

IMPROVING TOURISM'S CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS RHINO CONSERVATION

Just over a decade ago, Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism began developing an ambitious recovery programme to re-establish black rhino populations across their historical rangelands in the north-western communal areas. Lasting success would need to create and institutionalise mechanisms that foster and maintain local community support for rhino conservation.

Jeff Muntifering | Conservation Biologist, Minnesota Zoo and Science Adviser, Save the Rhino Trust

Following a series of fruitful community meetings and well-orchestrated research on local attitudes and perceptions towards rhino recovery, it became clear that rhino tourism could play a pivotal role in delivering key rhino value outcomes back to local people. However, tourism is a double-edged sword and very little knowledge existed on how best to ensure that anticipated benefits would outweigh the potential costs. Thus, ensuring the emerging rhino tourism would contribute net positive conservation benefits for rhino was paramount.

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Improving tourism's contribution towards the conservation of Namibia's desert-adapted black rhino has been my primary focus in my role as Science Adviser to Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), a small yet successful rhino conservation NGO

based in north-western Namibia. In this article, I provide a brief summary on some of the key lessons learned from the past decade of applied research and policy development at Desert Rhino Camp, our rhino conservation tourism prototype in north-west Namibia.

Removing the devil in decision-making

Catalysed by a thorough understanding of the local rhino context, a new concept for tourism to directly support rhino conservation was initiated and operated under the name Palmwag Rhino Camp (later re-named Desert Rhino Camp) in 2003. The enterprise existed initially as a direct partnership between SRT, a high-end tourism company – Wilderness Safaris, and the government, which would evolve to directly include the neighbouring local communities. The basic idea was fairly straightforward: SRT's unrivalled rhino tracking expertise would be put to work not only to find and monitor rhinos but, together with Wilderness Safaris' award-winning hospitality and guiding services, enable high-paying tourists to accompany them on their patrols. The government would get a concession fee and local communities would receive employment opportunities and monthly cash pay-outs (based on occupancy). However, we soon realised that putting

the concept into practice would be challenged by the complex, competing interests and perspectives of the parties. This 'devil in the details' is precisely what the conservation and tourism sectors historically struggle to reconcile and is typically the fundamental stumbling block that leads to conservation or tourism failure, or both. Therefore, designing a decision-making process that not only cultivated common-interest solutions but also fostered a social-learning environment would be essential to any lasting and effective partnership and rhino-tourism practice.

One of the central tenets of the policy sciences is a theory and practical framework that provides just what we needed: a systematic, transparent and repeatable method for designing and evaluating effective decision-making processes. This process consists of a series of decision functions and gold standards such as goal setting and intelligence gathering, discussing management alternatives, setting rules, guidelines and the mechanisms to enforce them, implementing the new policy and terminating old ineffective policies and evaluation (see Susan G Clark, *The Policy Process*, 2011, for a detailed description). Each function should be discussed collectively and chronologically, ensuring not to leave anyone out or skip a step.

Establishing this shared decision-making process from the very beginning has been the most fundamentally important lesson for building lasting partnerships in rhino conservation tourism and solving problems in the common interest. In practice, the process was initialised through conducting joint forum meetings on a regular basis. These policy forums provided a comfortable environment to collectively design, interpret and invoke applied research that would continually improve our practice and strengthen our partnership.

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Applying rhino research in a decision-process framework

Grounded by an effective decision process and a shared goal to view rhino without our presence being detected, our first study focused on identifying key rhino disturbance factors and modelling scenarios to promote viewing policies that minimise the chances of a rhino detecting the group. Guides and trackers requested 'rhino viewing cards' be developed from the data they collected, to illustrate viewing times and distances under various circumstances. *Ad hoc* rhino viewing practices, of which over 50% resulted in displaced rhinos, were thus terminated. Currently, only 10% of rhino-viewing events result in a site displacement.

We also agreed that our activities should not permanently displace rhino from the area. Using rhino location information collected by our monitoring teams and GPS tracking devices installed in vehicles we explored rhino tolerance to vehicle activity. This research clearly demonstrated that rhino were actively avoiding areas under chronic (daily) vehicle disturbance. Guides and trackers decided to rotate areas for tracking, giving each area a 2-3 day 'rest' between patrols. No rhinos have been permanently displaced and rotating areas also helped ensure that patrols did not only focus on easy to find rhino close to camp.

We have also developed spatially explicit rhino habitat models and maps to evaluate whether our operations were indeed securing key rhino habitat. Currently over 300,000 hectares of high-quality rhino habitat is being secured by Desert Rhino Camp and regular monitoring for roughly 40 rhino with no measurable impacts on population performance or distribution is taking place. Most importantly, no rhino under tourism has been displaced into sub-prime habitat or at-risk areas for poaching. Since the camp opened in April 2003, no rhino have been poached. Landscape-scale rhino habitat maps incorporating known human-impact factors have and will continue to help prioritise rhino-recovery planning efforts.

However, we still have plenty to learn and improve upon. Although preliminary tourist surveys have indicated high levels of satisfaction, exploring how rhino messaging could be improved using conservation psychology and human behaviour theory to produce increased willingness to donate to rhino conservation or become greater 'rhino ambassadors' would be valuable. Additionally, even though over US\$0.5m has been paid out to neighbouring communities through tourism revenue-sharing deals since 2007, has this led to increased pro-rhino behaviour at the broader community level? Such behaviour change research will be crucial to ensure that our rhino tourism strategy continues to adapt and improve to secure both the rhino and the local community support they need to survive. We hope some of our lessons learned may help guide the expansion of responsible rhino tourism elsewhere.

Grants

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 We would like to thank all the donors to our 2013 appeal, Operation Wild and Free, in aid of Save the Rhino Trust, who donated a total of over £13,000. We'd particularly mention Woburn Safari Park, which raised an amazing £8,342, Blair Drummond Safari Park (£2,000), Zoo Bassin d'Arcachon and rhino's energy GmbH. We donated £6,400 from our own core funds, and raised another £3,700 from auction items donated for our annual dinner in November. We're really grateful to all those who have supported Save the Rhino Trust over the last year.



From top: Tourists can visit Save the Rhino Trust's shop and information centre to learn more about the critically endangered desert-adapted black rhinos. Local people are employed as trackers and guides to take tourists to view rhinos, while also monitoring the species. Below: tourists stay in luxury tented accommodation at Desert Rhino Camp.

