

Corned beef and rhino capers

After several weeks in Save the Rhino Trust's (SRT) office in Swakopmund, Namibia, I had filed rhinos, catalogued pictures of rhinos and written about rhinos in every possible way, but had yet to see one in real life. It was therefore with unusual enthusiasm (given the early start) that we packed up the Landcruiser and headed north to my first taste of the wilderness: Ugab base camp.

Hannah Grist
Michael Hearn Intern 2007-8

The Ugab River forms the southern border of the huge 25,000km² of rocky desert that is the patrolling ground of SRT. It was only after driving several hours across boulders at a 45° incline without seeing another soul, that I not only began to appreciate the expertise of my driver, Director of Field Operations Bernd Brell, but also the real on-the-ground challenges of working in this brutally inhospitable terrain. The next day was spent reaching our final destination, the arid mountains of the Palmwag concession in the north-western corner of the country. Here I met the team of four trackers who were to accompany Bernd and me on a tracking patrol, part of the five-year census efforts to see and identify every rhino in the area.

The next ten days were spent camping in the depths of the mountains, armed with little more than a bedding roll and a kettle. Each day we were up at dawn, and after the all-important first cup of tea, piled into a 4WD vehicle to trundle across to nearby waterholes, the most likely place to pick up signs of rhino. Rhino "spoor," or tracks, are the most obvious pointers, and ones that even I could learn to spot. However, the skill of the team in finding broken branches, displaced rocks and barely visible tracks was staggering, particularly as they could follow these signs for many miles across a landscape composed of rocks and scrub bushes, without ever breaking their incredible pace.

Despite this, my first official rhino sighting on the second day was unexpected. After spending hours following tracks that meandered up and down a fence, we finally lost the trail and decided to head deeper into the area by vehicle to try to pick up fresher spoor. We were bouncing up and down along the track when suddenly one of the trackers gave a shout that he had spotted something. With help and a decent pair of binoculars, it still took me a minute



Below:
Marking Rhino ID Card



Left:
Hannah Grist
Above:
SRT Tracking team

to be able to discern an oddly shaped bush in the distance, moving very slowly: my first rhino.

Even with the phenomenal skills of the trackers, finding rhinos in such a huge area is not an easy task. They move during the mornings, and then have a long midday siesta when finding them is virtually impossible. After about three o'clock the rhinos are up and on the move again,

Grants

We have been able to send over lots of grants to SRT recently: £7,358 to pay for the running costs of Lesley Karutjaiva's vehicle. Fuel prices have risen dramatically in Namibia over the last few months and budgeting ahead is proving challenging. £6,168 of this came from the proceeds of the Rhino Cycle Namibia in 2007, while the rest came from private donations from John West, Alex Wood and Lucy Holmes, and others. £25,000 for an alternative energy scheme at Palmwag, involving solar panels and grey-water recycling, paid for by the Ashden Trust and the Desert Cycle 2007 team, in memory of Mike Hearn (1972-2005). £3,000 from the Desert Cycle 2008 team for a new gearbox for Rudi Loutit's vehicle. £5,000 from the Desert Cycle 2008 team for (the rising) fuel costs associated with the completion of the five-year census. We have just received a grant of \$39,951 from USFWS to buy a new vehicle for Lesley Karutjaiva, head of one of the other tracker teams. We would like to thank very much indeed all the donors and cyclists, who have made these grants possible.

and if we did not find a fresh trail by 4pm or so, it would be time to head slowly back towards base camp. (Although teams have been known to follow a trail for so many miles that they have to walk several hours back to the vehicle in the dark; a challenge I am glad I didn't have to face on such treacherous terrain.) Despite their heavy appearance, rhinos nimbly pick their way up the mountainsides and easily outpaced us.

The experience of being out and walking from dawn until dusk and spending the nights under the huge starry expanse of African sky is one that the most expensive health spas would be hard-pushed to replicate. You achieve a zen-like calm that not even the prospect of the daily corned beef ration can perturb. Even more than this, you have the knowledge of a job well done. Since SRT began working in the area, the rhino numbers have nearly tripled and the incidence of poaching is now almost non-existent. Coming back to Gathwick Airport, with the noise and intrusiveness of a big city, I couldn't help feeling that there are worse ways to make a living.

Thanks

I am really grateful to the Linbury Trust, which has funded the Michael Hearn Internship Programme, together with additional support from the Ashden Charitable Trust, the JJ Charitable Trust and the Mark Leonard Trust. This has been a wonderful year.

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Cool stuff in Namibia

Grant Cole
Nephew of Trustee Christina Franco



CHRISTINA FRANCO

Bernd, Fly (on truck), Grant, Alex and Michelle

This summer my brother, Alex, my mum and I went to Namibia and met up with our Auntie Christina. We got to experience a lot of cool stuff in Africa. It took us over 30 hours to fly there from where we live in Boise, Idaho. After many hours in the car we arrived at the Save the Rhino camp, where we stayed the first night. That night we went for a walk with Bernd and his dog, Shamira. She chased after a pack of baboons, which is not very smart because baboons can be really dangerous.

The next morning we drove in Bernd's car for several hours on our way to a campsite in the middle of nowhere. We weren't even on a real road! One time Bernd had to get out and cut away at some bushes with a panga so that we could get through. On the way Bernd and Fly kept stopping to look at rhino tracks and dung. Thanks to their great tracking we were able to see a rhino! And she was pregnant! It was really neat to see a real, live rhino so close! But once we found her we were stuck in that spot for a long time. We couldn't drive past her because Bernd didn't want her to get scared by the cars and run off in the wrong direction.

It was cool to see how SRT works to keep track of the rhinos. We were so lucky to be with them. This was the trip of a lifetime.