

Coals to Newcastle

Or the story of how three rhinos went from the UK to Tanzania

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I've handed over many things in my career: school books, desks, laboratory equipment, even a couple of boreholes. But I suspect I'm the only British diplomat who has ever handed over three rhinos from the UK back to Africa.

The story begins at Port Lympne Animal Park in Kent. Run by The Aspinall Foundation (TAF), it works to conserve endangered species including the Eastern Black rhino, and return them to wild protected areas, such as the rhino sanctuary at Mkomazi National Park in northern Tanzania. The sanctuary is run by Tony Fitzjohn OBE and his wife Lucy, who breed this critically endangered species, with fewer than 800 left in the wild.

Prior to their departure, the rhinos attracted some top-level attention. They were visited by Prince William, Patron of Tusk Trust, who spoke eloquently to the BBC to condemn poaching. The Chancellor of the Exchequer saw them onto the plane and their journey was covered from start to finish by BBC TV.

At the other end, in Tanzania, we gathered one cool Sunday morning in mid-June at Kilimanjaro Airport. Just after 7am, a yellow 757, donated by DHL (who had decorated it with huge rhino stickers), touched down. First off the plane came the BBC team. While DHL had looked after everyone very well, it had not been the most comfortable of flights. As one weary hack put it, little could disguise the all-pervasive scent of "Eau de Midnight Rhino". After the journalists came the Port Lympne keepers to settle the rhinos into their new home, with South African vet Pete Morkel, a veteran of several rhino transfers. Next came hay, carrots, white bread and other British delicacies to wean the rhinos gently onto a Tanzanian diet. Last came the rhinos themselves, in three big wooden crates, gently lowered from the plane and onto the back of three waiting lorries.

The rhinos had travelled well, sedated and happy.

The journey from Kilimanjaro airport to Mkomazi is about 180km, the last 30km on dirt road. A four-wheel drive does the journey in just over two hours. For a convoy carrying a fragile and precious cargo, it takes three times as long. So I went on ahead to Mkomazi to meet up with the Tanzanian Minister for Natural Resources and the board of Tanzania's National Parks.

It is amazing what Tanzanians can rustle up in the middle of nowhere. TANAPA had laid on a large tent draped in the national colours, complete with banquet chairs and tables, sound system, MC, television crew and a buffet lunch.

Important events in Tanzania are always marked by ceremony. And in a country with a strong oral tradition, speeches are essential. There were seven of them - all filmed by TBC for that evening's news, a great opportunity for me to put across strong messages about conservation and CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. In turn, the Tanzanians stressed their determination to stamp out poaching. In late May, two rhinos were killed in the Serengeti: around 15 suspected poachers have been charged, and several TANAPA staff suspended.

The trouble with ceremonies is that they don't work well for jet-lagged rhinos. When President Kikwete welcomed some rhinos to the Serengeti in 2010, a thousand-strong crowd turned up, complete with two brass bands. But lessons had clearly been learned. As the rhino convoy trundled up Mkomazi's airstrip, the PA system was switched off, I did a quick formal handover to the Minister, we posed for photos in front of the crates, and the convoy continued on its way. The politicians flew back to parliament in Dodoma, and the rhinos quietly, and with the minimum of fuss, walked out of their crates and into their specially built pens. Pete Morkel said it couldn't have gone better.

All three rhinos are settling in well in their new home, behind electric fences, and guarded by armed rangers. The next step will be to introduce them to the 14 other rhinos, an international bunch, from South Africa, the Czech Republic, as well as Tanzania.

Tony Fitzjohn has been in Tanzania since 1994. He is a remarkable individual, who admits he would often rather ask for forgiveness than permission. His autobiography "Born Wild" is well worth a read. Tony worked for many years in Kenya with George Adamson of "Born Free" fame, before the poaching got so bad it claimed Adamson's life. I asked Tony what keeps him going, now that the price of a rhino horn has reached \$1 million on the black market. He quoted an American abolitionist, Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice". It's a mantra for optimists everywhere.

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