

Looking for Rhinos

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AWF has supported rhino conservation efforts since 1979. Recently AWF's Mark R. Stanley Price, director of African operations, and Philip Muruthi, coordinator of the Species and Ecosystems program, visited two rhino projects in Kenya's Tsavo National Park and found out for themselves the rewards and rigors of rhino monitoring. Following are excerpts from Stanley Price's report.

By Mark R. Stanley Price

Our first destination was "Oliver's camp," which lies on a natural water line, a vivid gash of green in an otherwise parched landscape in Tsavo East.

The camp, run by assistant park warden Oliver Munyambo, has thus far released about 30 rhinos into the wild.

By 6:30 in the morning, Philip and I were ready to go on foot to find a rhino. We were keen to see how monitoring is done without radio tracking. (Most of the rhinos have had radios inserted into their horns so they can be tracked for the first few months after release, the critical period of adjustment before settling into a home range.) Rhino safety is a challenge at Tsavo--the animals are prized by people who poach them for their horns.

With budget cuts paring Munyambos's staff down from nine to six people, it's a struggle to balance the needs for leave, area security and rhino monitoring. AWF is concerned about these matters--we have long supported Kenya's program to restore a wild, unconfined population of rhinos after the poaching of the 1980s, the first such effort on the continent.

Philip and I set off with Munyambo and ranger Christopher Ruto, who wore camouflage uniforms and carried automatic rifles. We frequently came across rhino footprints--Oliver and Ruto examined each set, determining which rhino had probably made the prints and what it was doing at the time. Their deep knowledge of the area and the rhinos was immediately apparent.

Despite the hot sun on our backs, we spent a wonderful three hours patrolling. We came across tracks that indicated the presence of a courting pair--an exciting deduction, but we couldn't find the animals. On our way back to camp we spotted a rhino named Maria by a road. Always approachable, she was aware of us as we climbed an anthill to watch her a few yards away. Even though Maria is free and in the wild, she still visits the camp area almost daily.

The 30 rhinos in this population range over an area of 680 square miles, a large area for six rangers to cover, but Munyambo tries to spread out efforts accordingly. Although some monitoring is done in vehicles, rangers patrol on foot as well. Munyambo is convinced that if illegal outsiders see ranger boot prints, they will move out of the area.

Our next destination was the Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary in Tsavo West that assistant warden

Richard Kech oversees. AWF has been involved with the sanctuary since 1987, when it covered less than half a square mile, the same area that in 1960s had the highest rhino density ever recorded. Ngulia grew progressively larger, to over 25 square miles today. AWF paid for half of the final expansion and contributed to, staff housing, equipment and fence maintenance--a constant chore. The beautifully kept Ngulia camp sits beneath the Ndawe escarpment and in the brooding presence of the Ngulia hills. We spent the night at the Ngulia Lodge, which sends minibuses of tourists every day into the sanctuary to see rhino as well as lesser kudu, giraffe, buffalo and elephant. The larger animals go in and out of the sanctuary, stepping easily over the 4½-foot fence, but the rhinos rarely try to cross the barrier.

Ngulia presents some interesting challenges to counting the rhinos. The animals are confined, so it's clear they are in the sanctuary. But how many? The number of rhinos moved into the sanctuary is known, as are deaths and births, which are detected from tracks. But as calves grow up, it's easy to confuse them unless each is seen with a known mother.

On the other hand, the rhinos drink every day or two at one of Ngulia's three water holes. Each year, between August and October, when the skies are clear, Kech organizes an all-night watch at each water hole over three nights. Using cameras with powerful flashes, the rangers try to photograph each rhino emerging from the water and identify animals that don't have ear notches by the shape of their horns.

We asked Kech if we could monitor on foot instead of by vehicle. He seemed somewhat reluctant, but he and three others, all armed with automatics, set out with us. Philip and I were in the middle of the file, with a very capable corporal bringing up the rear. We disappeared into the thickest bush I have seen. As we proceeded, we made noise to alert any sleeping animals before we got too close. Twice we remained motionless to an upraised hand from our leader and heard a large, heavy animal galloping off. One was a buffalo, the other a giraffe.

When we emerged scratched and hot from this tangle three hours later, we had a very good impression of how difficult it is to count the rhinos in this small patch of Tsavo, just 25 out of 7,700 square miles. Our short stay in Tsavo gave us a healthy respect for the conditions under which Oliver Munyambo, Richard Kech and their men must operate. Maintaining morale to protect the rhino areas cannot be easy, especially with declining budgets. Ngulia's staff has also been reduced, from 26 to nine. Inevitably, the standard of overall security for the area around the sanctuary is jeopardized. Given the effort it takes to secure the vast areas of Tsavo in the face of man-made and ecological challenges, AWF hopes to help as much as we can.