

Spirit of Enterprise

The 1987 Rolex Awards

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Conserving the desert-dwelling elephant and rhino by involving the local tribal communities

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The elephant and black rhino of the Kaokoveld in north-western Namibia are exceptional because they spend much, if not all, of their lives in the Namib desert, where the rainfall averages less than 150 mm per annum. In order to survive in this extremely arid environment, they have made behavioural and perhaps physiological adaptations and have acquired intimate knowledge of the food and water resources within their home range which is passed on from generation to generation. Thus it is extremely unlikely that, if the present desert-dwelling elephants and rhinos were exterminated, they could be replaced by the translocation of animals from other areas.

The whole of the Kaokoveld was proclaimed a game reserve in 1907 and remained as such until 1970, when the South African Administration deproclaimed all but a thin strip along the coast in order to create tribal homelands for the Herero and Damara people.

Having lived in and been administratively responsible for the agriculture of the Kaokoveld, I am convinced that the arid western parts of the region are ecologically unique and this, coupled with the spectacular desert scenery and the fact that it is very marginal for human settlement, give it the potential to be one of Africa's finest and most important national parks. After the Kaokoveld's deproclamation, I therefore recommended that the western parts of the region retain their conservation status and be incorporated into the adjoining Skeleton Coast Park to provide a sanctuary for the desert-dwelling elephant and rhino and other large mammals. These subsequent pleas by myself and leading conservationists were ignored by the South African authorities.

While I was resident in the Kaokoveld, I developed a close association with its tribal peoples and was particularly impressed by their generally harmonious relationship with potentially dangerous species such as elephant and rhino. Other game species were only hunted when the people were in need or, in the case of predators, when they threatened livestock.

In the Kaokoveld, as in other parts of Africa, large-scale illegal hunting for ivory and rhino horn took place during the 1970s and, by the end of the decade, there was a flourishing black market trade out of Southern Africa. This was a

great temptation to the local inhabitants whose pastoral economy had been undermined by the worst drought on record, and as a result, by 1981, the desert-dwelling elephant and rhino of the Kaokoveld were well on the road to extinction. Realizing this, the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources gave the Kaokoveld populations of both species their top priority for conservation.

However, in 1982, when I returned to the Kaokoveld as the field officer for the Kaokoland/Damaraland Desert Project of the Namibia Wildlife Trust (a non-government conservation organization set up to assist the State authorities in their fight against illegal hunting), the Namibian authorities still had stationed only a single officer, Chris Eyre, with one assistant in the region. The situation I found was catastrophic. Fewer than 300 elephants and 60 rhino had survived in the entire region, and almost all other big game populations had also been decimated by drought and uncontrolled hunting. Unless something was done about the situation fast, the Kaokoveld's magnificent wildlife was doomed.

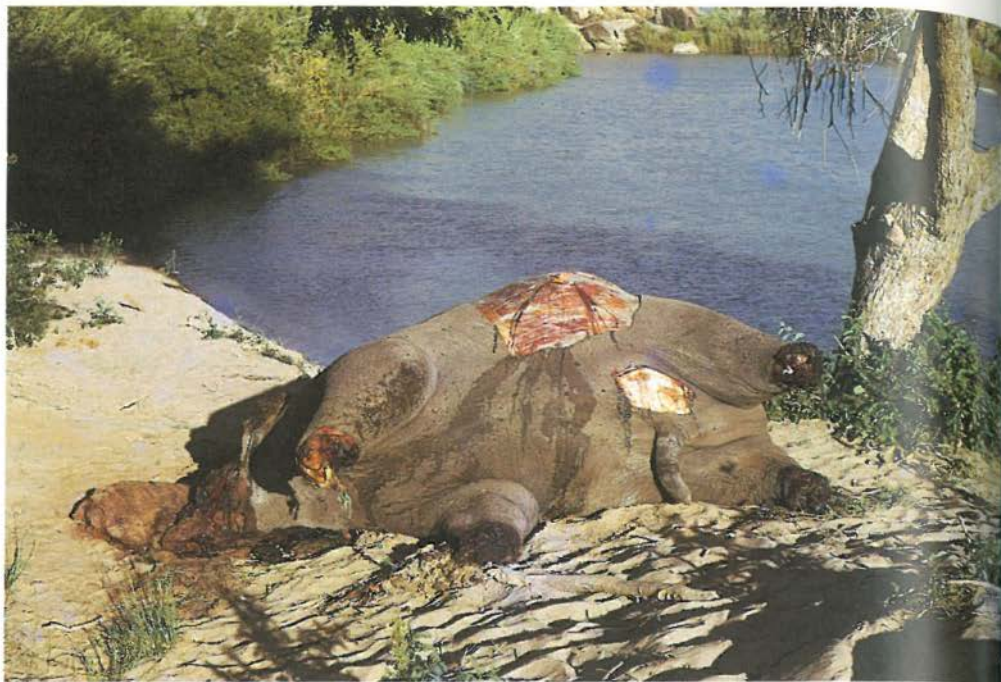
Realizing that we did not have sufficient manpower to adequately patrol the whole area we set out to gain the support of the local inhabitants by a campaign of conservation education which resulted in both the Herero and Damara Representative Authorities totally banning hunting in the region. This was a major breakthrough as poachers would now also be breaking the laws of their tribal leaders, and contraventions would have social implications that would be more serious to the hunters than going to prison or paying fines.

In mid-1983, in conjunction with Herero headmen, I started the "auxiliary game guard system" by which headmen appointed local tribesmen as game guards who then received basic training and regular supervision. The Namibia Wildlife Trust and later the Endangered Wildlife Trust supplied the guards with staple rations and a small monthly cash allowance.

Their main function was to notify us of any hunting that might have taken place in their areas; however, they were not undercover informers and all their



Traditional Himba pastoralists – the nomadic human inhabitants of the northern Namib. The man in the centre is a member of the auxiliary game guard force which was created to assist the authorities in their fight against poaching.



A bull elephant gunned down from a helicopter on the banks of the Kunene River. The poachers used a chain saw to remove the tusks and feet from the carcass.

activities were conducted in the open. When evidence of illegal hunting was found, the cases were discussed with the area headman who gave us invaluable support in our investigations and, with few exceptions, we were able to get successful convictions.

The auxiliary game guards have played a major role in deterring would-be poachers and keeping us informed about general game and human movements. However, I believe that the most important contribution of the system has been to directly involve the local community in the conservation of their own natural resources. Ultimately, these people will rightfully be responsible for what wildlife survives in the Kaokoveld, and this augurs well for the future.

Currently, although there are more government nature conservation personnel in the region, the local support for conservation is still the key factor in controlling poaching; in fact, poaching for elephant tusks or rhino horn has virtually ceased in the Kaokoveld and the numbers of both species have increased for the first time in over 15 years.

Unfortunately, State funds are still not available to support this unorthodox system and, consequently, further financial assistance is still urgently needed to carry out further work of this nature, both in the Kaokoveld and other tribal areas where important wildlife populations are threatened.