

UP collaborates to save the survivors

15 July 2016



Orphaned rhino calves at the rehabilitation facility

The poaching of rhinos for their horns has resulted in the loss of many animals. It is particularly sad when pregnant rhinos or mothers with calves are poached. When calves under the age of 12 months are orphaned, they are likely to succumb to predation or starvation. However, according to Professor Leith Meyer, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Veterinary Science's Department of Paraclinical Sciences at the University of Pretoria (UP), these orphaned calves have a better chance of survival if they are located and taken to rehabilitation centres where they can be kept and cared for until they are ready to be released back into the wild.

The [Department of Paraclinical Sciences](#), in collaboration with SANParks, Care for Wild, Kaapse Valley Conservancy and Mpumalanga Parks, have initiated a research project with the aim of determining how the rearing conditions and environment of the rehabilitation facility affect the orphaned rhinos' subsequent adaption to their natural habitat. The principal investigator on this project is Dr María Fàbregas, a behavioural ecologist and post-doctoral fellow in the Department. She will be supervised by Prof Meyer and Prof Henk Bertschinger. Numerous other experts in the fields of wildlife veterinary science, epidemiology, endocrinology, ecology and reproduction will be involved. The team will use physical, physiological and behavioural indicators to assess the welfare of the rhino calves during rehabilitation, and will explore how these animals cope once they are released. This study is generously funded by [Groupelephant.com](#), a division of EPI-USE.

Prof Meyer explains that little is currently known about how these animals cope with the rehabilitation process, or how well they adapt once released into the wild. 'Rearing conditions, particularly mother deprivation, can have profound effects later in the life of an animal, potentially affecting their ability to survive, interact with other members of their species, breed, or raise their offspring,' he says. Through scientific research, it is possible to determine which aspects of the rehabilitation process influence the welfare and behaviour of these animals. This information can then be used to adapt rehabilitation programmes accordingly, in order to maximize their success. Prof Meyer concludes: 'If successful,

rehabilitated rhinos could form their own healthy, sustainable groups in the wild, or be re-introduced into wild populations. This could be of immense benefit to conservation programmes.'

Visit our brand new [Research Matters](#) website to find out more about how researchers at the University of Pretoria are making today matter with [other exciting rhino research projects](#).

Author Mikateko Mbambo

Last edited by Buyisiwe Nkonyane