

Tanzania:

Thank you from the **Selous Rhino Trust**

The Selous Rhino Project, a 15-year collaboration between the Selous Rhino Trust and the Wildlife Division of the Government of Tanzania, has very sadly come to an end.

John Corse
Selous Rhino Trust

In September 1994, Richard Bonham (now Chairman of the Maasailand Preservation Trust) came across a set of rhino spoor deep in the Selous Game Reserve, Tanzania. Not a particularly gobsmacking statement on the face of it but if you had been a follower of all things rhino in those days you would have quickly sat up. It had been thought that there were no rhinos left in the Selous; rather that, in a frenzy in the 1970s and '80s, they had been poached to extinction.

The problem was that this particular spoor was overlaid with the spoor of men, a sure sign that the rhino was being tracked by poachers. So Richard and my sister Lizzy set up the Selous Rhino Project in collaboration with the Wildlife Division, which allocated 12 of their most experienced rangers to the project.

So what happened over the next 14 years? No signs of rhino poaching were found; the project gained the support of eminent and well respected organisations, from your own Save the Rhino International, to the European Union, to the African Rhino

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Specialist Group and many others across the globe; my sister died; my brother-in-law, Bimb and I took over; we employed more and more experienced experts; we encountered no dead rhinos; we started finding, photographing and identifying individual rhino; we surveyed the northern Selous in detail; we surveyed likely rhino areas in the wider Selous; we assisted in the location and interception of fish and meat poachers; we started producing credible population data and files on what became 16 known individual rhinos, including young of various ages - they were breeding; we still found no signs of rhino poaching; tourists started seeing and photographing rhinos, all was progressing well and the collaboration that was the project seemed to be a success.

Lately, however, the project began to record a significant increase in poaching. Dead hippos, lion, hyena, crocodile and vultures were found on the banks of the Rufiji River and nearby lakes. Increasing evidence of elephant poaching for ivory was recorded, complemented by a twofold increase in recorded poacher interception by rangers. Then, during 2009 our previously excellent support from the Wildlife Division dried up. The project has since been unable to operate.

At the same time, Tanzania applied to CITES to trade a limited amount (98 tonnes) of ivory, and to downlist elephants from Appendix I to Appendix II, with the aim of allowing more trade in elephant products. Excellent elephant conservation was cited in support of the application but the latest elephant census data is not available, and there is clear evidence that poaching is on the increase and not being well-controlled in game reserves (although it seems much less of a problem in national parks).

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One can only wonder at the motives and thinking that have created this scenario: increased poaching juxtaposed with an intention to make ivory more available, juxtaposed with the withdrawal of support for this rhino protection and monitoring project. And all this at a time when safari tourism has been hammered by the global economic crisis. It is a sad scenario, but for one piece of good news: it seems that with all the facts at hand, a number of influential nations will not be supporting the Tanzanian Government's application to CITES.

I hope that my sister, Lizzy would be proud of the achievements that the Selous Rhino Project made when it had the freedom to operate effectively. I hope that one day there will be an opportunity to focus once more on rhino in the Selous. I hope that opportunity comes before it is too late.

We would like to thank everyone at Save the Rhino, and all its supporters, for all their efforts on behalf of the Selous' rhinos.

Save the Rhino comments:

We are completely dismayed by the restrictions that were placed on the Selous Rhino Trust by the Tanzanian Wildlife Division, making it impossible for the Trust to carry out its aerial patrols. All the hard work by Fraser and Kes Smith, and before them by Friedrich Alpers, made possible with the incalculable support provided by Nomad Tanzania and international donors (including Save the Rhino, Chester Zoo, Tusk Trust, IRF and USFWS), has been brought to a standstill. Even if Tanzania's CITES application is rejected, and the Trust is invited to resume its rhino monitoring work, there is no guarantee that senior staff and funding will still be available. The future of the Selous's population of some 20+ rhinos is of grave concern.

