

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING NAMIBIA'S RHINOS



Aron White | Michael Hearn Intern

As part of Save the Rhino's Michael Hearn Internship, I spent a month working with SRT in May 2015 and found out how the Trust has adapted to this latest threat. The black rhino of northwest Namibia are very special animals. Perfectly adapted to their desert-savannah home, they are able to subsist on desert plants that are poisonous to other animals, and can go days without drinking water. They also represent the largest rhino population in the world to survive on unfenced, unprotected land. Since 1982, SRT has closely monitored the population, implementing a hugely successful programme that employs local people as rangers.

SRT's rhino monitoring programme enjoyed three decades of success and, under its stewardship, the rhino

population of the Kunene region recovered from the brink of extinction to become one of Africa's most significant black rhino populations. However, the Kunene's rhinos were not immune from the poaching crisis that began in South Africa in 2008, subsequently spreading to neighbouring countries. In December 2012, a mother and calf were shot in the Kunene – the first poaching incident in the region since 1994 and a tragic harbinger of what was to come.

What followed was a very difficult period for the Trust. As CEO Simson Uri-Khob explains, 'The heavy poaching started in 2014. The poachers knew where the rhinos were because they live there in the concessions, and they monitor the movements of our staff. When our staff had off days, the poachers would go in and do the dirty job, because they knew where to find them.' As the crisis worsened, 24 animals were killed in the area in 2014 alone. 'It really affected me because we had been successful for so many years and suddenly this poaching came up and people just plundered the animals.' SRT was faced with an ultimatum: adapt or die.

Recognising that the existing programme was not working, SRT decided to overhaul operations and shift the Trust's focus to cover proactive anti-poaching measures as well as the ongoing monitoring programme – essentially doubling the scope of their work. The Trust also expanded collaboration with other stakeholders, ensuring that every patrol be accompanied by an armed guard supplied by the Namibian Police. This reorganisation was a huge operation, putting considerable strain on staff and meaning major changes for SRT's trackers in the field.

In February 2015, former vet and SRT Trustee Dr Axel Hartman was brought on in to fill the new role of Chief Operations Officer and oversee many of the changes necessary to tackle the poaching crisis. 'I manage all aspects of operations: the day to day running, managing and deployment of patrol teams, analysis of patrol data, and streamlining logistics: sort of a co-ordinating function to support the CEO.' Dr Hartmann has even moved to the SRT field base in the Kunene, where a tent is now his permanent base. From here, he is able to take an active role in overseeing field operations and pitching in elsewhere, which might sometimes mean putting on his vet hat to treat rhinos.

Having recognised that the predictability of previous patrols was a factor in poaching patterns in the area, SRT also overhauled the location and duration of their patrol programme. The previous three tracker bases have been reduced to one, to help with coordination of patrols and ensure maximum coverage of the area. Tracker teams now spend up to 20 days at a time in the field, with newly implemented bonuses rewarding teams for walking extra miles in a day.

SRT tracker Ngaujake Kututa explained the realities now facing the field teams: 'Before, we were just monitoring, it was just about rhinos. But now we are also looking for poachers. It is very dangerous because, you know, poachers are people like you. They can also hide, they can also shoot you. It is very difficult.' As well as the threat from poachers, the anti-poaching teams face a host of other perils. 'There are dangerous animals there. Sometimes when you sleep in the tent, lions are coming around the tent in the night, trying to open it.'



Above: Aron with some of the SRT Rhino Rangers, who work to protect the desert-adapted black rhino

“Every penny counts, so we can have as many as possible boots on the ground with a full stomach. Therefore I humbly request more donations for our teams, to be able to protect our rhinos.”

Simson Uri-Khob, CEO

These major changes to SRT operations have led to a range of additional expenses for the Trust. As Dr Hartmann explains, 'Equipment costs have gone up, with global positioning devices, radio communications, more rations and uniforms needed due to the increased number of patrols. Salaries had to be increased drastically in view of possible rewards offered by syndicates for insider info and increased personal risk. The guys had to be rewarded for their total commitment, they had to double up their effort or more, which they did.'

The massive scale of SRT's reorganisation has impacted upon every member of the team, from the trackers in the field to the office staff. Lorraine Tjazuko is SRT's Fundraising and Administration Manager, responsible for applying and reporting to donors. 'There has definitely been an increase in expenditure which we had to explain to all the donors. We are still working on strategic plans and implementation, so getting a definite budget is obviously very tricky. We are implementing as we go, so we don't know the expenditure forecast. That makes the fundraising more complicated than it used to be.'

Main: SRT Rhino Rangers are adapting to the rising poaching threat facing Namibia's rhinos

The success of SRT's reorganised patrol programme has been striking. The implementation of the anti-poaching programme was followed by 173 days with no poaching incidents. However in June 2015, a mother and calf were poached in the Kunene. SRT patrols picked up the incident very quickly, and their swift response led to the arrests of five suspects.



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Morale among SRT staff is now at an all-time high, and CEO Simson Uri-Khob is confident that their success will continue. 'Things are getting easier. Staff are more confident in what they're doing, there is more involvement with big NGOs, and the team spirit is very strong.' As tracker Ngaujake puts it, 'They are the Namibian diamond. We can save these animals.'

The challenges posed by the current poaching crisis illustrate how important it is for a field programme to be able to react quickly and effectively to changes in their environment. Lengthy application processes and complex reporting requirements for many large donors mean that such flexibility is incredibly difficult in practice. Save the Rhino's support of SRT over the past year has therefore been crucial. And this is thanks to donors like you.

Grants

Since November 2014, we have sent £131,002 to Save the Rhino Trust, including grants of \$25,019 from the Glen and Bobbie Ceiley Foundation, €4,000 from Krefeld Zoo, \$2,000 from Wait Brown, £26,469 from the Desert Heart party, \$33,551 from the Anna Merz Rhino Trust, \$90,637 from USFWS, and many other miscellaneous donations and our own core funds.

