

Catching the rays

As a small NGO in Namibia, our core tasks are to monitor the black rhino population throughout the Kunene Region, to carry out research for better biological management, and to build capacity in local communities by training them how to emulate the work we do. This all costs money, and although a small amount of funding travels a long way here in the field, our fundraising efforts are usually focused on helping to pay for our core activities. So when the chance arose to reduce some of these costs, we jumped at it.

Bernd Brell
Director of Field Operations
Save the Rhino Trust

Having worked to conserve the desert-adapted black rhino since 1982, Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) has long recognised the desirability of becoming less donor-dependent. To help address our annual funding concerns, we have diversified into many new economic ventures. Perhaps the most ambitious of all these was the opening of the new Rhino Centre at Palmwag in 2003. Along with becoming the administrative and logistical base for our field operations, the Centre has become a hub for many other different activities:

- Headquarters for the council of local community leaders ('indaba') giving the headmen and community groups a forum in which to engage in decision-making and strategy planning regarding conservation issues in the region
- Research centre, combining SRT's field research with that of Round River Conservation Studies. The collaborative work on human-induced disturbance is helping to ensure that future increases in tourism will not be to the detriment of the rhino population of the region
- Creating Wilderness Safaris Namibia ecotourism venture, through which clients accompany a team of SRT trackers within the core area. This initiative has proved successful so far, with 60% of the income from the scheme being used to support the Trust's anti-poaching and monitoring work.

However, the creation of such a hub created extra running costs that impacted upon SRT's long-term vision of becoming financially self-sufficient. Of particular concern was the Centre's reliance upon electricity supplied from the diesel generator at the nearby Wilderness Lodge, which, although relatively cheap at £70 per month, was neither reliable nor environmentally sustainable. With this unavoidable cost taking funds away from SRT's core anti-poaching, monitoring and community guard training work, it was clear that the ideal solution would be to provide a renewable energy system for Palmwag. However, although the provision of renewable energy at the Centre would in the long-term be self-sustaining, and also set a good example of environmental sustainability for the local community, the initial outlay of capital was prohibitively expensive for SRT.

Ironically, the vision of providing renewable energy to the Centre would perhaps have remained unrealised, were it not for the Namibian National Grid extending the electricity network to the Palmwag concession. As this extension of the grid was to be partially subsidised by SRT, this had the potential to increase substantially the ongoing costs of the Rhino Centre for SRT. Worse, there was no budget. Funds would have to be diverted from SRT's critical anti-poaching and community initiatives, with drastic consequences for both the rhino and human populations of the Kunene Region.

in response to this, in late 2007, with the support of Save the Rhino International, SRT embarked upon an ambitious project designed to source funding for an alternative energy scheme at the Rhino Centre in Palmwag. With the generous support of The Ashden Trust and the Desert Cycle 2007 team, SRT secured the £23,000 required to install the new system. These grants, made in memory of the much-loved Mike Hearn, conservationist and true friend of rhinos, allowed for the installation of energy efficient equipment and solar panels at the Rhino Centre.

It is therefore fantastic to report that, as of November 2008, the Rhino Centre at Palmwag is totally energy independent, saving the Trust significant amounts of money throughout the year. It is also hoped that as the system becomes more established, the Trust will be able to sell energy back to the national grid. The installation of this comprehensive renewable energy system means that the Rhino Centre is not only a cultural and economic hub, but can also proudly stand as a beacon of environmental good practice.

Thanks!

Our heartfelt thanks to the Trustees of The Ashden Trust, and to all the participants of Desert Cycle 2007, for making this project possible.

