

UPDATE ON DEATHS OF BLACK RHINO IN TSAVO EAST NATIONAL PARK

Rhino translocation and immobilization for various management purposes in Kenya has been a success story with low death rates over the years. Between 2005 and 2017, one hundred and forty nine (149) rhinos have been translocated with eight (8) deaths.

Between July 2017 and February 2018, 74 rhinos have been immobilized for ear-notching and only one death was recorded. Several hundreds have also been successfully immobilized for clinical interventions.

The capture and translocation of these particular rhinos started on Tuesday 26th June, with the first batch of three rhinos (2 females and 1 male) captured at Nairobi National Park translocated successfully to Tsavo and held in bomas at the sanctuary for acclimatization.

The second capture was also successfully conducted on Friday 29th June with a batch of three more rhinos (2 females and 1 male) having been captured, followed by two others (a male and a female) on Monday 2nd July at Nairobi National Park and held in bomas for acclimatization.

On Thursday 5th July, three rhinos (2 males and 1 female) were captured at Lake Nakuru National Park and again successfully translocated to Tsavo East National Park the same day and released into the boma.

While in the boma, they were fed on fresh browse, supplemented with lucerne and sugarcane. The animals were provided with adequate water from newly-sank boreholes in the sanctuary.

However, on Monday 2nd July, one of the males was observed to be restless, taking excessive water and recumbent, while lying on the side later in the evening. Attempts to make it stand were futile as it showed signs of weakness in the fore limbs. A decision was made to move it out of the boma and place it under a nearby shade, where supportive treatment, including intravenous fluids, was administered.

The animal showed some signs of improvement, but refused to take water or feed. It died on Tuesday 3rd July at around 5pm and a postmortem conducted on the morning of 4th July.

On 3rd July, another rhino in the boma started showing similar signs and was released together with another one that looked a little dull. The other three rhinos were released from the boma early on the morning of 4th July to prevent further deaths.

The three rhinos captured at Lake Nakuru National Park on 5th July were released from the boma on the dawn of 7th July after a day and night stay in the boma to allow rehydration with fresh water.

Preliminary investigations by KWS veterinary teams attribute the deaths to salt poisoning, as a result of taking water of high salinity on arrival in the new environment. These findings are consistent with cases of salt poisoning in other animal species and were exemplified by postmortem findings.

These deaths are unprecedented in KWS operations and have necessitated independent investigations, which are now underway.

Prof. Peter Gathumbi, a Senior Veterinary Pathologist from the Department of Veterinary Pathology, Microbiology and Parasitology, University of Nairobi, travelled to Tsavo to carry out independent investigations, where he collected samples on 12th July 2018 for analysis.

The whole translocation was a KWS initiative to move rhinos from one of their parks to another for the purpose of wildlife population management.

The horns of the dead rhinos are in safe KWS custody.