HOEDSPRUIT ENDANGERED SPECIES CENTRE (HESC)

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Photo credit: Rhino Revolution

HESC RHINOS LULA AND KHULULA RELEASED INTO THE WILD

On the 9th of October 2024, the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre (HESC) bid farewell to two of its long-standing resident female rhinos, Lula and Khulula. They were ready to be released back into the wild after being successfully rehabilitated at HESC over the last few years.

While their stories had a tragic start, there is now renewed hope that their future will be a bright and safe one as they begin their journey to being wild and free.

Both Lula and Khulula were brought into HESC as young calves who witnessed the death of their mothers at the hands of poachers. Khulula arrived in 2016 at 5 months of age. She was found next to the body of her dead mother, who had been killed by poachers. The mother's horn was still intact, so it was believed the poachers were disturbed. Nonetheless, the traumatised little calf needed care. Lula arrived in 2017 after also witnessing her mother being killed by poachers. She too was 5 months old.

The calves were placed onto milk formula and a feeding routing was established. They thrived in their new surroundings and were placed together with other rhino calves to be socialised.

Over the years, as other rhinos were released, it came time for Lula and Khulula to be moved to a designated area at HESC where human interaction was kept to a minimum. This was in keeping with their rehabilitation process.

To ascertain whether a reserve is suitable for rhinos to be released on, many factors need to be taken into consideration. These include the existing rhino population, current predator population, whether there is adequate security, as well as the size of the land.

Lula and Khulula's horns were trimmed before loading them onto the trailers. This was done because the reserve where they were going to be released on regularly trims the horns of their rhinos, so all rhinos need to be on equal footing when it comes to defending themselves, and to deter poachers.

To keep them calm, both rhinos were blindfolded and tranquillised. Ropes were placed around their heads and legs so that they could be guided into the trailers. A rhino weighs around 2 tons on average, so it took a team of people to load them into their respective trailers.

Once loaded, they were ready to be taken to their new home. They were first released into a smaller area of the reserve so that they can adapt to their new environment. Once all parties are satisfied that they are ready, they will then released onto the wider reserve.

To date, the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre has successfully rehabilitated 13 rhinos, of which 12 have now been released into the wild. They have also taken in more rhino calves, who have also started their rehabilitation journey to eventual release.

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