

Tanzania:

Going dry in Mkomazi

The name "Mkomazi" means "no water" - or more accurately in the Pare language, an amount so tiny it wouldn't even fill a teaspoon. So why the dickens would someone wish to create a Game Reserve here in Mkomazi?

When the Mkomazi Game Reserve was established in 1951, the area was well watered by the springs and rivers flowing down from the Pare and Usambara mountains. Each year nearly 4,000 elephants followed the great migration route (now gone) from northern Kenya, through the Tsavo Parks, Mkomazi, the Maasai Steppe, Kilimanjaro, Amboseli, and back again. Mkomazi used to be one of the best rhino areas in Tanzania.

The colonial administration of the time began to encourage the scattered populations of local residents to come down to the plains and take advantage of new schools and vaccination campaigns. Conflict with the animals was resolved by killing them. Sustainable sisal plantations were replaced by water-hogging rice plantations. The animals were left with a few seasonal water pans, two earth dams built by the Game Department and an unreliable spring (more accurately, a trickle) at Kisima. Now only small populations of elephant remain; their memories lost, migration routes stopped by progress, development and the greed of man.

Today, one of the dams, Dindira, has been rehabilitated and serves the far north of the Reserve. The Maore water pan is continually de-silted and now holds water for most of the year. Both Maore and Dindira have permanent guards

stationed to prevent invasions by domestic stock and to habituate the wild animals. The Kisima spring became a trap for wild animals; buffalo would fall in and drown and then we'd have to treat the water. We used a JCB to close Kisima off; when there is water, we pump it to a pan nearby. Old wells dug by the Wasambaa have been filled in to extend the life of the spring, but it still dries up almost every year.

During the early 1990s the George Adamson Trust funded an extensive water survey, but only one of the three wells drilled (at 400ft) has been a success. During the dry season, a daily 95km round-trip is needed to collect the 10,000 litres required. At least the well is there, and we are grateful to Friends of Serengeti, Switzerland and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands for funding our rebuilt Scania 82 that does these trips so reliably.

Nearer camp we have rainwater catchment and 3 home-built tanks that hold nearly 400,000 litres of storage. This has to be treated and circulated; when water goes "off" it makes bad eggs smell pleasant! These are essential reserves, as the Scania inevitably needs regular servicing and during the wet season its rear-wheel-only drive can't always cope with the roads. With eight rhino, 50 men, visitors, a sundry collection of vehicles and a large workshop (not to mention a large family!), we cannot afford to be without water.

After the rains, we have to take water into the sanctuary in our 35-year-old



ex-army Bedford lorry. There are 4 main stone-built water pans and the rhinos have to share the water with the resident buffalo, giraffe, eland, impala, leopard, hyaena and other animals. At 45sq km, there is room for all and more, as long as we can supply the water. If we don't put it out regularly, the main gate camp, Kilo Echo, will get noisy and sometimes destructive evening visits from a bunch of thirsty rhino! Wild as they are, if they hear the tanker coming they will often follow it in to the discharge point and some of them even drink out of the taps whilst the water is being off-loaded. At least this provides a good chance to check up on the otherwise elusive rhinos!

But we're still in danger of running dry. What we really need, in this driller's nightmare of pre-Cambrian gneiss, is a more extensive hydrological survey in and around the rhino sanctuary, and some test holes drilled. The other alternative would be to pipe water from Lake Jipe, 40 miles away, but that would bring its own technical and political problems.

It is vital that we have water closer to the sanctuary and to camp, and also more year-round, guarded, water in the Reserve to keep animals in the area during the dry season. Then perhaps we could concentrate on more important work and rename the place Maji Mingi (Lotsa water)! Even Maji ya Kutosha (enough water) would be VERY satisfactory! Can anyone help us with this?

Tony Fitzjohn
Project Manager
Mkomazi Game Reserve

In April 2003 Save the Rhino made a grant of US \$4,800 to Mkomazi, which will go towards the salaries of three of the rhino rangers: Semu Pallangyo, Steven Hyera and Philbert Shindano.

