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Kariega update Tuesday 22h30 4th April

Today is day 33. The last time we worked on Thandi was 23 days ago and I was very apprehensive at what we might find under the gruesome exterior of her facial injuries. The Kariega team for today's procedure consisted of 25 individuals on-site but with so many thousands willing her to get well and anxious for news of her progress, we feel like only one small component of this rhino's support network. Thandi's Team.

As usual, we gathered before the procedure to go through the plan. An addition to the team today was Dr Gerhard Steenkamp who is a veterinary surgeon from Onderstepoort. Dr Steenkamp, and his colleagues will be bringing specialised skills and experience into Thandi's continuing support plan and his role today was to assess her facial injuries and begin applying whatever surgical support the growing team of surgeons believe she may require.

We worked with her for almost an hour today which was longer than we had planned for. She was amazing once again, surprising us with her resilience and tenacity having been through such a horrific experience and showing her inner strength even at this stage of her recovery. Not once was I concerned about her anaesthetic, her blood pressure and oxygen levels were good throughout and this gave us the platform Dr Steenkamp needed to carry out his surgical activities.

The first stage in her facial treatment today involved removing as much dead tissue as possible. Most of what is not viable consists of bone which has been severely exposed and separated from its blood supply. If we allow any of this dead bone tissue to remain, it could end up as a decomposing fragment of tissue inside a mass of healing flesh and hence a long term source of infection. Extensive time was spent literally breaking off pieces of bone until bleeding indicated viable tissue. The maggots are back and some of the deep recesses of her mutilated skull where inhabited by them and needed to be removed. Many other bone cavities contained compacted mud which had dried into solid plugs which impede healing and so had to be scooped out and flushed. Tragically, there are still panga marks deep into her skull bones creating fissure lines and crevices which required attention.

Once as much dead tissue had been removed as possible, we could get a clear picture of her healing progress. The outside extremities of the area are clean and the recovering skin margin is creeping in slowly from the peripheries one millimetre at a time. There are some good banks of new tissue often referred to as granulation tissue which has encroached into many of the deep trenches left by the pangas between the bone structures and the skin. She still has significant areas of exposed bone towards the middle of the wound but most surprising of all has been the amount of new tissue

which has been created inside the exposed sinuses. So there is real measurable progress visible without any major stumbling blocks apparent at this stage.

These are still early days yet as we still have a long way to go but what we witnessed today was very encouraging. At this stage we are not sure how much surgical assistance she may require but many of the building blocks of re-construction are appearing, which for now is as much as we can expect.

Every time we work with her face I am both appalled by the extent of her wounds, and encouraged by the determination that this body possesses to recover. In spite of the destruction of her face to such a degree that 33 days later she still has a mutilated crater which is 37 cm long and 19 cm wide. Regardless of the long hours she spent struggling on her side, in shock and agony, she is determined to survive. Under the constant threat of complications from maggots, infection and rotting bone fragments, Thandi has made her choice, this girl wants to live and she wants to live well. In spite of everything she has gone through, this living, breathing, feeling animal just keeps marching down her road towards recovery.

What an inspiration, this one rhino called Thandiswa, is proving to be. What a beacon of hope she is providing for us when there are so many horrendous stories and statistics drawing dark clouds over the future of this species. What an example of how we need to FACE-UP to the realities of poaching, stop talking and start doing.

Thandi, you are a true champion of the cause. You are beautiful.

In honour of what this amazing rhino is teaching us, in admiration of her courage to fight against indescribable odds, in amazement of the amount of awareness she generates for her kind and out of respect for the example she is to us, I would like to make a very personal request to every single person who reads this. This request is not from Kariega Game Reserve, this request is from me, Dr Will Fowlds.

“Please make a choice today to contribute to the care of SURVIVORS of rhino poaching, like Thandi, across our country. This request is small and this request is simple. I am asking you to donate the equivalent of the average price of one injection, at least. On an average treatment day, Thandi will get twenty-two medication injections at an average price of R 52-00. My request is for at least one injection of R 50-00.”

The value of an “injection” excludes professional and labour fees, travel and vehicle costs, helicopter expenses and other medications and anaesthetic costs which are by far the bigger costs. I will be explaining in detail in the following update how to go about this and how we intend managing and using this fund. But, today you get to choose to do something active for rhino like Thandi (meaning LOVE), today is your day to show you LOVE rhino, today is your day to be an active part of the “Thandi Team”, today is your day to give an INJECTION which will make a difference: Please support the

“Thandi Rhino Treatment Fund” initiative. You can start now by drawing up your injections. Will Fowlds

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