



AERIAL SUPPORT FOR THE POACHING WAR

IF SOUTH AFRICA WANTS TO COMBAT RHINO POACHING THEN THE COUNTRY'S LEADING BUSINESS PEOPLE MUST THROW THEIR WEIGHT BEHIND USING THE HELICOPTER TO ACHIEVE THIS END. This was the message at a function held recently at Virginia Airport where a recent trial of helicopter support had proved highly successful.

It was also where a Durban businessman explained how he was so moved by the situation and to do something that he invested more than R500 000 into a five-month long, secret helicopter trial programme in a joint venture operation with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

With the trials having now been completed, Vincent Christoforus, CEO of King Shaka Aviation, said he was convinced that the best way to stop rhino poaching was to use the helicopter throughout the province. He appealed to SA business to help finance a broader use of helicopters throughout KZN's reserves: "We have to use numerous helicopters in a co-ordinated manner and they need to serve both state game reserves as well as private ones".

He said that some R4 to R5-million would be needed in annual sponsorship to fulfil this task properly. He emphasised that his plans to protect and save KZN's rhinos would be conducted on a non-profit basis. "I have learnt over these months how sophisticated and professionally co-ordinated this attack on our rhinos is. It is a crisis. You have to meet fire with fire – and the amount of money needed is affordable for big business."

In collaboration with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife he said the trials had suc-

ceeded in establishing the machine's credentials, which have been endorsed by Ezemvelo conservation specialists on the ground: "I have invested my assets in doing the research and development. Now SA business can feel comfortable in joining me to take this the extra mile. They have to if they want to arrest this slaughter". Christoforus expressed concern at the cost private land owners had to pay to secure their rhinos. "I wonder how long they can continue paying the amounts they are to protect them".

He gave credit to Dr Bandile Mkhize, the CEO of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, to whom he attributed "strong and heartfelt persuasive powers". He described how Dr Mkhize had told him of his organisations limited resources and his belief that the war against rhinos would intensify.

"He also spoke with great understanding of how significant KZN's tourism and eco-tourism industry was, not just for the country and the province but also for helping uplift community lifestyles and providing employment for people".

It was more than co-incidental, he said, that an entrepreneur like himself should have witnessed the remains of de-horned baby rhino while visiting a private game reserve two weeks after being approached by Dr Mkhize. "I had to try and do something."

The joint agreement between King Shaka Aviation and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife was based on Ezemvelo agreeing to give over KZN's premier game reserve Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park (HiP) for the helicopter trials, whilst also providing accommodation for the pilots as well as supplying the fuel. For their part King Shaka Aviation donated a Sikorski 300 helicopter, the pilots, maintenance and undertaking daily flights over the reserve.

Dr Mkhize said the trials were conducted confidentially in order that both his organisation and King Shaka Aviation could assess the operation and be sure of the helicopter's suitability.

"There were logistics that had to be ironed out. Vincent and I agreed that only once we had collated the findings would we release them to the public. We did not want to create false expectations."

He described Christoforus's gesture as extraordinary in its commitment and generosity. "I join him in saying that the playing field is now clear. Business has every motivation in the world to support the use of employing helicopters throughout the province. I am convinced that the helicopter can play a fundamental role in closing these poaching syndicates down."