

25 YEARS OF MKOMAZI



Has it really been that long? We're moving forward at such a pace these days that I'm really having to think back to when I first came to this poached out, burnt out, cattle-filled, tsetse fly wasteland at the request of the Tanzanian government, and sat on the site where our camp now is wondering where to start.

Tony Fitzjohn | Field Director, George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust

I think I was in tears! After nearly 20 years with George Adamson in Kenya and at the tender age of 45 it was my first humbling 'hero to zero' moment ever and I didn't think I could do it. But like all things in life, the answers slowly came to questions that I hadn't even considered when I agreed to help in the rehabilitation of this 1,500 square mile area between Mt Kilimanjaro and the Indian Ocean. If I'd had a plan, I think I would have been so overwhelmed by it all, I would probably have gone sailing.

We started off initially with the wild dog programme, catching them on the Maasai Steppe, where they were



MATT BRODIE



Step by agonisingly slow step, we put the infrastructure of roads in, de-silted seasonal water pans and dams, cut boundaries, flew

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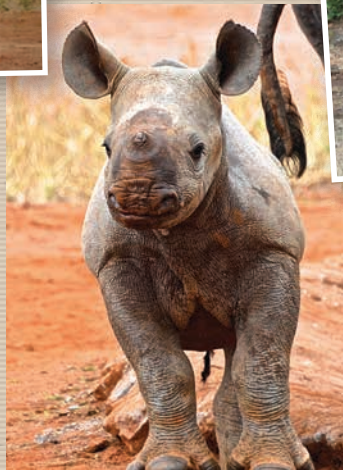


being poisoned, with the help of the local Maasai. And then turned our attention to the black rhinoceros.

We needed wages and radios

Black rhino and wild dog are the focus of Mkomazi's conservation efforts

non-stop in a dangerously cheap Cessna 206 after poaching gangs, cattle barons and motorised poaching from a very eclectic selection of the population, slowly coming out of many years of economic decline.



After a few years and as we began to get to know the area and its animals and habitat better, we decided that as far as the endangered species programmes went – which is what we came here to carry out originally – we would concentrate on the African wild (or hunting) dog and the black rhinoceros. Little did we realise the furor this would cause. The dogs were disappearing everywhere and the rhinos were down from 12,000 in the seventies to a couple of dozen in Tanzania, but this didn't stop all sorts of opposition from academics, hunting organisations, those with government in their pockets and sundry others.

We had established a local George Adamson Wildlife Trust in Tanzania with some highly respected local Tanzanians on the board, and they were a tower of strength. The 'system' meant that progress was slow but sure – a bit like a 5-mile hurdles race.

We had just started thinking about this when Dave Stirling and Johnny Roberts pitched up in camp. Renowned for their Sahara Desert crossings and other great adventures, antics at Glastonbury and social connections, they had recently started up Save the Rhino International in the UK and were keen to help. After traipsing around a very under-developed area that we thought would be suitable for rhino they said 'What do you need, man?' 'Wages' I said, and wages it was. They also found a very kindly supplier in Kenya who kitted the whole Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary out with a Motorola VHF radio system.

Dr Mike Knight and Dr Pete Morkel of the National Parks Board of South Africa came to do a detailed environmental study and vegetation analysis of the area; Ian Craig of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy came down to help us demarcate the right area and give us an idea how to run it; top-level meetings took place in Dodoma between our Trust, the Wildlife Division, the Ministry and the National Parks Board of South Africa; we were lent a bulldozer by Friends of Serengeti Switzerland and a grader by Noremco; and we were off. In 1997 we flew in our first four Eastern black rhino from Addo National Park in South Africa. Offspring of those sent there in the 1960s by Nick Carter, a Kenyan Game Department vet, who had darted them in Kibwezi just north of us here in Mkomazi, they had bred up into a viable, if exotic, and expensive population.

But it was a start. Save the Rhino was with us then, with Rhino Raves and Rhinos at the Dogs (at a London greyhound track) and other events, and always seeing where they could help with funds and equipment, year in, year out. Dave's sister even drove a Land Rover to camp that had been to Cape Town and back, which we are still running as the main Rhino Sanctuary vehicle.

Where do you find more rhino?

We imported four more from South Africa, three from the Czech Republic and then Damian Aspinall gave us two females and a male from Port Lympne Wild Animal Park in Kent, whom we are currently introducing to the Czech male.

The nineties sadly came to an abrupt end (they tell me), Dave and Johnny moved onto more esoteric things and Along Came Cathy.

And we all grew up.

Cathy Dean and Save the Rhino have both eased us into institutional funding and created relationships for us.

They have done most of the enormous load of paperwork involved, found funding for incredibly non-sexy projects like replacing all the fence poles along the Rhino Sanctuary line (we have 14,000

to replace!), finding tractors from EAZA, and covering all angles – recently with the donation of a new digital radio system from USFWS being just being one example.

When we established our environmental education programme 'Rafiki wa Faru', which involves a school bus and a classroom for day visits for schoolchildren in the Rhino Sanctuary, Save the Rhino were the first to support it (pictured below). It's been amazing to see how the kids have managed to create positive and supportive local attitudes towards the whole Park and our operation. We could never have done that on our own.

We now have well over 20% of Tanzania's total rhino population and that's a sad reflection of the times we live

in – but it's a population that is now increasing rapidly as we have only just reached our 'founder population' after all these years. All the

animals came from captive sources overseas or were born here. This year we have had two more female calves already.

We have an incredibly good team, many of whom started with me 25 years ago and their loyalty and dedication has certainly been responsible for getting me through some very bleak times. Our main security is a slightly wrinkled bunch of retrenched Tanzanian army soldiers that chased Idi Amin out of Uganda. Now they look after their own rhino and no one comes near us – such is their reputation. They have also brought a solid sense of discipline to all sectors of the Sanctuary that I doubt I could have done on my own.

That all sounds a bit rosy, but the poisoned chalice that is a rhino sanctuary, in these days where the price of rhino horn in the street is higher than the price of gold, weighs heavily on us all. But the sheer privilege of being the entrusted guardians of these remarkable animals outweighs it all. Rhinos aren't going to go on my watch.

Questions, questions...

The past 45 years, since I first arrived in East Africa, have seen dramatic changes, even more so now. Will we find the political will to support these incredible wildlife areas in new and emerging democracies where The Vote rules? Will we be able to engender, through the children, local community support instead of a 'them and us' situation? Will we be able to enter into true partnerships with the government wildlife authorities, instead of just being a bunch of blind funding idiots? Can we hold the line against mining and oil interests? And all those other questions...

The answer is, in Tanzania, yes, I think we will. With the rhino we certainly hit rock bottom but, phoenix-like, we are rising from the ashes stronger, more dedicated, more professional and more inclusive. We can do it but we need the leaders, businessmen and celebrities of the established order to do their bit in changing the perceptions of the countries they trade with, so as not to impoverish ours with their demands for animal's teeth and compressed hair.

If we lose the real Africa, we lose our spiritual bridges to the past and our origins. For what?

Grants

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Since 1 April 2014, Save the Rhino has sent £45,233 to Mkomazi, made up of grants of \$49,000 from USFWS for Sanctuary staff salaries and fence maintenance, \$17,192 from USFWS for Rafiki wa Faru, and £4,800 from our core funds for a mix of both.



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Local school children are able to visit the Park through the 'Rafiki wa Faru' programme

