



Responsible tourism in Namibia's Kunene Region

At the coal face of black rhino conservation is the individual ranger. Over the last ten years, the activities of these men, and now women, have formed the foundation on which the successful recovery of Africa's rhino has been built.

Mike Hearn, Director of Research, Save the Rhino Trust

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Maintaining the tracking, recording, monitoring and protecting activities is essential. Complacency is quickly punished; its impact often undermining many years of diligence, and in some cases the lives, of rangers who have acquired an understanding of these animals' movements to the point where looking at the physical tracks is merely confirming what they already know. Call it, if you want, a sixth sense.

The black rhino of northwest Namibia is one of the only viable black rhino populations worldwide to have survived on communal land lacking any formal conservation status. Save the Rhino has supported SRT for many years now, and this has been essential in maintaining SRT's monitoring activities - both vehicle and camel-based patrols - covering some 2.5 million hectares of northwest Namibia.

Now, SRT, in partnership with Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) and community-based institutions, is exploring the potential for the expansion of the Kunene black rhino range into areas where they used to occur, prior to the heavy poaching in the 1970s. To ensure the long-term sustainability of SRT's achievements, this project aims to utilise local markets, such as tourism, to create incentives for local communities for black rhino conservation, contributing to improving

rural livelihoods and allowing rhinos to once again thrive. The tourism industry is now the second biggest contributor to Namibia's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and there is every potential for future growth.

"Responsible Tourism" is the name of the game. A refinement of the term "Eco-tourism", its goal is to see tourism revenues paid by the tourist feed back into the conservation of the region they visit. Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) and Wilderness Safaris in Namibia have formed a partnership that aims to meet some of the monitoring costs of black rhino conservation in the Kunene Region through just such a venture.

The Rhino Camp offers a unique opportunity for visiting guests. On flying into the north west, clients receive an introduction to SRT's work at the Rhino Centre, before a two-hour game drive into the private concession, home to 64% of Kunene's black rhino. Wilderness's resident guide, Chris Bakkes, who has worked in the area since 1995 before joining Wilderness Safaris, makes the experience all the more personal. On request, a senior member of SRT can join the safari to give more insight to the incredible success story of the black rhino programme, which saw numbers increase from only 50 in 1982, to well over 140 individuals now. Dinner

is served under the clear desert skies and the quiet night is broken only by the call of a jackal or passing hyena. The following morning, led by Wilderness guides and SRT trackers, guests spend the day driving through the 250-million-year-old lava foothills of the Etendeka mountain range, searching for the desert-dwelling black rhino.

The Camp has only been in operation since April, but it has already received excellent write-ups on how it successfully marries conservation and tourism. A central theme is observing these rhino with the minimum impact. The behavioural response of the rhino is recorded at each sighting, while the trackers fill in the ID forms SRT use to identify each animal. This monitors the response of rhinos to the tourism activities, ensuring that no negative impact on breeding arises.

For those who wish to get more information on the Rhino Camp partnership between SRT and Wilderness Safaris, please see the Wilderness Safaris' website:

www.wilderness-safaris.com

Save the Rhino has just given SRT £19,725, the third and final instalment of a three-year grant in support of the monitoring programme.