



In this file photo taken on June 26, a female black rhinoceros is awaiting translocation in a transport crate in Nairobi National Park. A total of 11 of these translocated endangered animals later died in their new home. — Photos: AFP

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# Dark time for Kenyan wildlife

The massive failure of a translocation exercise is just one sign of problems that are cropping up with the African nation's famed conservation record.

ELEVEN of Kenya's precious black rhinos were transferred to a new home in what was supposed to be a routine operation in a country fabled for its conservation.

So how did all of them end up dead?

The primary cause of death, an official report has found, was due to toxic levels of salt in the water of their sanctuary.

But an AFP investigation has found that the problem was well known and deep concerns were ignored. Experts sounded repeated warnings about the site's unsuitability. Yet the relocation project was pushed through — and officials are now blaming each other for the fiasco.

head, Kenya's Union of Veterinary Practitioners.

The saline water made the animals only thirstier, pushing them to drink more, drawing water out of their body tissue, thickening and slowing their blood. They were "desiccated", says Dr Kibore.

A rhino named Bolt was the first to die, and the others soon followed. The last, Jack, was so weakened he could not fend off a lion attack that left him wobbling and alone, with huge gashes in his side before he succumbed days later.

At the time of the translocation, veteran conservationist and former KWS chairman Nehemiah Rotich was chief operating officer, tasked



Remains of the rhinos that seemingly died due to a bureaucratic mix up.



In this file photo, Balala (left) looks on as Kenya Wildlife Services staff subdue a sedated black rhinoceros in preparation of moving it. Balala maintains he made no decisions in the disastrous translocation exercise.

## Rhinos and how they are conserved in Africa

extinction after the last male died in March.

In 1970, Kenya boasted 20,000 black rhinos — a number that plummeted 98% to only 350 in 1983, but has steadily crept up to over 700 due to conservation efforts.

Kenya is a pioneer of the sanctuary approach, placing rhino in fenced-off areas under the close watch of armed rangers equipped with thermal imaging cameras and drones.

Ironically, this success comes with its own set of problems as there is limited space for these rhinos. As a result, faced with a burgeoning human population, they cannot roam and expand their gene pool.

With black rhino populations thriving in parks in Nairobi and

to move 14 rhinos to a new sanctuary in Tsavo East, in south-eastern Kenya, in an operation funded by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the North American chapter of the International World Wide Fund for Nature).

KWS has successfully carried out numerous so-called translocations of this kind. But in this case, all 11 animals which were moved died. The three others were not transferred. The figure represents more than the nine rhino poached in the country in 2017.

Despite the tragedy, officials underline the country's success in bringing down poaching in recent years, with 59 rhino killed in 2013. South Africa, home of the largest rhino population, has lost over 1,000 of the animals annually over the past five years.

Kenya's tourism and wildlife minister, Najib Balala, and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the North American chapter of the international World Wide Fund for Nature), which donated US\$1mil (RM4mil) for the project.

Dubbed #TheBigMove, the operation would help ensure the survival of a species brutally depleted by poaching.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) describes the black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) as Critically Endangered – just one step away from being extinct in the wild.

Rhinos from parks in Nairobi and Nakuru were sedated, loaded and transported to a new sanctuary in Tsavo East, a project that the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and WWF had spent six years preparing.

There, the rhinos drank borehole water so salty that it corroded a metal grill around the pump valve, and no other wildlife would come near it, says Dr Benson Kibore,

board – the oversight body that has to approve major management decisions – say they blocked the transfer multiple times due to fears about the saline borehole water and the lack of vegetation.

Discord came to a head in 2016, former board member Brian Heath says. The board were told with just days' notice that a big ceremony was planned by KWS and the WWF to launch the transfer – and this just as a punishing drought was taking hold, he says.

"We said, 'No way!'" he recalls. But pressure persisted, he says.

Both Heath and Rotich accuse the WWF of "pushing hard" for the translocation. Their anger was echoed last week by prominent Kenyan conservationist and former KWS chair Richard Leakey, who in a parliamentary submission slammed the WWF for "interference".

In October 2017, the board gave conditional approval for the translocation pending improved conditions at the site. The board's



Kahumbu says that losing the rhinos is 'a complete disaster'.

mandate expired in April 2018.

By that time, the green light for the translocation had still not been given to the management. Even so, the operation went ahead three months later – in the absence of a new board.

Evidence of the tussle over the translocation comes from a meeting in May 2017 attended by KWS officials and WWF's chief rhino

expert, Martin Mulama.

Two sets of minutes were written, according to documents seen by AFP.

The first made no mention of concerns, but was amended after complaints from some present, leading to a second version that included the warning:

"The prevailing habitat could not allow any translocation to take place."

A series of 15 water assessments by KWS, conducted between February and May this year, indicated that the water was at times up to three times saltier than recommended levels.

But Kibore claims that these crucial documents were not provided to vets even when the first rhino fell sick. As a result, the vets wasted valuable time looking for other causes, such as a snake bite.

WWF's Mulama strongly denies pressuring anyone to push ahead with the translocation and insist-

ed that sole responsibility lay with the KWS.

The WWF, he says, was not aware of problems with the sanctuary and had received "regular assurances from KWS that the site was suitable and safe".

"At no time would we do anything detrimental to the species we were trying to protect," Mulama says.

For Kenyan conservationist Paula Kahumbu, the problem is far greater than the wrangle of which individual signed off on the calamitous mission.

"Things failed at multiple levels, the lack of accountability from various authorities is of great concern," she says.

Kahumbu says the signs of turbulence within KWS, and recent developments such as the building of railways through national parks, and other encroaching infrastructure, show it is "a very, very dark time for Kenya" and its wildlife. – AFP