

The China syndrome

For many years, the last detected case of a Namibian illegally hunted desert-adapted black rhino occurred in 1994 in the north-west of the country. Two suspects were arrested and spent a couple of years in prison. Since then, with help from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) and local communities, the rhino population in the Kunene and Erongo Regions of Namibia has grown and dispersed over the species' entire range.

Save the Rhino Trust, Namibia

In September 2011, this encouraging scenario changed when a young male rhino was found in a snare deliberately set for a rhino. The illegal poachers had done their homework, possibly having observed the movement of the mother and calf for a while, then setting the snare on the game trail the animals were using to and from the natural spring. Fortunately a second snare, set for the female rhino, was removed before it could do any harm by a joint SRT and Community Game Guard patrol.

This incident was followed by the shocking illegal hunting of a cow and six-month-old calf around Christmas 2012. The female rhino had been shot once, her horns surgically removed, indicating that the suspect had done this before. The six-month old female calf spent nearly five days with



Namibia has lost 14 rhino within the first nine months of 2014

its mother before help arrived, and unfortunately she died due to severe dehydration during the transport to safety. With a bit of

luck and help from the local community, the culprit was arrested with the horns, and the bullet point retrieved was matched to the rifle confiscated. On 20 August 2014, the poacher was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for the illegal hunt of a protected game species, without the option of a fine; fined N\$10,000 or three years for possession; N\$7,000 or one year for illegal possession of a firearm; and a further N\$1,000 or six months for the illegal possession of ammunition.

SAVE THE RHINO TRUST

In 2013 Namibia experienced a sharp increase in the illegal hunting of rhino and possession of horns, losing two

white rhino (the female was pregnant) on privately owned land, one desert black rhino on a privately owned rhino custodian farm and one black rhino in the north-west of Namibia. In two cases, nine suspects have been arrested and one set of horns was recovered.

Namibia has lost 14 rhinos within the first nine months of 2014: 12 desert black rhino on communal custodian land and two white rhino on privately owned land. Another three desert-black rhino have been wounded, but were successfully treated by a MET veterinarian and translocated to safety. Though no suspects have been arrested so far, two sets of horns have been secured. Customs and Airport Police successfully intercepted 14 horns from seven individual desert black rhino and one white rhino, packed in two suitcases destined for Hong Kong. Three Chinese nationals were arrested and court proceedings have begun. Another Chinese national was arrested during a sting operation trying to obtain rhino horn on the black market. All the Chinese nationals were denied bail by the state, and remain in custody.

In all cases, there has been good co-operation and strong will by government agencies, supporting NGOs and the private sector to try to stop, or at least minimise, the impact of the crime syndicates targeting Namibia's wildlife.



This photo shows a badly decomposed rhino at a crime scene

SIMSON URI-KHOB

CEO, Save the Rhino Trust

“**Congratulations on your new role as CEO of Save the Rhino Trust! Can you describe the work you will now be doing?**”

Thank you. On top of the fieldwork co-ordination, I will be responsible for running the Trust in all aspects. I will focus on leading the Trust, representing it at high-level meetings with politicians and donors, and making sure that my staff are well looked after and happy with the work they do.

“**How did you get involved with rhino conservation and how long have you worked at SRT?**”

Long story short: while I helped maintain the Trust's vehicles I become good friends with Blythe Loutit, (who co-founded the Trust with her husband Rudi). I think she saw more conservation value in me than I thought and offered me a job with SRT. I started as a welder and supervisor for the junior staff who built elephant protection walls in the communal farms. Not long after I found myself tracking rhino with elderly trackers who taught me all the tricks to track rhino.



Teams of highly skilled trackers scan the Namibian horizon for the critically endangered desert rhino



Some 13 years later I found myself at Canterbury University where I gained my Master's degree – this was for my field experience that I built up during my experience of rhino conservation. I went through the ranks at SRT and finally became CEO. Thanks to the late Blythe and Mike Hearn, who left me behind in their shoes.

“**We understand that you have always been very involved with local communities. What does community conservation mean to you?**”

Community conservation is the most important aspect of conservation success on communal land. My perception is that if you work with wildlife within a community then there is always the question: 'What are we getting from this wildlife that causes us problems?' Therefore it is important that the communities know the value of wildlife; they should benefit from wildlife and at the same time become co-owners to be able to absorb the losses and conflicts.

“**What do you enjoy most about working in rhino conservation?**”

Tracking rhino with the trackers; watching the rhino's behaviour and collecting data. Also during rhino capture operations, I enjoy being close to the rhino when we are working with them on the ground.

“**With so many different challenges, is there a typical working day?**”

My work day starts mostly at very different times, but no later than 6:30am and stops usually around 10pm. It's not like you always know where to start and where to go for

the day. I mostly like to have a programme but have realised it never works out; I work with people on different programmes and sometimes I have to follow their plans and not mine.

“**How have you seen rhino conservation change in Namibia?**”

Rhino conservation in Namibia has changed within the 23 years I have been working. It is more now in the hand of the communities, where previously it was the sole responsibility of the government. Also communities in conservancies are getting direct benefits through rhino tracking tourism or pay-back for good conservation efforts.

“**What do you think are the three key challenges facing SRT?**”

Funding, poaching threat and political willingness. If the politicians do not support rhino conservation then it will be a problem for our rhino, because they are the strongest people.

“**What future do you see for Namibia's rhinos?**”

If we manage to stop the poaching before it's out of hand, we surely will have a very healthy black rhino population in Namibia. As we talk, we are the world leaders in this species. We have experienced some poaching in the Kunene, but have joined forces with many to combat and stop these idiots from killing our valuable assets; the rhino.

Interview by Rory Harding, former Michael Hearn Intern.

Grants

.....
Since 1 April 2014, Save the Rhino has donated a total of £72,248 to SRT, which includes grants of \$112,895 from US Fish and Wildlife Service, £2,000 from Blair Drummond Safari Park and €2,000 from Zoo Krefeld, as well as many other smaller amounts from donors to our 2013 Operation Wild and Free appeal in aid of SRT.

MAIN IMAGE: STEVE AND ANN TOON

