

Cementing communications in the Selous

It all seems very simple: Save the Rhino International offers us a tremendous donation (raised through the Chyulus-Selous bash in November) and we need a repeater station to improve communications around our rhino conservation headquarters in the Selous Game Reserve. Marry the two together, and all we need is the hardware, a big truck, a telecoms expert, a cement mixer, and bingo, we're up and running!

Of course here in the Selous it's a touch more challenging. You can't get a cement mixer into the Reserve. Then there's Kipalala Hill, which will become the repeater station's home; the summit is an hour's 45-degree hike up from the nearest track through thick bush. Notwithstanding the fact that the area is teeming with wild animals, some of which are quite often (and frankly understandably) not entirely ecstatic at the sight of the human form, and are very likely to make their feelings known if they get the chance.

So it's a feat of logistics and preparation - a challenge that the rhino team is very good at handling, as is Materego, the company installing the repeater installation, which has good bush experience in similar tricky situations.

As we write, the foundations are dug and the concrete platform laid ready. And all of this has been done by 25 Olympian-fit men supported by a game ranger, who

have carted each bag of cement, sand and water to the top of the hill on their own backs. It's hard work but good for the guys who are all recruited from villages around the Reserve and may otherwise be tempted towards fish poaching (or more worryingly other animal targets) as an alternative source of income; a career that aside from the conservation consequences is not only dangerous, but also liable to serious sentencing if they are caught.

With everything now in place at the site, the repeater is being assembled in Dar before being trucked out to the Reserve in advance of the rains, which normally start in mid-March.

Talking of wild animals, Kipalala Hill is also home to at least one of the area's black rhino. In late January, when the Selous Rhino Trust's Friedrich Alpers was on a monitoring patrol around the hill, the ranger team found the male quietly

resting in some heavy bush; this sighting despite the fact that life on the hill has been temporarily disrupted because of the repeater station work. This follows a rhino sighting by a tourist last year, a little further north at Beho Beho, the first time a tourist on safari has seen a rhino in the Selous for about 15 years.

What is important about both these incidents is that they show that after all those years of torment by humans, there is a slow but visible shift as the rhino become more secure and confident under the protection of the Selous Black Rhino Protection Project's rangers.

It's our job to keep them secure and help them regenerate; our vision being that, in time, visitors to the Selous will have rhino firmly on the list of animals they would like, and would be likely, to see.

Louisa Muir
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LOUISA MUIR

TOP: LOUISA MUIR, BOTTOM: FRIEDRICH ALPERS

