

## Black rhino trophy hunting: Sustainable utilisation or slaughter?

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The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora's (CITES) decision in October 2004 to permit the trophy hunting of five black rhinos in Namibia caused shock waves through the conservation community, both in the UK and abroad. Major schisms were immediately apparent, for example, animal welfare campaigners versus pro-hunting lobbyists. However, there were also divisions and deep soul-searching amongst more moderate organisations straddling both sides of the debate, not least at Save the Rhino. What a dilemma: how do you justify shooting rhinos in order to save them?

The CITES decision stems primarily from two recent trends. First and foremost, the 1,000+% increase in Namibian black rhino numbers over the past 25 years due to the excellent work of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), aided by NGOs such as Save the Rhino

International. The increase has strained the carrying capacity of protected areas and led to multiple small breeding groups being 'loaned' to private game ranchers under the Rhino Custodianship Programme. MET's argument in favour of hunting is that old male rhinos disrupt the reproductive growth rate amongst small populations, hindering the capacity for overall population recovery. Moving them is very expensive and few want them; there's not a great deal of demand for grumpy old male rhinos!

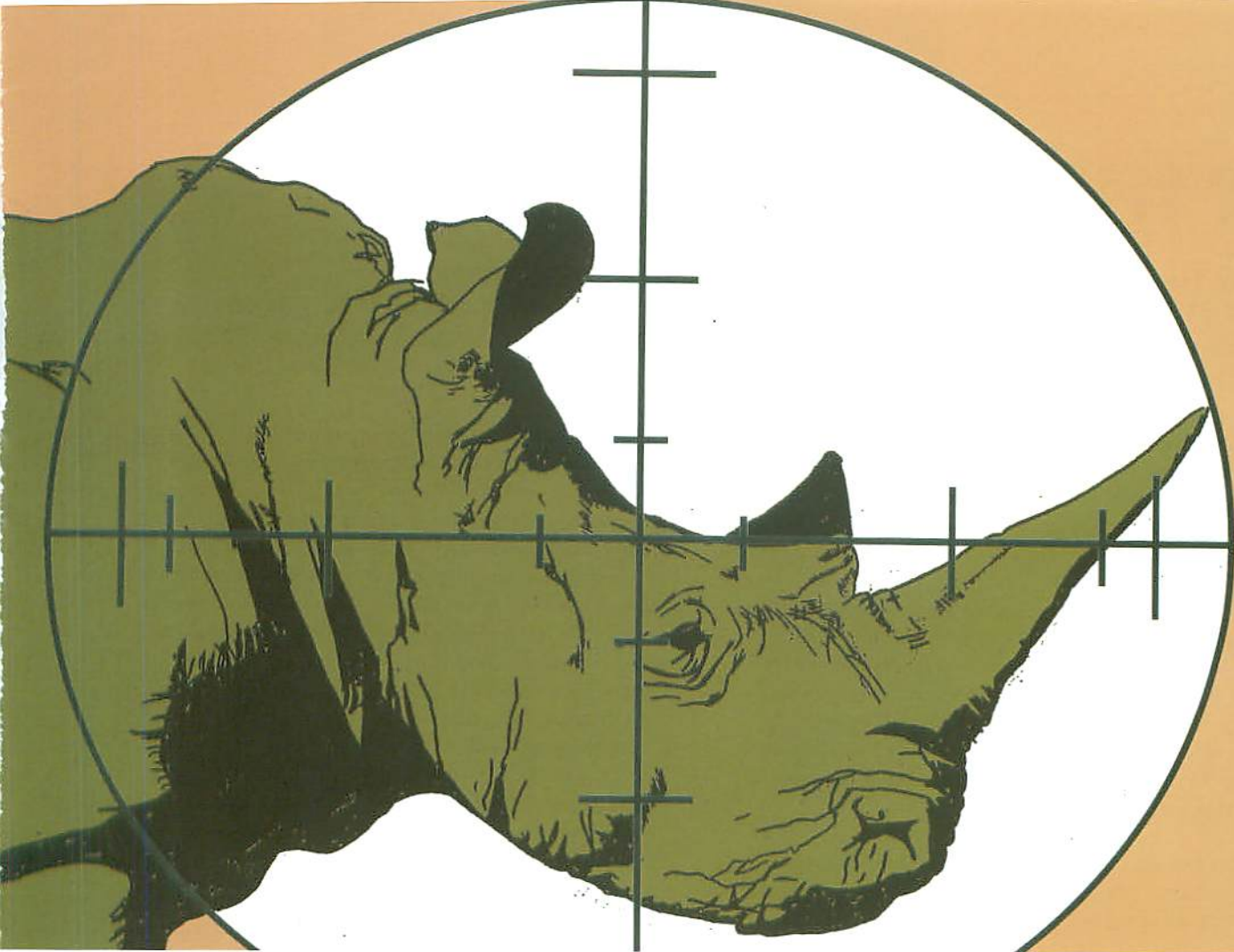
Hard-nosed conservation pragmatism favours cashing them in. Five black rhino trophies are worth at least US \$250,000, far more than the combined UK rhino conservation NGOs provide for Namibia in one year. In statistical terms the loss of five animals could be considered insignificant, given that population is expanding by around 100+ animals per year.

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Financial expediency is also at the centre of the second trend: that towards greater community involvement in conservation under Community-based Natural Resource Management programmes (CBNRM). Since 1995, rural communities have been able to organise themselves into Conservancies and gain rights over key resources, most notably tourism and the sustainable utilisation of wildlife: game cropping, for meat and skins, and trophy hunting. Whilst CBNRM has its faults, and many conservationists find the sustainable utilisation of wildlife unpalatable, there's no denying the fact that, for the first time since before colonial times, many rural Namibians now have a degree of political and economic





autonomy. Until the CITES decision, hunting has been restricted to ubiquitous game species such as springbok and impala, plus a small, but controversial, quota of charismatic mega-fauna such as elephant. Now rhinos are on the slate too.

However, trophy hunting offers the prospect of raising relatively large sums of money for communities who've foregone livelihood options such as farming in favour of ecotourism and wildlife management.

Such developments represent a progressive form of conservation and offer a possible solution to the increasing problem of human-wildlife conflict, which threatens conservation efforts outside of protected areas. In this light, CITES' decision could be viewed as reflecting faith in Namibia's ability to sustainably manage its natural resources in a manner that enables the rhinos to recover whilst aiding the social and economic development of the nation: the elusive win-win situation.

Despite these social and economic arguments in favour of trophy hunting

of rhinos, serious doubts remain. Whilst Namibia has safeguarded its rhinos in exemplary fashion, other rhino states have been less successful and poaching remains a real threat. What message does this send to potential rhino poachers in those countries? There's also the very distasteful implication that it's OK for rich hunters to shoot rhinos, whilst poor local people remain poachers. More practically, how will MET ensure that only old males are shot? Namibia's rhinos are amongst the most heavily monitored wildlife populations in the world, but in field conditions, mistakes can happen. What chance a young male in its prime will be caught in the sights of a high-velocity rifle? Finally, there are financial justifications for preserving rhinos rather than shooting them, with some tourism commentators suggesting that there are greater returns from wildlife safaris than hunting ones.

What does this leave us? A hugely complex and polarised debate. Many in the field are in favour, whereas most donors are horrified. What can we do to try and bridge this fundamental chasm in the conservation community?

Most importantly, black rhino trophy hunting must be strictly monitored. If problems occur, CITES must review its decision.

However, the conservation donor community needs to look objectively at the realities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century wildlife conservation. The majority of wildlife exists outside of protected areas. Expecting people to preserve such animals for aesthetic reasons, when they cannot rely on basic human rights, is unrealistic. Unless wildlife contributes to economic welfare and pays its way, it will inevitably disappear as people use the land for other purposes. Wildlife pays in two ways: tourism and hunting. Tourism, whilst currently strong, is notoriously fickle: read what happened to Kenya in 2002-3 after the terrorism threats. Namibia has chosen to diversify the income streams it gets from wildlife. If we are to remain fundamentally opposed to hunting, then we must come up with new ways of funding wildlife conservation in a sustainable manner.

# A tribute to Mike Hearn

Mike Hearn, who has died aged 32 in a surfing accident, was a powerful force in African rhino conservation, in particular of the desert-dwelling black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) in north-west Namibia. He had been Director of Research at the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) there since 2002.

His first meeting with a rhino was at the age of 10, when his father took him to the rhino enclosure at Port Lympne wild animal park in Kent, near the family home. Within minutes, his father recalled, Mike was scratching the animal's nose and feeding it bananas.

Educated at Dulwich College, south London, he was 20 when he contacted Save the Rhino International (SRI), looking for a job in rhino conservation. Unable to oblige, they offered him work experience in their fundraising office in London. Within six months, an obsession to work in Africa with rhinos had been born. An administrative job at the office of the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) in the Namibian capital, Windhoek, came up and Mike took it.

For the first year, he was confined to the office, filing and making cups of tea. He volunteered to computerise the trust's rhino database and this, coupled with his love of photography, enabled him to get out into the rhino area.

In 1995, he was involved in setting up a base camp from the village of Khowarib. His responsibilities included operating foot, camel and vehicle patrols in the core rhino areas. Stills photography developed into film, and he went on to help make several films about the desert black rhino, including a programme for the BBC2 series, *Wild Lives*.

By 1998, improved monitoring and enhanced community-based conservation initiatives had seen a rise in the desert black rhino population. In order to understand these animals better, Mike enrolled for an MSc in conservation biology at the University of Kent. For his dissertation research, he used the database he was building up for SRT on rhino sightings in Kunene to guide decisions on biological management of rhinos. He won the Institute's prize for the best student of his year.

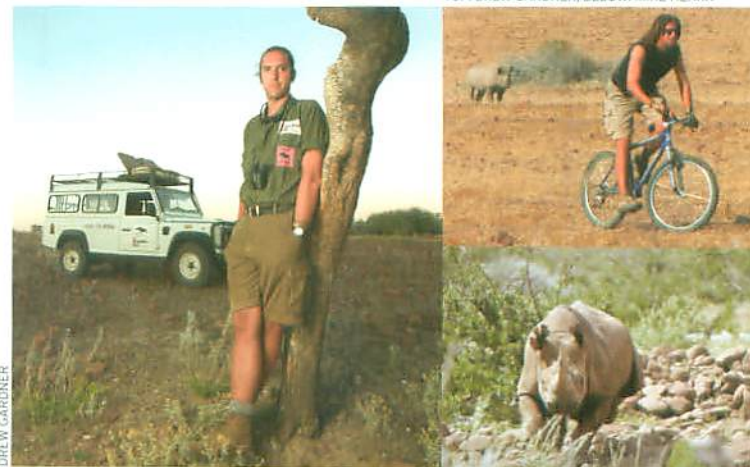
Mike returned to Namibia as director of research for SRT. In 2002, he became a member of IUCN-the World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission African Rhino Specialist Group in recognition of his growing authority in linking rhino conservation with people-centred approaches to conservation. It was on this topic that he was due to complete his PhD thesis in biodiversity management in 2006.

He worked closely with Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism and local communities, while his charismatic personality brought him into contact with international organisations that helped bring substantial funds into the country. He strongly believed that the rhino was a prime example of how a flagship species could be a strategic

resource for both the conservation of biological diversity and improving livelihoods, through a growing tourist industry.

He was instrumental in setting up an unprecedented tourism conservation initiative with Wilderness Safaris: money raised from visitors at the rhino camp at Palmwag went to support one of SRT's monitoring teams in the area. Mike's generous nature was recognised by explorer Benedict Allen when they met in Namibia in 1997. Allen, on a camel walk along the length of the Skeleton coast, arranged to meet Mike to hand over his camels so they could be used as part of SRT's rhino-monitoring effort.

Mike is survived by his parents, Tom and Anne, and by his two brothers, Jim and Nicholas.



**Michael Edmund Hearn, Conservationist,  
born 27 May 1972; died 19 January 2005**

This obituary was first published in *The Guardian*, 25 February 2005. Our heartfelt sympathies to Mike's family, to all those working at Save the Rhino Trust in Namibia, and to his very many friends all over the world. If you would like to make a donation in Mike's memory, so that his work in Namibia may be continued, please send cheques made out to "Save the Rhino", with a note saying that it is intended for Mike Hearn's memorial fund, to us at our London address. Please also visit our website to read other tributes to Mike.

David Stirling  
Projects Advisor