

## **Environmental education programmes**

Environmental education is seen by most State and private conservation areas as a vital factor in their long term protection. However, it is generally true that with the wide range of core conservation duties that need daily attention, relatively few resources can usually be spared on a sustained basis for education functions. To be effective, consistent commitments of trained personnel, transport, equipment and educational materials are needed, along with clear, measurable goals of what the education should achieve.

Around rhino conservation areas, environmental programmes have taken many forms. Pilanesberg National Park during the 1980s and early 1990s probably went further than most, by employing a full-time team of school teachers, and setting up a large educational facility that could house and feed scores of rural school children on routine basis. A full 2-3 day programme of environmental teaching and field activities awaited visiting children, and the aim was to expose every single school child in the entire region to this programme at least once in their school careers. Realising that a few days of exposure would not usually be sufficient, a travelling road show was devised, and all schools were assisted in setting up Wildlife Clubs. The success of this programme could be gauged by the fact that parents and village elders began to complain to Park staff that the children now knew more than them, and they too needed to be educated. State budget and staff cuts however eventually crippled this education programme, reducing it to a shadow of its former glory. Lapalala Wilderness was the first private conservation area to purchase black rhino, and they set up a similar rustic environmental school camp system. They used the added component of showing the children Bwana, a lovable hand-raised black rhino, who is a great success at stimulating everyone's interest.

Most environmental education programmes today take the form of general conservation and ecological teaching aimed at school children. Many areas have rustic overnight facilities for children, but many others can only afford one or two usually under-resourced staff members to undertake general community liaison and education, with school classes coming for only a few hours to a conservation area. Efforts to teach school teachers are underway, but usually the deep rural schools have absolutely no resources or capacity to routinely impart environmental awareness (with or without a rhino component) to their charges.

Several private conservation areas have scholarship programmes which fund the higher education of a number of children from local communities or staff members. In addition, such areas often provide direct support to one or more local schools.

A vital general background theme in much of the environmental education is to show how protected areas are valuable job-creating and income-generating resources that can bring economic upliftment to neighbouring areas. In countries where rhinos

can be bought and sold or trophy hunted, the direct link between their conservation and income to the area is more easily demonstrated, and some new initiatives to involve communities themselves in hands-on rhino conservation breeding have begun.

Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) in Namibia were among the first fully to include communities in rhino conservation and day-to-day monitoring, and to develop rhino-specific educational and awareness material for children. The desert black rhino became all-the-rage among school children who sold the appealingly designed “rhino friend” badges to raise funds to sponsor a rhino for their school. The first fun educational / games booklets were developed by SRT for young children, based on rhino conservation and biology themes.

Since then, the idea of developing educational / awareness material with a rhino theme has progressed greatly by developing products that can be used as a teaching aid in any school subject (e.g. mathematics, geography, reading, biology). This allows the environmental (and rhino) education to be incorporated almost seamlessly into a wide variety of routine school classes. The first example was the “Rhino Resource Book” developed by Wildlands Trust, KwaZulu-Natal. This contained a range of 2-4 page “lessons” featuring rhino issues. In Zimbabwe under the SADC Regional Programme for Rhino Conservation, the idea was made more practical for younger children by adapting several key lessons into laminated cards which could be used outdoors if necessary; the “Rhino Cards” supplied on CD-ROM with this EAZA Rhino Campaign Information Pack. File kits were produced, comprising teacher guide notes plus several copies of the laminated card lessons to share among the kids during a session. For older children, un-laminated “Rhino” booklets (similar to the Rhino Resource Book) were produced.

Along with any education programme comes the need to gauge its effectiveness. The Zimbabwe team undertook before and after questionnaires among several targeted schools and found around 20% improvement in knowledge about rhinos and attitudes towards the need for rhino conservation. The programme was also taken to Swaziland with good preliminary results.

Although all schools using the “Rhino Cards” and “Rhino Resource Book” were very enthusiastic about the idea, limitations included the rate at which teachers could be trained to use the material, their individual willingness to implement the lessons, and the provision of sufficient copies of the books (at around \$2 per copy) for all the children passing through each trained teacher’s classes. Teachers themselves are often not broadly educated and have very limited environmental awareness, and schools have very few or no resources of their own.

A final approach developed by some private areas involves using field rangers as role models and educators. They undertake tours of local communities and schools,

discussing their own jobs and role in conservation, relating exiting tales of encounters with dangerous animals and poachers. They are provided with educational material to show (films etc.) or hand out. This approach can be very successful. The ranger is seen by children as someone to look up to and indeed relate to much more personally, rather than as the same boring teacher they encounter every day. Obviously the rangers need to be supported by a budget for travel and equipment, and extra staff would need to be employed to maintain normal levels of field surveillance.

*Keryn Adcock*