

Media Release - 2 April 2001

I. Statement Of South African National Parks (Sanparks) On The Sale Of 21 White Rhinos From The Kruger National Park

Concerns have recently been raised in the press regarding the sale of 21 white rhino from the Kruger National Park, in particular the questions of whether:

1. the calves may be separated from their mothers and exported;
2. the animals may be hunted;
3. the conservation management reasons for removing rhinos from the Kruger National Park.

Because of these concerns, SANParks is being called on to cancel the sale.

To clarify the first concern listed above, SANParks will not separate the calves from their mothers, and prospective buyers would be required to buy both mother and calf. The concern is that someone who buys the animals may separate the calf and export it, or else may have the animals hunted.

In the view of SANParks, this type of game sale holds considerable value for conservation in general. We recognize the vital contribution of the private sector in wildlife conservation. Land made available to wildlife by the private sector is of great value in building up the numbers of rare and valuable game species. SANParks has a long history of supplying game to private landowners. In consultation with IUCN Species Survival Commission Specialist Groups, we have actively followed a policy of encouraging the private sector to obtain rare species such as the Cape mountain zebra. We are mindful of the fact that the Cape mountain zebra and black wildebeest would have gone extinct had private land owners not taken steps to protect them.

There are always individuals who may act unethically and contrary to the interests of good conservation, but this is no reason to cast aspersions on the good provided by the majority.

To address the third concern listed above, it is true that white rhinos are not so abundant that they are causing habitat damage in the Kruger National Park. They are nevertheless sufficiently numerous to make them available for sale. The Kruger Park white rhino population is presently about 3000 - 3500 strong, making it the largest population in the world. The average annual population growth is between 8 - 9 %.

As noted, making the white rhino available to the private sector enhances the conservation status of the species and helps to ensure its long-term survival. Furthermore, SANParks follows a policy of using the income from the sale of high value game for the Park Development Fund. This was established specifically with the aim of financing the development of new parks in areas in need of conservation. Thus revenue from the sale of high-value game has been used to buy land for new national parks or to expand existing ones. By this means SANParks can fulfil its obligation to protect biodiversity in threatened biomes such as Lowland Fynbos (Agulhas National Park), Succulent Karoo (Namaqualand) and the Thicket Biome (Addo Elephant National Park). The principle is that conservation assets that are in adequate supply may be sold to buy conservation assets in short supply. Revenue from the sale of rhinos is strictly regulated so that it is used directly for the conservation of biodiversity (mainly land purchase), and none of it contributes to the general operating budget of SANParks. Contrary to assertions in the press it could not be used to reduce the SANParks overdraft.

For these reasons SANParks will not consider cancelling the sale of the white rhinos.

However, for this specific sale, we will require buyers to make the following undertakings:

1. Mothers and calves will not be separated until the calves are fully weaned and independent (at least

20 months).

2. The animals are sold for breeding, and will not be hunted for at least a year after purchase.

It must be stated that both the hunting and the live sale of white rhinos are fully legal activities, subject to regulation by the provincial conservation agencies in terms of CITES. In requiring these undertakings from buyers, SANParks is concerned only to eliminate the sale of excessively young rhino and the possibility of so-called "canned" or "put-and-take" hunting. SANParks respects the right of game owners to engage in hunting or to trade in live animals in accordance with the law.

II. STATEMENT BY THE SANPARKS ANIMAL USE AND CARE COMMITTEE

The SANParks Animal Use and Care Committee met on 28 March 2001 to evaluate the concerns regarding the sale of rhinos raised by Ethical Conservation Network and in press articles. In view of the publicity this issue has received, the Committee felt that it is important to publicly clarify its mandate.

The Animal Use and Care Committee is composed of individuals with particular insight and technical expertise in the handling of animals. This expertise makes the Committee well qualified to judge the ethical acceptability of techniques and procedures used in the treatment and handling of animals. Decision-making on broad policy issues relating to the management of game is NOT within the mandate of the Committee. On such issues SANParks, as a public body, must be guided by the views of the general public, and the issues must be exposed to public debate. The Committee may advise SANParks on such issues but should NOT replace the public at large as a guide to the formulation of policy.

With regard to the issue under consideration, it is NOT within the mandate of the Committee to make decisions on:

1. whether or not SANParks should sell game into private ownership;
2. the degree of responsibility SANParks should maintain for the fate of animals once they have been sold, specifically with respect to controlling the right of buyers to have the animals hunted or to resell them;
3. whether or not SANParks should be obliged to demonstrate habitat damage or other symptoms of 'over-population' before selling game;
4. whether or not SANParks should use income from game sales for the development of national parks.

These issues are either governed by existing legislation, or should be formulated as policy by SANParks and made available for public comment.

In articles by Alex Duval Smith in the Star of 27 March and in the Pretoria News of 28 March, statements are attributed to Karen Trendler, Chair of the Committee that appear to make judgements on some of the issues listed above. We refer in particular to the following:

"It is unfortunate that animals are sold but, given Kruger's financial problems, it is unrealistic to hope that the sales will stop. However, there is real cause to be concerned about the animals' welfare after the sale and we have yet to see scientific data demonstrating that there is a rhino surplus at Kruger"

and

"...administrators showed insufficient concern for the welfare of the animals after their sale".

We wish to make it clear that these statements are either misrepresentations or were quoted entirely out of context. They do not represent conclusions or recommendations of the SANParks Animal Use and Care Committee.

In accordance with its role in advising SANParks on issues relating to the treatment of animals, the Committee discussed with the SANParks Coordinator the harmful consequences of separating rhino calves and their mothers. The Committee pointed out that rhinos aged between one year and 18 months suffered more trauma if removed from their mothers than did very young calves.

It was concluded that:

1. Rhino experts within SANParks will work with the Committee members to decide on minimum ages of calves that may be captured.
2. SANParks will advise buyers of the deleterious consequences of separating cows and calves, and will require an undertaking for buyers not to do this until the calf is fully weaned and independent (20 months or older).
3. SANParks will communicate concerns relating to the separation of cows and calves to the provincial and national authorities responsible for issuing CITES and other permits regulating the management of rhinos.

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