

Swaziland and its wildlife

The landlocked Kingdom of Swaziland sits to the north east of South Africa, sharing three-quarters of its borders with the country. Cross the borders to the east, and you will reach Mozambique. Today it is home to both black and white rhino. But history has not always been kind to wildlife in the country.

Laura Adams | Events Manager

The human story in Swaziland stretches back to our very first ancestors. Over the centuries, the land has seen waves of different settlers; the first San hunters, then Bantu migrants from central Africa. The Afrikaners and British soon took a keen interest and over the years other migrants, such as the Shangaan and Portuguese, have settled here. The country was under British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and remained a protectorate until 1968. Since the late 1800s Swaziland has been ruled independently by a King. King Mswati III has ruled since 1986 alongside his mother, the Queen Mother or Indlovukazi, governing one of the most peaceful countries of the region.

Despite unprecedented levels of poaching, Swaziland has only lost two rhinos to poaching since 1992

Today Swaziland has six proclaimed protected areas for wildlife. Big Game Parks



looks after three reserves. Although privately owned, money generated goes back into developing the spaces for wildlife and conservation management. Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary located in the Ezulwini Valley was the first Big Game Park to be established, and is Swaziland's oldest protected area. Big Game Parks also manages Hlane Royal National Park, comprising 22,000 hectares of bushveld and the smaller Mkhaya Game Reserve. Both Hlane and Mkhaya provide a home to lion, elephant, rhino, hippo, giraffe, as well as different species of antelope such as nyala, impala and eland, many of which are also found at Mlilwane.

Wildlife in Swaziland has always been highly valued amongst royalty due to its place in royal rituals and its symbolic association to the King and Queen. In recent times, pressure was exerted on all species by settlers for the ever-expanding need for development and agricultural land. In the 1950s, giant herds of wildebeest were exterminated. Seen as pests and reserves of disease, they were poisoned and killed by machine guns. Species were systematically exterminated and most became locally extinct.

The history of the three Big Game Parks is one of determination and dedication to protect the country's wildlife. In the 1960s, Ted Reilly, the pioneer of wildlife conservation in Swaziland, set up Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary by converting land he inherited that was once farmed and mined, donating it to a non-profit making trust. Over time, a huge variety of species were brought to live in the Sanctuary, including the first rhinos reintroduced to the park from Zululand (before later being moved to the other reserves that contain better grazing for rhino). With the support of the King, more land was made available for wildlife and Big Game Parks was entrusted with the management of the Hlane Royal National Park. The family also bought and converted the land that is now Mkhaya Game Reserve from commercial cattle-ranching operations.

Today, wildlife numbers including re-introduced white and black rhino continue to grow. But there are challenges ahead. Poaching is a daily threat to staff and wildlife, with rangers risking their lives every day. The control of invasive species and human land encroachment also remain a threat. Despite many challenges over the past 50 years, Big Game Parks has grown into a real conservation success story, providing local employment, education, tourism facilities, and a sanctuary for wildlife.

Despite the odds, Swaziland has an enviable rhino conservation record. The country lost 80% of the rhino population to poaching in 1988-92, but the rampant slaughter was brought to a sudden stop with well-publicised law enforcement actions, the introduction of preventative anti-poaching legislation and unwavering support from the Head of State.

Today, in the face of unprecedented levels of rhino poaching in neighbouring South Africa and with rhinos having recently gone extinct in Mozambique for the third time, Swaziland has lost only two rhinos to poaching since 1992. Both of these were poached in 2011 by the same South African gang. While there will undoubtedly be further poaching attempts, it appears that zero-tolerance law-enforcement, strong political will and dedicated field staff give Swaziland's rhinos a good chance of surviving the current poaching tsunami.

Thanks

We would like to thank *Sporting Rifle* magazine for its grant of £4,755 to Big Game Parks, which has been used to pay for bicycles for the patrol teams and for ceramic plates for bullet-proof vests.



Laura's visit to Swaziland



In September 2013, Save the Rhino sent me to Swaziland to spend two weeks working with the team at Big Game Parks. My partner paid his own way to come with me, and used his design, IT and website skills to develop BGP's digital and online work.

This was my first visit to a field programme since my travel to Namibia, to work with Save the Rhino Trust, as part of my Michael Hearn Internship back in May 2010. We visited Big Game Parks for two weeks. During this time we worked on administration tasks and marketing, whilst learning more about the Parks' conservation activities.

Rhino poaching has grown to incredibly high levels in nearby Kruger NP. Swaziland has successfully fought against the surge of rhino poaching in recent years. The skulls of poached rhinos from previous decades are a reminder of the constant threat. *(Top left)*

Big Game Parks employs rangers who are active 24 hours a day. A recent grant from Save the Rhino and *Sporting Rifle* bought bulletproof vests and new bicycles for the rangers to use out on patrol. *(Top right)*

During our second week game capture was taking place at Hlane Royal National Park. There are currently too many wildebeest living in the Park and it is important to keep a balance of all species. *(Right)*

Tourism plays an important role as income goes towards protecting the rhinos and other wildlife of the parks. We stayed at all three of BGP's wildlife reserves, including Mlilwane camp. *(Right)*

