

Namibia:

How the camel is helping the rhino in Namibia

One of the projects Save the Rhino supports uses camels to monitor rhino...

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Camels were first introduced to Namibia's Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) by the explorer Benedict Allen, who left three camels in the northern Kunene region following his coastal trip from Luderitz to the Kunene River in the early 1990s.

In 1997 Mike Hearn, SRT's late Director of Research, supervised camel patrols working westwards out of a base in the Khowarib Schlucht near Sesfontein, into the rhino range. Together with Blythe Loutit, Simson Uri-Khob and their team of trackers, SRT monitored the rhino and also attempted to introduce tourism in the form of camel rides to the Sesfontein Fort.

Further camels were acquired in 2000 and SRT moved the camels and trackers closer to the rhino range, creating a base at Mbakondja. The continued presence of the SRT Camel Team in the core area of the Kunene region's black rhino range (where more than 70% of rhino live in an area of approximately 2,990 km²) is considered crucial to the survival of this western, desert-adapted population. This is because much of the core rhino habitat is in areas which are inaccessible to vehicles, and therefore without the camel patrols it would be difficult accurately to monitor this rhino population.

SRT's Camel Team provided extensive assistance to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) during their March 2006 capture and translocation procedure, which saw 24 rhinos captured and marked. To get these 24 sorted out the camel team tracked

and found 42 rhino, of which the 24 were selected to receive transmitters. In addition, two bulls were translocated to the Khoadi Hoas Conservancy. This was the first attempt to expand the rhino range in Kunene Region since the dehorning and translocation programme in 1989.

This successful operation could not have been achieved without expert input from the Camel Team, Director of Research Simson Uri-Khob (who co-ordinated the ground operations), and Director of Field Operations Bernd Brell (who piloted the aircraft used to locate the rhino). I acted as navigator and spotter from the air, which helped to keep helicopter hours to a minimum.

SRT's continuing aim is to help communities take on more and more of the responsibilities of conserving and monitoring the rare desert rhino. As such, the camel project employs 10 community-based game guards (who work as trackers and camel keepers (herders) and one female office worker to do admin and be on radio standby. A training programme has been initiated with the aim of increasing the game guards' abilities in handling rhino tours, on camel back, vehicle or on foot. Continued SRT training of conservancy game guards and ongoing patrolling and monitoring of rhino in these conservancies has increased the capacity of the game guards to sustainably manage these rhino. Conservancies are currently being made members of the MET Custodianship Programme for state-owned black rhino in Namibia.

Three years ago a new type of tourism venture was initiated between SRT and Wilderness Safaris Namibia, whereby one of SRT's camel teams is fully supported by proceeds from tourists staying at Palmwag Rhino Camp, in exchange for hosting guests on their rhino tracking excursions.

A Wilderness Safaris guide accompanies the trackers and tourists get the opportunity to track and see rhino in the wild. This is a pioneering venture, that should in time prove very successful, but results for 2006 have been disappointing. Only two safaris took place, earning SRT a total of NS14,720 (€1,000).

In future SRT intends to purchase more camels and form a second team capable of dealing with the safaris once demand increases. Ideally SRT would have one camel team monitoring rhino, a second team out on safari with Wilderness Safaris clients and a third group of camels resting. In time, income from the safaris should support the costs of both tracker teams and all three strings of camels.



Left:
Part of Save the Rhino Trust's camel team

Bottom Left:
Black rhino in Namibia

Many Thanks

In October 2006 Save the Rhino sent £21,150 to SRT: £19,951 carried forward from the Desert Rhino fundraising dinner and dance we held back in March 2006, and another £45 received from a private donor. These will help cover the costs of the camel team's salaries, supplementary camel fodder and camel veterinary costs for the period November 2006 - October 2007. Another £1,155 raised by Vanessa Buxton's and Allie Wharf's cycle ride in January 2006 will be used to help cover the flying patrol costs of Bernd Brell, Director of Field Operations at SRT. Our thanks to all those who supported Desert Rhino, Ness and Allie's bike ride. A combined total of £1,230 from the Mackintosh Foundation and money raised by Tom Collier, who took part in the Cardiff Half Marathon, is being used to support a Stage 2 training programme for conservancy game guards. Finally, the EAZA Rhino Campaign has just granted €30,000 to SRT.

