

ADVENTURES IN NAMIBIA

As the sixth Michael Hearn Intern at Save the Rhino International, I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend a month working with Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) in Namibia. The month of excitement and first-hand experience really brought my rhino world to life.

Katherine Ellis | Office and Communications Manager

“ **A**s I enthusiastically flicked through my *Mammal Guide of Southern Africa*, I was immediately drawn to the rhino section. A black rhino was described as follows:

'These animals are usually solitary, they are sometimes moody, can be very aggressive when disturbed and charge blindly with minimal provocation.'

I began to wonder what I had let myself in for. However, the reality is that even a one-tonne charging rhino has no protection against a vicious poacher armed with a gun. The critically endangered population of Namibian black rhino was decimated during the early 1980s, but fortunately SRT was established to protect the black rhino resulting in a population that has quadrupled in size since 1982 in a steady recovery of the Kunene Region's population.

My month with SRT began in its head office in the delightful coastal town of Swakopmund. I quickly became

familiar with the quirky characteristics of the office; the hefty metal security gate, the coating of sand after many sandstorms during the seasonal 'east-winds' and the interesting neighbours in the adjacent snake park. During my

time in the office, I helped out on grant reports, communications, the picture library and vehicle data entry along with various other administrative tasks.

I also had two opportunities to spend time with staff in the field. First I travelled to Palmwag in the north-west of the country with Sue Wagner (SRT's Fundraising and Communications Manager) and Simson-Uri Khob (Director of Community Outreach and Training). Also with us was Anne Hearn (Mike Hearn's mother), who had travelled out to Namibia for what would have been Mike's fortieth birthday. The Michael Hearn Internship was set up seven years ago following his untimely death in Namibia.

The journey to the field was magnificent; I can truly say I have never experienced such vast openness and wilderness.

Grants

In 2012, we have sent over a series of grants to SRT: \$90,000 from Save Our Species and US \$78,565 from USFWS RCTF for its Field patrolling and monitoring programme; £5,000 from our own core funds for the same programme; and £1,325 from core funds for special rhino operations. Our very grateful thanks to all our donors.

The scenery changed dramatically from flat coastal plains to the rugged desert Kunene Region. During our drive, endless rocky outcrops popped up on the horizon and we were soon fully immersed in the mountainous landscape.

Simson was determined to show us a rhino on our first full day in the field. Whereas I think a two-hour car journey in England is long, I soon became accustomed to Namibian-style driving, where nothing is thought of spending eight hours solid on an incredibly bumpy desert 4x4 track. As I scanned the horizon from the back of the jeep (or 'bakkie' as I should say in Namlish), every grey rock and tree stump started to resemble a lone rhino. After several hours, finding a rhino seemed like looking for a needle in a haystack and, as midday approached I resigned myself to the fact that today would not be a rhino day. Then all of a sudden Simson spotted a black rhino far away in the distance. Simson took notes and photos of the individual; a truly remarkable experience.

Later that weekend, on 27 May, we gathered with local field staff and Mike's friends at his grave in a picturesque

Below: Friends and SRT staff gathered with Anne Hearn for graveside drinks in memory of Mike



“ **I quickly became familiar with the interesting neighbours living in the adjacent snake park...** ”



“ It'ssssss... me again! ”



Detailed information is collected on each rhino spotted by the trackers

*Yep - I'm still hiding from those school visits: see page 12, *The Horn Spring 11*

desert setting for sunset drinks and traditional songs to celebrate his life and remember a truly fantastic rhino conservationist.

I spent much of my time in the field assisting SRT's Director of Research and Evaluation, Jeff Muntifer, with his research into using rhino tourism as a conservation tool. The main issue with protecting rhinos is that it requires huge sums to pay for the salaries, training and equipment of the rangers. SRT is hoping to increase its involvement with local communities, by training locals to become responsible rhino tourism guides, creating employment and generating funds for rhino conservation. I spent several days interviewing tourists to gather their opinions on rhino tourism, to assess the demand and gather data on how much tourists are willing to pay to see rhinos. The research is significant and will assist in shaping tourism policy.

My second trip to the field was to Ugab base camp with Bernd Brell (Director of Field Operations). I spent four unforgettable days with one of SRT's rhino tracking teams, who work incredibly hard, with long days in the field often from dawn till dusk. The field teams provide valuable anti-

poaching and monitoring information on the Region's black rhino. They report on black rhino numbers and distribution and compile data forms on each rhino sighting.

Two weeks before my arrival at Ugab, Bernd had seen a lion in the camp. To my amazement, early one morning we had call from Dr Flip Stander of the Desert Lion Project to say he had darted the lion nearby. Flip monitors the Region's desert lion population to collect ecological and behavioural data as well as monitoring human-wildlife conflict. I was shortly in the presence of a huge anaesthetised lion, helping to monitor breathing and taking other measurements. This unforgettable experience showed me how conservationists are successfully working together in the remote field environment.

My days in the field consisted of early starts travelling into the rhino range with three field staff, Bernd and his trusty companion Tula (his dog). The aim was to travel to several

remote areas to search for rhino that had not been seen in several months. Some of the tracks we drove on were unbelievable, with one vertical mountain track appropriately named 'Divorce Pass' in honour of couples arguing while driving up or down it.

Then it was up to the field staff to search for rhino tracks. These guys have the most amazing eagle eyesight; they are able to distinguish rhino footprints amongst the sand and rocks and assess how fresh they are, along with the direction the rhino was travelling.

Once we spotted recent tracks, we then proceeded to track the rhino on foot. Now I thought that I walked fast, but the trackers scrambled over rocks with lightning speed. My first two rhino sightings were fantastic, a rhino quietly walking in the distance and another resting by a bush. The rangers are able to identify most individuals immediately. They also take photos and fill in a rhino ID form with important information including age, sex, ear notches, horn size and shape, tail shape, condition of animal, along with the time, GPS position and proximity of rhino sighting.

During my last two days at Ugab, Bernd started a week-long joint security exercise with NamPol (Namibian Police)'s Special Field Forces Unit. Several members of staff had travelled to the field in a collaborative effort to step up security to counter possible rhino poaching.

So after six black rhino, several flat tyres, long days on the road, numerous spiders in my bed, bumpy roads and some truly dedicated field staff, I can now say I have experienced the field and have gained a much deeper understanding of rhino conservation. The trip was a real eye opener and highlighted the extreme challenges faced by those working on the ground to conserve these magnificent animals.

I would like to say a huge thank you to Sue, Jeff, Simson, Bernd and all the other SRT staff who made this wonderful trip possible.

Namibia,
I will be back.



Apparently lion's feet smell quite nice!



SRT

ALL IMAGES SRT UNLESS NOTED

Top: Trackers searching for rhino
Middle: Anne, Simson and Katherine
Right: Trackers investigating rhino dung for clues

