

The need for boots on the ground

As the poaching epidemic escalates, greater emphasis has been placed on technology. Military technology, including drones, thermal imaging and geo-fencing, is all being explored and used with varying degrees of success. Whilst donors are often enthused by the idea of funding technology, it is only as good as the men on the ground who operate it.

Sam Taylor | Chief Conservation Officer, Borana Conservancy

Borana is a fledgling rhino conservancy, and our financial resources are slim. Our knowledge of rhino and their behaviour is limited by our inexperience. However, we hope that through the careful visual monitoring, recording and analysis of data (ours and from older conservancies), we will be able to refine and develop our biological and security management of rhino.



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Technology should be there to provide additional capacity to rangers on the ground, not to replace them



In recent times, the defining aspect of rhino conservation has become primarily one of Intelligence gathering. The development and training of paramilitary-style reactive and proactive teams have dominated my thought process in the preparations leading towards introducing rhino onto Borana. The biological management has been secondary in my priorities – such is the current horrific state of affairs.

However, we have found that these two fields are not mutually exclusive; in fact each is instrumental in the planning of the other. The monitoring of rhino provides not only valuable insights into their behavioural biology; it also provides both incidental and specific indications as to how best to deploy security. Having just 21 black rhino, all fitted with simple VHF telemetry transmitters embedded in their horns, we are able to locate each rhino. We then deploy large numbers of scouts to track the rhino and get a visual on them, which is verified by a supervisor. From the accumulated data, we can ascertain security risks.

Obviously, knowing where the rhinos are means we are better able to protect them. But similarly, by knowing where they've come from, and under what conditions, and where they may go next because of these conditions, we can now loosely predict behaviour and help manage risk – predation, poaching or any other threats that affect rhino.

However, the principal component is boots – trusted boots – on the ground (pictured left). These men see the animal, make informed decisions and ultimately have it in their hands to keep these animals alive. They work long hours in testing conditions, day and night, monitoring the whereabouts and status of each rhino.

Armed anti-poaching units are deployed at night when the threat is highest. Top-quality but basic equipment ensures that the men perform their job effectively and at minimal risk to themselves.

Whilst advanced technology, both for anti-poaching and research, is fantastic, it does not replicate loyal, motivated and trusted men on the ground. I am not arguing against the use of technology to protect rhino, as there are some incredible – if expensive – innovations that are revolutionising wildlife management and security. I am, however, arguing that the investment in the men and women on the ground and their welfare should not be jeopardised by investment in technology. Technology should be there to provide additional capacity to the rangers on the ground, not to replace them.

With the large sums of money associated with the illegal rhino horn trade, a huge amount of trust must be placed in the men on the ground. Investment in the rangers, both financially (in terms of equipment and training) and personally (through close working relationships), boosts morale and loyalty to the cause.

Once we have the financial capability to protect boots on the ground, then we'll start to consider putting drones in the sky.

Grants

We recently sent over £12,136 (raised by Nicholas Nangunye and from a donated auction lot) to Borana for fencing upgrades, the education support programme and for Borana's information networks. This will be of direct benefit to the rhino and also continue to strengthen the community involvement in the Conservancy.

