



UWA officials during the relocation of the white rhinos from Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Nakasongola District yesterday. PHOTO/FRANKLIN DRAKU

Officials say the move is a foundation for rebuilding a sustainable rhino population in the wild.

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU

White rhinos return to Kidepo after 40 years

The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has launched the second phase of its rhino translocation programme, moving two southern white rhinos to Kidepo Valley National Park in Karamoja, marking a major milestone in restoring Uganda's lost wildlife heritage.

Dr James Musinguzi, the UWA executive director, who flagged off the first two rhinos from Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Nakasongola yesterday, described the move as a foundation for rebuilding a sustainable rhino population in the wild.

"This moment marks the beginning of a new rhino story for Kidepo Valley National Park. The translocation of these rhinos is the first step in restoring a species that once formed part of the park's natural heritage. Over time, additional rhinos will be introduced to rebuild a viable and thriving rhino population in Kidepo gradually," Dr Musinguzi said.

He explained that the exercise is embedded in Uganda's National Rhino Conservation Strategy, which provides the framework for restoring rhino populations within their historical range.

"The exercise is also informed by a feasibility study undertaken by UWA, which assessed suitable habitats, ecological requirements, and security conditions.

The study identified Kidepo Valley National Park as one of the most suitable locations for reintroducing rhinos into the wild," he added.

Located in Karamoja, Kidepo borders Karenga, Kotido, Moroto, and Kaabong districts and lies approximately 700km from Kampala. Gazetted in 1962, the park is home to about 77 mammal species and 476 bird species.

Dr Musinguzi said extensive groundwork had been undertaken to prepare Kidepo for the rhinos' return, including the establishment of a secure sanctuary with perimeter fencing, access roads, firebreaks, ranger facilities, water infrastructure, and monitoring systems to ensure effective protection and management.

"We are deeply grateful to our conservation partners whose technical expertise, financial support, and logistical contributions have made this milestone possible. The return of rhinos to Kidepo demonstrates the power of partnerships in restoring species and protecting Uganda's wildlife heritage," he said.

The translocation is supported by Wild Landscapes East Africa (WLEA), Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), and Uganda Conservation Foundation (UCF). Officials say these partners have supported sanctuary development, infrastructure preparation, equipment provision, and

logistical planning necessary for the successful translocation.

Mr John Makombo, the commissioner for Biodiversity Management, said the reintroduction is a critical step in restoring the park's ecological integrity.

"Kidepo Valley National Park is one of Uganda's most intact savannah ecosystems, and the reintroduction of southern white rhinos restores a key component of that ecosystem. This strengthens not only species recovery but also ecosystem resilience," he said.

Upon arrival, the rhinos will initially be placed in a secure sanctuary within the park, where trained rangers and veter-

inary teams will monitor them closely to ensure successful adaptation to their new environment.

Uganda's rhino history

Rhinos once roamed widely across Kidepo but were wiped out due to poaching and insecurity in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Uganda's rhino recovery journey began in 2005 when a breeding programme was established at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary after the species became extinct in the wild in Uganda. The programme's success, coupled with the importation of eight rhinos from South Africa late last year, has enabled gradual expansion of rhino restoration efforts to other suitable habitats.

Dr Musinguzi said the return of rhinos to Kidepo will strengthen biodiversity conservation, enhance the park's tourism potential, and contribute to Uganda's broader efforts to restore endangered wildlife species within their historic ecosystems.

"The reintroduction of rhinos to Kidepo is a landmark moment. It reflects our commitment to wildlife conservation, ecosystem restoration, and sustainable tourism development. Over time, Kidepo will not only be home to rhinos again but also continue to attract local and international visitors to marvel at Uganda's rich biodiversity," he said.

KEY FACTS

Uganda now has 61 rhinos, and conservationists say the country boasts one of the highest rhino reproduction and survival rates globally. Since 2005, not a single rhino has been lost to poaching, thanks to 24/7 security surveillance within the sanctuary. The reintroduction is part of Uganda's ongoing efforts to ensure that key species are restored to their natural habitats.