

My very first day back in Kenya in 1965 ended with a game of tennis at the Vet Lab Sports Club courts where I met blond wavy-haired Tony Parkinson, one of several animal trappers and zoological collectors then working in the country. Within a few days I was at Tony's base compound in Lowe Kabete, about eight kilometres from the office, dealing with my first wild animal case as I had to climb up the side of the chute to inject the backside of the five-metre giraffe that had developed foot rot. Four years later, Tony and his partner, godfather and mentor, the skinny stooped John Seago, had asked me to join them as they switched from the old-fashioned method of catching rhino with a lariat to the more modern one in which drugs and darts were used.

Most of our work was carried out on the edge of the NFD, just north of Isiolo, where we captured the rhino and moved them out of the district in order to make room for a settlement scheme. Other than the basic biological imperatives of survival and propagation, nothing drives the lives of Kenyans more than ownership of a *plotti* (plot of land), so the settlement scheme was a high political priority for the local and very powerful minister, Jackson Angaine.

I went into the rhino work as a complete ignoramus, only knowing by hearsay that a few had been captured by the new method, but having no idea about the actual process. Tony and his team started each day by sending trackers out into the bush trying to find signs of the animals. At about mid-morning the trackers would return as the rest of us sat and hoped for good news. Then it was into the vehicles and off to the bush, often covering several kilometres across country. The cross-country driving was in itself hazardous, what with huge rocks hidden in the grass, truck-eating ant-bear holes, steep-sided *luggahs* (seasonally filled channels that carry water, sometimes raging torrents, during the rainy seasons) and thorns that could go right through

tires often in groups. One puncture often meant several in the same inner tube.

I asked one of the trackers, named Meru, so nick-named as he was the only team member of that tribe, and with whom I could at least greet in my very rudimentary KiMeru (the Ki- indicates the tribal language, as in KiSwahili, the Ki- often being dropped), how he found the rhino. We chatted in Swahili.

"We search for the piles of manure where they have been to the *choo* and as those are always in the same place every day, we know the boundaries of their homes."

Later, I asked him to show me one such midden, and we stopped to look at one right beside a track.

"It looks as if he has kicked it around," I said.

"Yes," he replied with a grin. "Don't you know why?"

"No, tell me," I said, half expecting something weird, as I had already found out that he was a bit of a charming rogue, a *mkora* in fact. Meru at once launched into the following story:

The father of all rhino was once walking through the forest when he met an elephant and they had a fight. The rhino got the worst of it, and ran away with flaps of bleeding skin, all hanging down. After a while he met a porcupine and said to him: 'Lend me one of your needles so that I can sew up my skin.'

'All right,' answered the porcupine, 'but you must be sure to give the needle back to me tomorrow.'

Rhino do not have thumbs, [at this point Meru wiggled his right thumb about] so his stitching job was not very neat and he had some places where there was too much skin, so he just put it together as best as he could, ending up with ridges. By the time he had finished he had forgotten all about returning the needle. Then one day he met the porcupine again.

'Where's my needle?' asked the porcupine.

The rhino couldn't remember, and thought he must have sewn it up inside himself. Ever since then he has been looking for it to return it to its owner and kicks his dung in case it has come out. ❀



Red-billed oxpeckers not only seek out feed on the rhino, but they also act as his sentries.

After a few captures from the truck, with the inevitable damage to various parts of its body, not to mention the bashing about that I was getting standing in the back behind Tony as he drove, we had a confab, and decided that something better was needed, as we were taking too much time to achieve not much. A rhino every two or three days was not efficient. On my next trip to Isiolo I found a small red-and-white helicopter parked beside the camp. I soon met the pilot, solidly built Andy Neal, and we worked together on the project for the next four years.

After some more or less inevitable glitches, I established a very effective drug cocktail for rhino captures that was a great success. It was a mixture of two drugs: fentanyl, a potent morphine-like compound, and Azaperone, a very effective sedative, aptly named Stresnil because it did indeed reduce or eliminate stress in pigs, the species for which it had been first developed.

A darted rhino would begin to slow down and stagger about five minutes after the dart hit it in the rump. It would then begin to circle

and soon fall over or come to halt against some trivial object, such as a tree. Only if the dart hit a rhino over bony areas, where drug absorption would be slow or even fail, did I have to consider administering top-up doses. These would ensure that the rhino did not stagger around for too long and exhaust itself.

While Andy and I waited for a darted rhino to slow down to a halt, we kept in touch with Tony over the two-way radio. Tony could usually keep quite close in his truck, often having the animal in sight as it blundered about. See the footage at www.jerryhaigh.com.

Once the rhino stopped, Tony and his team would park about thirty metres away from it, get out of the old Ford truck and gallop across the rough ground to it with hobbling ropes in hand. Once Tony had tied the rhino's legs together and the animal was on its side, it was an easy task to roll it onto a sled and winch the whole thing up onto a three-tonne lorry. From there it was usually no more than a couple of hours of rough cross-country driving back to camp.

My job, once the helicopter put me on the ground, was to keep a close eye on the animal's condition, making sure that it was breathing comfortably, that its pulse was steady and not too rapid and that its temperature did not escalate. In order to be able to give it the correct dose of antibiotics and other treatments that I felt it needed, I also had to calculate its weight from measurements of its length and girth.

The formula for calculating a rhino's weight in this manner had been developed by Cambridge veterinarian Dr. John King, who, when working with the Kenya Game Department had immobilized and weighed enough animals to be able to correlate measurements with actual weights with no more than a 5 per cent error margin. His formula, when one thinks about it, was elegantly simple and takes one back to high-school physics. A rhino is really no more than a cylinder with a few bits stuck on it. The volume of a cylinder is its length multiplied by the square of the radius of the circle. Using the girth as the circumference of the circle gives one the radius (using the knowledge of Pi, or Greek π , the roughly 3.141592653589793 multiple of the diameter). All John had had to do was add a constant to allow for legs and head, and—Presto!—he had a weight. The bigger challenge had probably been to devise a method of weighing a one-tonne rhino in the middle of nowhere with nothing



Unloading a rhino into the bomas at Isiolo.

more than a scale, a winch and some ropes, but this John had solved by rolling his charges onto a flat wooden palette and then hoisting the whole assemblage under a tripod.

Once back at camp, it was a simple matter of sliding the sled off the lorry into an empty and very robust pen, rolling the rhino off the

sled and pulling his recent bed out of the pen before closing the heavy gate and administering the antidote to the fentanyl.

The animal would usually wake within a minute or two, no doubt surprised and certainly angry. Sometimes, especially if the air temperature was high and the animal remained on its side for too long after the antidote was given, we would pour twenty litres or so of water over it. The response was always immediate as the rhino leapt to its feet, which is quite a thing to witness when an animal has short legs and a big barrel of a body.

It usually took about four or five days to fill the eight pens that acted as the staging post before beginning the translocation to a park.

Tony and I had been working together for about two years, catching a new batch of rhino every four to six weeks, when a new twist to the program occurred. It was January 1972, and Tony had called, asking me if I was free to come down in ten days for a new capture session, adding that we would be working with a film crew.

As Mutua and I drove off the Isiolo-to-Marsabit road that day, and the fine white dust plume that had been blowing sideways behind us suddenly engulfed the car, we quickly closed the windows to avoid choking. We threaded our way between the acacias past the rhino bomas and up to the parking spot at the camp.

There were three vehicles that I didn't recognize—a fancy new Jeep and two Land Cruisers—parked alongside the company Land Rover and Tony's monster, a 1957 powder-blue, Bel Air Chevy, replete with fins and chrome fit for a space shuttle. There was also a small group of new tents erected away to the east and new faces round the dining table.

Tony introduced them, the names flying past in the usual blur, making them hard to remember. But one name did stick, both because it was the first name that flew at me and also because the man attached to the name had a distinct Hispanic look to him. He was somewhat overweight, although on his big frame it hardly showed. He was the first man I had ever met who carried Mexican blood in him. His name was Frank Zuniga, and I learned that he was directing a film that featured John, Tony and the crew, and that rhino capture and translocation were to be a part of the story. The film was being made for television and was to be called *The Biggest Bongo in the World*. (In the end, the TV