

Kenya:

Mutinda: The story of a poacher turned gamekeeper

For a long time, the very word 'Mutinda' conjured up the image of a ghost:

Richard Bonham
Chyulu Hills rhino project

Not a nice ghost, but one who left a trail of butchered animal carcasses in his wake. To make it even worse, sometimes also left a note (heavily censored here) to the effect of "you wimps will never catch me". Worse still, he would carve messages into the bark of trees giving graphic details of his opinion of the Chyulu game scouts.

One day Mutinda's cockiness got the better of him and his luck ran out. A spot of bush justice was dispensed and he was handed over to the police for prosecution. But a sympathetic magistrate gave him a \$10 fine and sent him home. It was not long before more carcasses with his stamp began appearing.

Our next break came when the bush news network leaked the information that he was trying to sell one rhino horn, two tusks and six leopard skins. Together with the Kenya Wildlife Service, a sting was set up and bingo, we had him with all the evidence needed to lock him up for a long time. But again he had the last laugh. After spending 65 days in a remand prison (not a very pleasant place), he was brought to court. But somehow the rhino horn and the ivory was no longer there as evidence... They had mysteriously been "misplaced" at the police station, so, with no case to answer, he returned home to his small village on the edge of the Chyulu Hills.

Incensed, I thought if we can't beat him, let's get him to join us. I wrote a letter asking him to meet me on neutral ground. He didn't turn up. I sent another, this time with some money enclosed, suggesting we meet in a bar on the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. I arrived at the appointed hour, waited an hour or so and was getting up to

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leave, when a man with an open smiling face sat down at my table, held out his hand and said, "I am Mutinda."

He, like me by now, was well oiled, which helped break down the barriers and in no time we were talking about the wildlife and the hills that were our common bond. He lost no time in telling me that he had never used a snare in his life - snares, he said, were for young boys and the unskilled, and all his hunting was done with a bow and poisoned arrow. He told me he did not know what else to do and had little formal education. He had been taught to hunt by his father, starting at seven years old learning how to make the poison, the bow and the arrow, and moving up the apprentice ladder from there until the day, aged 17, when he killed his first rhino and became a fully fledged hunter.



Mutinda with bloodhound, a game scout's best friend.

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First ever photo of a wild Chyulu black rhino, taken in 2007.

The rest is history. The lure of a steady pay cheque at the end of every month, a game scout uniform that brings with it status and honour, did the rest. Mutinda has become one of the most reliable and trustworthy game scouts I have met anywhere. He has also brought with him a mine of bush knowledge that has rubbed off on the other rangers, and has shown us previously unknown trails used by poachers that have led to successful ambushes. So a win-win situation has come out of it. Mutinda is no longer moving through the bush leaving a trail of carcasses behind him, and he has been directly responsible for stopping others. However, the real long-term benefit may be the example he is showing to his community through the growing prosperity of his family. The challenge is to find work and employment for others in his old fraternity in order to get them to change sides.

Support needed:

We're now fundraising to cover the rhino project costs for the year April 2008 to March 2009, and in the coming year we want to put in a new observation post based high up in the hills, manned joined by the KWS and Richard Bonham's game scouts. The biggest single cost - £56,802 - is that of the salaries, pension and training for the game scouts, who in turn support an average of ten family members. If you'd like to help, please contact: cathy@savetherhino.org

RICHARD BONHAM

Grants:

To Kenneth Donaldson who gave £4,350 for replacement equipment and to Chester Zoo who awarded £8,850 for wages, rations, vehicle fuel and maintenance, and prosecution costs.