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# Saving the survivors of poaching war

VIDEO OF THE DAY

**These veterinarians give a glimmer of hope amid the rising number of rhino being poached across the country.**

Susanna Oosthuizen | 2 May 2014 13:21 [Be the first to comment](#)

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NELSPRUIT – A concerned public is regularly faced with the sight of yet another mutilated rhino. One of these animals is killed for its

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horn almost every three days, and a known total of 293 have been poached this year alone.

Among this carnage, however, there is some good news, like the efforts of two veterinarians who have treated 60 injured rhino, and successfully healed seven with severe facial injuries.

Dr Johan Marais and Dr Gerhard Steenkamp started their project, Saving the Survivors, in 2012 to care for rhino that have fallen victim to poaching or traumatic incidents. It is estimated that from 80 to 120 animals per year can benefit from this project. This number will increase as the number of poached rhino increase. Most of them are being treated in the bush.

Steenkamp approached Marais to partner in this project. The latter explains, "Because I am a large-animal surgeon and have been doing a lot of surgery on wildlife for the past 10 years on among others rhino, buffalo, roan, sable and elephant."

### **Thandi and Themba**

Two cases stand out specifically for Marais. He relays the account of one of these, namely that of Thandi and Themba, "They were found one morning in March 2012. Both were immobilised and their horns removed. Themba lied on his chest, blocking the blood supply to his back leg, while Thandi, the cow, lied on her side. The attending vet, Dr Will Fowlds, reversed the anaesthesia just to get them to their feet as soon as possible. He darted both of them a few days after again to start treating the wounds."

Both had suffered horrific facial injuries, Marais remembers,



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explaining that the paranasal sinuses were completely open. Themba did not do well as his hind leg gave him trouble and he unfortunately died on day 24.

Fowlds called on the team to assist with the treatment of Thandi. "At this time we have not developed this system of closing these facial wounds, so we treated her face conservatively. This means we removed any dead tissue and bone, flushed the wound and applied local antibiotics," Marais recalls.

Four months later, her face had healed sufficiently for the next step of her treatment. Plastic surgeon, Dr A Lamont, performed a skin graft on the face to enhance the healing.

"We only covered the wound with a light dressing, which we sutured onto the skin. However, this only stayed on for about a week -she rubbed it off and then also damaged the skin grafts. We treated her twice again after this and then it became clear to us that if we wanted these wounds to heal faster and better, as well as for the skin grafts to take, we would have to devise a method of covering the wounds for four to six weeks at a time."

Soon after her last treatment, however, Thandi became pregnant, and while the wound on her face had not healed completely after two years, the decision was made not to immobilise her now again in fear of her losing the calf. "She is currently doing well, and we all look forward the birth of her calf," Marias concludes.



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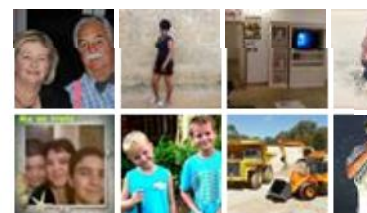


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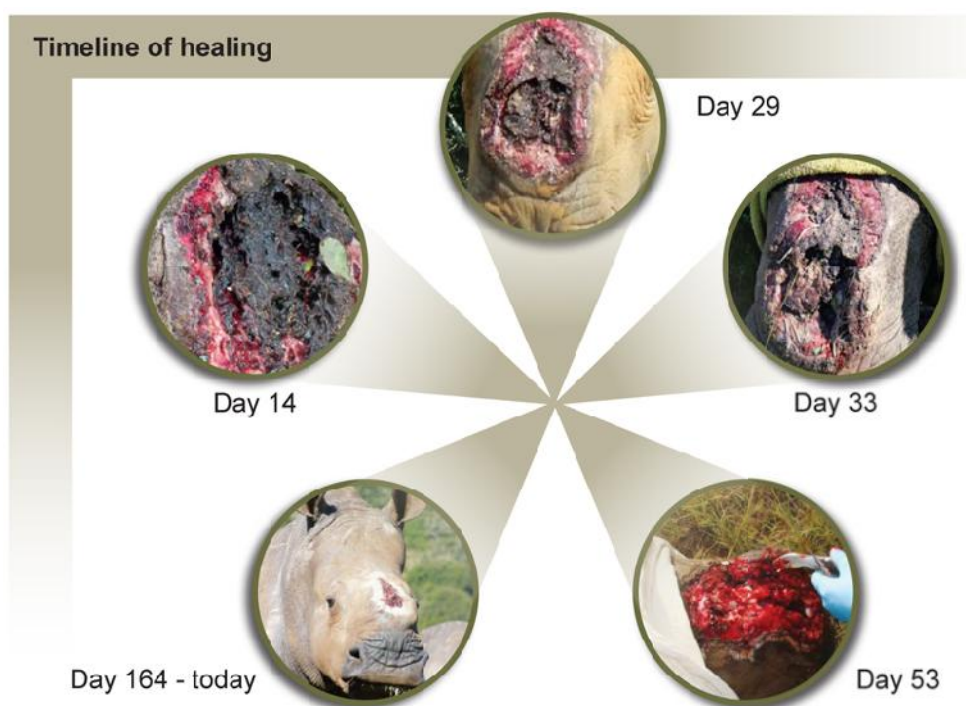
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The veterinarian mentions that the lessons learnt with Thandi led to the successful treatment in a second case, involving two cows with severe injuries. “We attended to these in September 2013 and also scoped their sinuses to ascertain the damage inside. This was also the first time that we started to close the wounds on a semi-permanent basis.”

The regimen changed and became more refined. Dental acrylic was used on one cow, moulded to fit the wound, after which they applied specific human wound dressings sponsored by Adcock Ingram, Health and Hygiene and Covidien. The acrylic hardens within minutes to form a hard covering over the wound. This was fastened to the face by screws drilled through it into the underlying bone.





Screws were drilled into the underlying bone to keep the wound covered

To compare the various methods, synthetic casting material was used on the other rhino. After three weeks the veterinarians evaluated the wounds to determine which of the coverings worked best. According to Marais, it was clear that the casting material was better and they continued applying it to the wounds, over a calcium-alginate dressing and anti-microbial foam. It was also clear that these wounds healed better while they were covered, in comparison with Thandi. And it became even more apparent that these would have to be covered, when early in 2014 one of the coverings came off and an astonishing amount of damage was caused by maggots.

“We have treated these two cows on several occasions and I am pleased to say that the smaller one did not even need a covering as of February 2014, while the bigger one, partly due to the maggot damage, will need treatment for the next two months.”

According to Marias, the most difficult part of this job is that no post-operative care can be provided due to logistics, but also the stress it causes the rhino. These animals' faces are extremely sensitive. “While you work on them, even when immobilised, they react violently. A major breakthrough came, however, when we devised a way of injecting local anaesthetic around the nerve that supplies that area to be able to work painlessly in that area.”

Each treatment costs from R15 000 to R20 000. The owner normally

pays the attending private veterinarian, while the costs incurred by Steenkamp and Marais are funded by the Saving the Survivors project. “We donate our time, while the fund covers the travel and any necessary treatment.”

Read more about this project and how you can donate on <http://savingthesurvivors.co.za>

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