

## A night out on the lava flow

After a disheartening visit to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) offices in Nairobi, where I found an organisation leaderless, demotivated and desperately low in funds, I was now (November 2003) in the volcanic hills of the Chyulus to look for the recently rediscovered rhinos.

Due to the shortage of trained rangers in the wildlife service, the KWS team is supported by Richard Bonham's Mbirikani community game scouts. Richard had also arranged for two security men to be seconded from Lewa Downs Conservancy, to instruct them in the arts of rhino monitoring. Richard and I decided to spend a night out on patrol with them. It might be only 24 hours in their company, but it always proves to be a good way to learn how everyone is getting along. Co-operation will be crucial to the success of this joint operation with the KWS.

In a single line and guns at the ready we set out through what looked like impenetrable bush. Following a dry riverbed we wended our way into the heart of the Chyulu Hills. Keen to demonstrate what they had learnt, the Mbirikani scouts showed us rhino signs (old and very old unfortunately, but I was impressed by their enthusiasm). Our aim was to arrive by nightfall at the foot of a prominent hill, where a semi-permanent observation post might be built. After a few hours' walking we came out of the thick acacia bush and moved onto the gentle slopes at the foot of the hills. The foetid smell of buffalo hung in the air. By the number of fresh buffalo pats a huge herd must have recently moved through. Darkness was closing in and the next 20 minutes were spent choosing a suitable campsite.

My idea of a good campsite involves a clearing, preferably with a view and, if it is a hot night, in the wind. An African on the other hand is content in the most airless spot completely surrounded by bush. There is method in this: if you are out on patrol, it's wise to remain hidden



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from any poachers who might be in the area.

The world's smallest fire was made to brew some chai and, from the depths of someone's rucksack, a piece of rubbery meat was handed to me in the dark. I didn't dare turn my head torch on to look at it for fear of what it might be, but the next morning, after some enquiries, I found out it was a goat's tongue - the choicest cut had been saved for Richard and me. Almost immediately everyone started to prepare for bed. A night out under the stars in the wild is a special time and all through the night I could hear the movement of buffalo close by.

We were up and off again soon after dawn, and were honoured by the sight of a lioness and her two cubs that had been sitting watching our every move as we broke camp. The patrol today was through the densest thorn. Cumbersome rucksacks and a constant vigilance for buffalo ahead and lazy puff adders under foot made it tough going. I wondered if the impenetrability of the bush might save these rhino. I had some misgivings that our presence, albeit a deterrent to poachers, might make the once shy rhino more complacent? All the more

reason now to make sure that this partnership between the local Mbirikani scouts and the KWS works.

**David Stirling**, Project Advisor

In June 2003, Save the Rhino International and Chester Zoo each awarded grants of £15,000 pounds to the Chyulu Hills rhino programme, which was used to buy a Landrover and pay for fuel and maintenance, as well as salaries for four community scouts and tents, sleeping bags, rucksacks and ponchos, thanks to generous discounts and donations by Wynnster Outdoor Leisure. The International Rhino Foundation contributed US \$6,000 for radio communications equipment, as well as another US \$1,200 to pay for Lewa Downs' expertise. Finally, Save the Rhino delivered a further consignment of tents, sleeping mats and webbings to the Chyulus in February 2004.