

THE MOST EXCITING RHINO SPACE IN AFRICA

Kenya's Chyulu Hills is simply that—an area inhabited by rhino. It doesn't fall into the category of a Rhino Sanctuary, nor is it an IPZ (Intensive Protection Zone)—yet.... It is a loosely defined space of about 65,000 acres, including part of the Chyulu Hills National Park and the Maasai-owned communal land bordering it.

Craig Miller | Head of Security and Field Coordinator **Jeremy Goss** | Conservation Scientist, Big Life Foundation

The free-ranging nature of the local rhino population brings challenges, but with no fences to restrict population size and a high carrying capacity, this is a place with exciting potential as a black rhino stronghold.

The presence of rhino on both National Park and community land has necessitated and led to an extraordinary level of cooperation between Big Life Foundation and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS).

Combining resources and working in tandem, has led to an unprecedented number of rangers protecting the area



Right: Camera traps are important for monitoring the shy rhinos of the Chyulu Hills.

in a more effective manner. Despite several serious poaching attempts, no rhino were killed in the year leading up to the writing of this article in August 2015. At a time when mistrust often dominates the relationship between government bodies and NGOs, this partnership is a significant achievement.

Main: Big Life Foundation and Kenya Wildlife Service rangers work together to protect the area's wildlife

However, given the current low rhino population, it would take decades to reach anywhere near the population carrying capacity, even with an almost impossible zero mortality rate. Inbound translocations will be necessary to supplement the population and, to do this in Kenya, Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) status is required, meaning that high standards of protection and monitoring must be met.

In the Chyulu Hills there is still work to do, but progress has been made on all fronts including infrastructure, security and monitoring. The eastern boundary of the area is densely populated

by humans, and with no hope of any recoverable habitat this area must simply be fenced. The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust has stepped in to provide support and funding to achieve this important step, and work on the fence is underway. Additional water points are planned so that rhinos do not need to venture away from the protected zone at any times of the year.

Population monitoring is critical and has hugely improved in recent years, thanks to support for better equipment and training of personnel. The Chyulu Hills' rhinos are incredibly shy and live in almost impenetrable bush, which is likely why they have persisted up to now. Live sightings are rare and most of what we know is through camera-trap monitoring, which has provided insight into individuals' movements and habits. Without this form of remote monitoring we would still have no idea of total population size, and no chance of identifying individuals, both of which have now been done.

Through 2013 and 2014, live sightings of rhino occurred at a rate of less than once a month, camera trap captured on average two to three times a month and spoor recorded roughly five to six times a month. Thanks to improved monitoring and understanding of the individual rhinos' habits, in 2015 there were more live sightings in a single month than 2013 and 2014 combined. The number of times rhino are recorded by camera traps has increased roughly five-fold, while spoor is recorded almost daily.

This greater knowledge has led to far more effective deployment of resources for protecting rhinos and, together with the other advances, Big Life Foundation is working with KWS to achieve IPZ status for this area as soon as possible. Famous hunter-turned-conservationist J. A. Hunter said in the 20th century about the Chyulu Hills that there 'is a rhino behind almost every bush', and we hope that this will one day once again be true. Big Life Foundation is grateful for Save the Rhino's support of our exciting efforts to revive this important population.

Grants

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Since November 2014, we have sent grants totalling £56,798 to Big Life Foundation, including \$19,118 from the Anna Merz Rhino Trust, \$50,000 from USFWS and £7,500 from the Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust, together with miscellaneous donations and our own core funds.

