she entered what was destined to be her new home for the next 18 months – a lump brought on by the thought of the rotting carcass that was, 24 hours ago, a live fertile female rhino – now reduced to a simple statistic. But most of all it was the sense of hope that I felt as I saw that tiny creature, representative of the future of the species, poke its little head out of the door of the trailer to explore its new home. And as I watched Mike quietly and patiently working to gain her trust and in turn give her her first human feed I realized that yes – there is hope –



Her name is Nkwanyana – named after Stoney, without whom I am sure she would not be alive today.

When a rhino is brought to the orphanage, its owners have a choice –

Leave the rhino there to become the property of the orphanage who will care for her and bring her into adulthood, requiring no payment but retaining full ownership, or pay a monthly fee and all the vet. bills that will accumulate, and then have her returned to the soil on which she was conceived, the soil upon which she took her first steps.

Emotionally, the answer is a simple one – she must come home. But that will mean an ongoing financial commitment. The initial cost of helicopter hours, vet bills and transport is around \$1200. Thereafter it would cost \$550 a month for at least 18 months – when converted to South African Rands this is not a small figure at all.

I would like to know that Nkwanyana will once again leave her footprints on the soil of the Zululand Rhino Reserve, I would like to secure her destiny and to know that she will breed there and give birth to babies of her own.

Please join me in sponsoring this worthy cause – Karen will give you monthly updates and you will be invited to join us for her “coming home” and watch her take her first steps back onto the reserve.

For more info about the reserve – go to www.zululandrhinoreserve.co.za - or contact me on

ivan@ivancarter.com

*call signs altered for security reasons

