



Counting rhino

For anyone managing rhino, reliable figures of population size are vital. Counts can be made from the air or ground, or at waterholes during a full-moon night. Tracks, middens, and other signs allow us to make indirect estimates. In small populations, a total count is sometimes possible. For larger populations, we can compare the number of recognized animals - identified from naturally occurring markings, or "notches" made on the ears - with the number of unknown animals in a sample to derive an estimate of the overall figure.

The communal areas of northwest Namibia suffered heavy poaching in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the near extinction of Africa's largest population of black rhino outside a protected area. By the early 1980s, only 50 animals remained. Conservation measures implemented by the government and Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) in partnership with the local communities have more than doubled this population.

Though a black rhino may weigh one and a half tons, finding rhinos and counting them has proved quite a challenge for conservation agencies in Africa. This is particularly true in northwest Namibia, where the rhino are spread over some two million hectares of arid, rugged and mountainous country. With the support of community game guards, SRT has tackled this problem by supplementing the low-tech classical approach with technological advances to build up 20 years' of monitoring data.

Since the early 1980s, monthly vehicle patrols - lasting up to three weeks - have monitored the Kunene and Erongo Regions. In the more inaccessible part of the range, camel teams are used. As rhino drink mainly at night, water points are visited early in the morning to locate

tracks, which are followed until the animal is found. Individual rhinoceros are identified by the sex of the animal, horn size and shape, or notches and natural marks on the margins of the ears. Rhino locations are recorded by trackers using a GPS unit. These data are imported into maps of the area to improve our understanding of rhino movement patterns, allowing us to prioritise suitable areas for protection. All this information is stored in a database, which profiles each rhino, its age, family tree and range area.

One of the strengths of the conservation programme in northwest Namibia has been the strong partnership formed across five sectors: central and local government; local communities and traditional authorities; and private conservation agencies such as SRT. Every five years, since 1991, these sectors have come together for a census of the rhino area. The entire range area is covered by foot, vehicle or camel over a nine-month period to update records of rhino identities, location of waterholes and other useful information.

The current census has been ongoing since August 2002. By December last

year, 93 rhino sightings had been recorded during 15,582km of driven search time, using an average of six vehicles each day. In addition, 465 middens were found, together with 317 springs and 76 temporary water points. One rhino mortality was recorded in the remote, northern-most extreme of the area. The animal had died about a year earlier, probably from natural causes. Horn shape matched a known rhino on the database; the teeth suggested the animal was 27-30 years old.

The research and monitoring programme of SRT is a practical conservation strategy, assisted by the active participation of the local communities, and backed by strong law enforcement from the MET. The recovery seen in rhino numbers since SRT's involvement in the mid 80s, together with that of other support NGOs, is testimony to the success of this approach. Our thanks go to Save the Rhino International, its supporters and dedicated staff for their efforts in ensuring this programme can continue.

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Save the Rhino International has made a three-year commitment of £73,000 to the Save the Rhino Trust in Namibia. This year's money goes towards the central team's patrol vehicle, staff wages and rations, maintenance of equipment such as GPS units and the camp, photography costs, some funding towards the administration of the rhino team, and a research and travel allowance.

