

Laikipia's rhino sanctuaries – today's challenges

There are eight private rhino sanctuaries in Laikipia hosting 49% of the Kenyan black rhino population and 70% of the white rhino population, including the recently established breeding programme for the Northern white rhino.

Laikipia hosts the largest population of rhino in East and Central Africa, but the increase in rhino poaching seen in 2009 took its toll: between January 2008 and February 2010 seven black rhino and seven white rhino in Laikipia were killed for their horns. The challenges facing the rhino sanctuaries in Laikipia are significant.



Geoffrey Chege

Chairman
Association of Private Land Rhino Sanctuaries

The proliferation of illegal automatic firearms in the region and adjacent areas in the north of Kenya is a significant threat.

Pastoralist communities have become heavily armed to protect themselves against perpetual ethnic conflicts, cattle rustling and banditry. These automatic weapons are also used to kill wildlife, including rhinos. This is a serious challenge for most rhino sanctuaries in the area, which are not permitted to have automatic weapons. More recently, there has also been resurgence in the use of poisoned arrows and spears: a silent killer that takes down a rhino in ten minutes.

None of the rhino sanctuaries in Laikipia receives support from the Kenyan government towards their operations; instead they rely on income from tourism or private donations, but these sources of funding are fickle. Following the post-election violence in 2008, when very few tourists visited Kenya for more than a year, and the more recent global financial crisis, tourism and private donations have dropped significantly. At the same time, the

motivation to kill rhinos for their horns is increasing as evidenced by the £5,000 equivalent of cash found in a vehicle linked to a rhino killing at Christmas 2009 in Laikipia. This cash was for local payments; clearly the ultimate value of the horn is significantly more.

All these challenges are set against a very weak legal system in Kenya. Very lenient sentences are often given, usually a fine of the equivalent of £300 or less, and it is not uncommon that no prosecution is made because prosecuting officers and magistrates do not appreciate the seriousness of the crime.

So, what are the Laikipia rhino sanctuaries doing about the situation? The immediate work has been: to increase the frequency and intensity of ground patrols, to put in place additional listening outposts for rapid responses and to increase collaboration with, and gain greater support from, the Kenya Wildlife Service and Kenya Police, notably to enable the sanctuaries to recruit and train Kenya Police Reserve personnel who are permitted to use more effective

Anthony King

Executive Director
Laikipia Wildlife Forum

weapons. Informer networks and intelligence gathering are also being increased to enable the sanctuaries to be better informed and prepared. In addition, there has been increased use of light aircraft on patrols and reconnaissance and highly trained tracker dogs have been used to follow-up on any incidents.

More broadly, rhino sanctuaries have begun to increase awareness amongst the judiciary and police about the plight of the rhino and the seriousness of the situation, and plans are in place to increase awareness to the wider public. These actions mean higher short term costs but, at this time, there is no choice if the rhinos in Laikipia's sanctuaries are to continue to exist.

“
...and spears: a silent killer that takes down a rhino in ten minutes.
”

DEMETRIO CARRASCO

