

NEAR EXTINCT RHINO MAKE COMEBACK IN BOTSWANA

With rhinos having been declared extinct or near extinct twice in Botswana, there is real concern that this does not happen to its now growing population. Bordered by South Africa and Zimbabwe, where rhino poaching is currently at a high, Botswana's rhino professionals know that their monitoring and security must be at its most effective. This article examines the future for Botswana's rhinos.

In January 2005, the 'Conservation and Management Strategy for the White Rhinoceros and the Black Rhinoceros in Botswana' was published with all key government and private rhino organisations signatories to it. It gave a Vision for Botswana - "there will be a healthy population of black and White Rhinoceros in Botswana, in both unfenced rhino conservation areas and in fenced rhino sanctuaries that are well protected, managed and monitored". The strategy set a goal of "500 southern White Rhinos in 20 years" (2025) and committed the Department of Wildlife and National Parks to re-introducing Black Rhino.

Compare the goal with the results: Following a re-introduction programme initiated in 2001 augmenting the indigenous remnant population, there are now a little



Photos: © Felix Patton

Above: male White Rhino at dawn in Serwe Pan, Khama Rhino Sanctuary

over 100 White Rhinos and 7 Black Rhinos in Botswana (*see box below*).

Poaching remains the biggest threat in rhino conservation areas of Botswana. It has risen in South Africa and Zimbabwe and Botswana does not expect to be immune. The

country hosts many Chinese organisations and their staff working on large infrastructure projects and, as in many African countries, they offer a conduit for rhino horn to the large Asian market for traditional Chinese medicines.

The Mombo Rhino Project, a joint initiative of Wilderness Safaris, Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust, the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks and the Botswana government is monitoring 44 White and 4 Black Rhinos in the 4,871 Km² unfenced Moremi Game Reserve. Of these, 34 of the whites are on Chief's Island and 6 are located to the south west of Moremi. Two females walked over 200 Kms into Makgadikgadi National Park, settling near Kumaga. A male was moved to join them in June 2008 and met up with the females in September. A second male from Khama was due to be released to join them.

Khama Rhino Sanctuary is a 43 Km² area of Kalahari sandveldt enclosed by a 28 Km electric fence and located 25 Km from Serowe. It has a

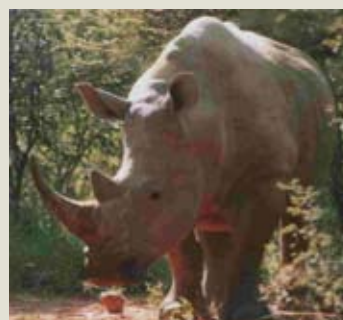
population of 33 white and 3 Black Rhinos. An additional 50 Km² has been allocated to expand the sanctuary and is being assessed for Black Rhino suitability.

Mokolodi Nature Reserve is a 50 Km² fenced rhino sanctuary close to Gaborone. It breeds White Rhinos for introduction to other areas. Three rhinos have been sent to Mombo and five to the Tuli Block in the east leaving 8 whites for further breeding.

In the Ghanzi District, north west Botswana, two private sanctuaries have White Rhinos – Tholo Farm (Edo's Camp) Kwalata each have six. Jwana Game Park, part of an area in the south owned by the government mining organisation Debswana, has three. There are five White Rhinos in the Tuli Block.



Above: Rangers with aerial locating Black Rhino in Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve



Left: Pearl, among the first white rhinos born in Mokolodi Nature Reserve

Government resources are, not unexpectedly, limited and rhinos roam huge, difficult to monitor areas especially in Moremi Game Reserve. Many of the staff employed are not rhino specialists and may be needed for other duties. In addition, a Trans-Frontier Conservation Area has been proposed for Shashe-Limpopo with 53% in South Africa, 19% in Zimbabwe and 28% in Botswana represented by the Northern Tuli Game Reserve. The 700 Km² Reserve was formed in the 1960's by thirty six adjacent farms which removed their fences to allow free movement of wildlife and there is no fence between it and Zimbabwe. With Mopane veld being the dominant vegetation, it offers ideal habitat for both black and White Rhinos. There are rhinos already in the South Africa section with four whites released in the Mapungubwe National Park and Black Rhinos in the Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve. Free movement of rhinos across country borders will challenge both protection and monitoring systems.

There is the potential to see between 10 and 20 Black Rhinos in Zimbabwe, either in regions where small isolated populations are under serious threat from poaching or private rhino conservancies that are presently over-crowded, and to

eventually translocate these animals to the Mashatu Game Reserve, part of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve, and southern Africa's largest private game reserve and the protected areas in the Okavango Delta. Houston Zoo, USA has joined with the International Rhino Foundation, working in conjunction with Wilderness Safaris, to support the return of Black Rhinos to Botswana, with a pledge of US \$100,000.

In order to face the challenges ahead, the private rhino sanctuaries formed a co-ordinating body – the Botswana Private Rhino Ranchers Association – in October 2008. In addition, the creation of a body to co-ordinate all rhino monitoring and research activity has been mooted with the dedicated full time staff and facilities necessary to create an annual plan of monitoring and to establish fully equipped Rapid Response Units in conjunction with current anti-poaching units. Rhino research projects on habitat, diet, range and so on would be co-ordinated and prioritised. It would maintain a national rhino data bank and facilitate the education of the people of Botswana in the need for rhino conservation. However, discussions are at an early stage.

National Parks and wildlife conservation areas cover 17% of Botswana and tourism, at 16%, is a

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major contributor to Gross Domestic Product, second only to the 45% of mining. Wildlife and particularly megafauna like rhino and elephants are essential for maintaining wildlife tourism in Botswana. The government remains committed to using the military power of the Botswana Defence Force for environmental security while the private sector remains committed to aiding the development of the rhino population. With such a strong relationship between the public and private sector, the future looks bright for the rhino in Botswana. ●



White rhino at dusk moving to water at Malema's Pan, Khama Rhino Sanctuary

Up until the middle of the nineteenth century there were both black and White Rhinos in Botswana. By 1895 the southern White Rhinoceros species was extinct in Botswana and most of southern Africa with only between 20 and 50 surviving.

In 1967 a rhino re-introduction programme was started with four white individuals translocated from Natal. Then between 1974 and 1981, a further 71 individuals were introduced into Chobe National Park and 19 into Moremi Game Reserve – both areas in northern Botswana.

By 1984 there were 190 white and 10 Black Rhinos in Botswana. However, during the 1980's there was a major poaching threat to the country's megafauna – principally elephants but also rhinos. It came from organised gangs of foreigners operating in small groups of less than a dozen men but up to 30 who were well armed, skilful in the field, had excellent information as to the whereabouts of anti-poaching patrols and were able to employ anti-tracking measures and ambushes. These foreign gangs were feared by the local community.

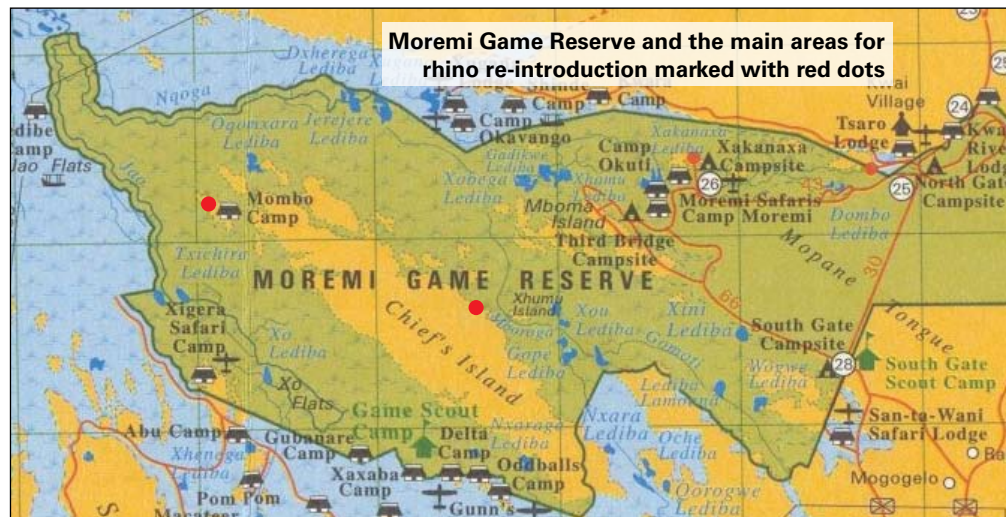
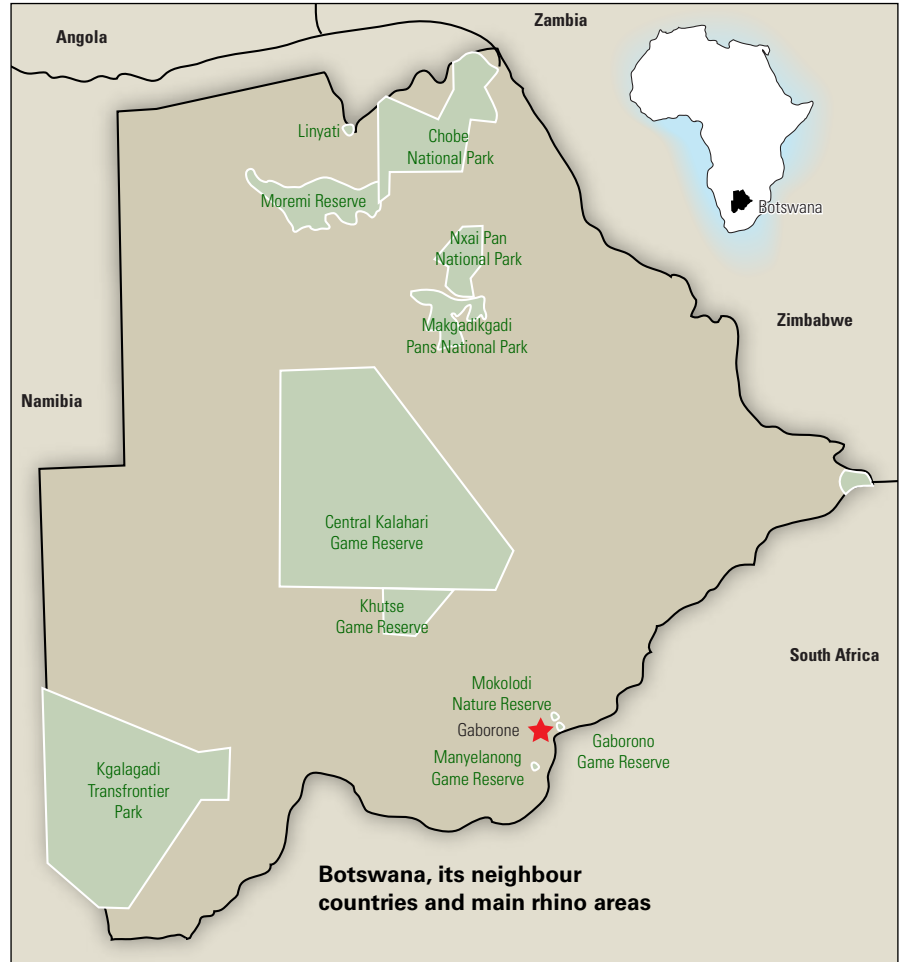
To counter these highly professional poaching gangs, in 1987 the government agreed to use units of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF), the military (army and airforce) which had been established in 1977. Most of the poaching was on land close to the 400 miles of northern borders and in the Okavango Delta – a huge 80,000 square miles of difficult terrain with good cover to patrol.

Initially the Commando Squadron, the special forces with skilled bush trackers, was used. In later years other units were introduced as the anti-poaching work was seen as a good opportunity for training in patrolling and ambush techniques. Apart from the threat from the poachers, the 400 to 600 troops employed each year had to contend with the dangers from the very animals they were protecting so underwent specialist wildlife related training. This embedded a strong conservationist ethic in the BDF.

Despite the BDF running a very successful anti-poaching operation, poaching could not be contained and by 1995 there were only 20 white and no Black Rhinos left in Botswana – for the second time rhinos were on the brink of extinction.

While the Department of Wildlife and the BDF were working on anti-poaching, the government decided to relocate the remaining wild rhinos into fenced sanctuaries in order to build up the population while open areas were secured for future releases. In 1992 a national strategy of government-private partnerships was established which led to the opening of the Khama Rhino Sanctuary, a community trust, in 1993 and the privately owned Mokolodi Game Reserve in 1994.

Khama was stocked with four rhinos from Chobe National Park and three from Moremi Game Reserve then later in 1995 and 1998 eight more were introduced from the North West



Parks Board, South Africa – five and three respectively. Mokolodi was stocked with rhinos introduced by purchase and donations from the Natal Parks Board in South Africa.

In 2001, the Mombo Rhino Project was started - over a two year period 32 White Rhinos were introduced into the Mombo area of Chief's Island in the Moremi Game Reserve of which 22 were the result of a 'rhino for roan' swap deal with South Africa. Seven did not survive – five died in the introduction process and two moved close to human settlement and were poached. A further six moved over 200

Kms out of the Reserve. In 2003, four Black Rhinos were introduced.

By 2007 the Mombo Rhino Project was mainly concentrated on monitoring rhino movements but many had moved off Chief's Island and the radio transmitters fitted on initial translocation had ended their life and replacements were needed. New transmitters were fitted to 7 white and 1 Black Rhino and a second vehicle purchased enabling more area to be covered including those near to communities where some rhinos had moved to and which were under threat. ●