

## Crouching rangers, hidden rhino

Weaving around, 50 feet up in the air, in what looks spookily like a rudimentary lawn mower with a pair of wings UHU-ed onto it and two plastic bag windows, is certainly not my cup of tea: actually my head starts to go doolally half way up a short flight of stairs.

**Louisa Corse**  
Selous Rhino Trust

**B**ut for the ruddy, action-man, I-could-mend-a-747-with-my-Leatherman Fraser Smith, who co-runs the Selous Rhino Trust in southern Tanzania with his hugely energetic and focused wife Kes, flying small machines that should be minding their own business, cutting the grass on Sundays has always been part of his life as a conservationist - just about since he was first allowed to wear a pair of long trousers.

Kes and Fraser are a formidable team who came to the Selous Rhino Trust (SRT) in 2006 with credentials and a track record that could fill a library, both protecting rhino in Garamba National Park in war-torn DRC, where they spent over 20 years, and helping spearhead international rhino conservation efforts.

In collaboration with Tanzania's Wildlife Division, they are now in charge of all operations, technical support and fundraising for the Trust, which was set up 15 years ago to protect the Game Reserve's hugely vulnerable and dwindling rhino population.

This dream team have certainly got results, largely through aerial surveys using a Super Cub (the gravity-defying grass muncher), and through developing the monitoring and beginning to introduce their Law Enforcement Monitoring model, which Kes spent years perfecting in Garamba.

Fraser says it was a slow start, and that he had begun to lose faith when he'd notched 70 hours flying and still hadn't seen a rhino. "The 77th was the bewitching hour, when suddenly as I skirted a thicket, there just below me was a real live rhino. It was the most incredible

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moment. I was so overwhelmed that I took a series of photos of the propeller before bringing the plane round again and getting the shots I needed." Is it a man thing, not being able to do two things at once, I wonder? Then again, wielding the lawn mower and trying to focus a lens is like doing acrobatics with one arm and no safety net, so I keep my mouth shut.

Since then, working from the air and with the Wildlife Division ground patrol team, Kes and Fraser have had countless rhino sightings, and now have positive ID photos of 11 individuals, all of whom have been identified through a combination of age, sex, location and characteristic markings. One young male for example, has a large old scar on his right side and is known as Kovu (Kiswahili for scar. Obviously). Tundu is a female with a large hole in her right ear. This is an outstanding achievement and also a great credit to the Conservation Action Trust, which owns the plane and lends it to the project.

In the past, rhino have been very, very rarely seen in the Selous, and really only through incredibly intensive patrolling, but Kes says that the Selous' rhino seem to be becoming more secure, since sightings by guides and visitors from Sand Rivers and Beho Beho, two safari lodges in the area, have increased significantly in the last couple of years. This is largely through the efforts of the rangers, who patrol in and around the rhino areas, together with the eagle eye of the lawnmower pilot. "Having the Super Cub prowling the skies with a bird's-eye view of all the little lakes and waterways, thick bushes and other nooks

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Right:  
A Selous rhino spots Fraser





IMAGES: KES & FRASER SMITH

**Top to bottom:**  
 Fraser in the Super Cub  
 Kes and the team inspect rhino prints  
 Fraser and the Selous rhino team  
 Close inspection

and crannies where poachers do their terrible business has been a huge deterrent," she says. "Poachers are terrified of the plane and they know that it means that soon there will be a team of people coming in on the ground to arrest them. We hope that sufficient intensity of patrolling and anti-poaching can be maintained to stop the poaching getting to the rhinos".

**“In 1970 there were an estimated 3,000 black rhino in the Selous. Today there are no more than a few dozen.”**

Law Enforcement Monitoring (LEM) is a further tool to help improve the anti-poaching. The concept originated in Zambia, but Kes and Fraser developed it in Zaire for Central Africa, to answer the Park Warden and Fraser's management needs, and to assist Kes's monitoring unit. She also did the initial development of it for the CITES MIKE pilot project. "LEM creates a live and on-going measure of both the threats and the effectiveness of various techniques in tackling those threats. It then allows management to respond rapidly to any changes, before it is too late," says Kes.

The LEM protection activities not only benefit the rhino, but also many other key species in the ecosystem. Fraser: "Any sign of poachers in an area is of course a serious potential threat to rhinos, but poachers are always going to come across elephants or hippos long before they find the very sparse rhinos. So our anti-poaching efforts are helping protect these species, as well as creating a crucial early warning system for the rhinos."

The control centre for the Selous Rhino Project is at Kidai Ranger post, set on a lofty cliff overlooking the Rufiji River, where Fraser bases himself with a team of Wildlife Division rangers. From here, Fraser is also involved in training as well as important back-of-house maintenance.

"Being a charitable trust means that we have to squeeze all our resources, and this includes getting as much out of all our expensive equipment as we possibly can" says Fraser. "Good, sound maintenance and good practice in terms of using equipment are essential." He is also in the process of building a hanger for the winged lawn mower which has proved so enormously valuable in taking the project to a whole new level of results ("will stop the hyenas eating the rubber wheels").

Kes has less involvement in the field with a large proportion of her role being focused on fund raising, reporting and developing the crucial monitoring and mapping systems needed to build up a comprehensive picture of what is going on in the Selous.

In 1970 there were an estimated 3,000 black rhino in the Selous. Today there are no more than a few dozen. The task now is to find support to build on the recent successes and rebuild a rhino population in the Selous that deserves their collective noun: a crash.

**Support**

Over the years the Selous Rhino Project has had significant financial support from many organisations, including Save the Rhino International, the International Rhino Foundation, Tusk Trust and US Fish and Wildlife Service. For five years, the project was also supported by a substantial grant from the European Commission, which funded vehicles and equipment as well as salaries. In the past year, Kes and Fraser's salaries have been underwritten by Nomad Tanzania, a safari company that owns Sand Rivers lodge in the Selous, as a bridge pending further support, but the project urgently needs longer term financial support. If you would like to help, please contact: [cathy@savetherhino.org](mailto:cathy@savetherhino.org)

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