

IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

Namibia's innovative approach to the problem of rhino poaching

These days the bad news from South Africa seems to be never-ending. Despite intensified law enforcement efforts and 165 poaching arrests, rhino poaching reached the highest levels ever recorded in 2010, with 333 animals killed illegally, including 10 critically endangered black rhinos.

Text Edward Jenkins
Photographs Save the Rhino Trust

It has been a high-tech assault, using helicopters, automatic weapons, darting equipment, rogue veterinarians and even Thai prostitutes. The body count continued in 2011, with over 280 killed in the first nine months, despite more than 127 poaching-related arrests. The only ray of hope

among these grim statistics is that poaching in the Kruger National Park area, along the border with Mozambique, has reportedly dropped sharply since the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) troops.

Namibia is certainly no stranger to the problem of poaching. From the 1970s through the mid-1980s, rhino populations dropped throughout Africa by a staggering 95%. In the mid-1970s, concerned conser-

vation authorities moved a number of black rhino from Kaokoland and Damaraland into the Etosha National Park, as a means of preserving genetic diversity. A 1982 survey showed that there were fewer than 10 black rhino in Kaokoland, and only 30 or 40 in Damaraland.

However, in recent years, innovative management and law enforcement by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), monitoring and training by Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), and the support of local communities, have produced remarkable results. According to the MET, the last documented case of rhino poaching in Namibia occurred in 1994. A still unconfirmed poaching incident may have occurred in the northern Kunene Region in 2010, where the remains of a black rhino with a bullet wound were found. In June 2011, the carcass of a white rhino was found at a game lodge near the Waterberg. However, although the horns had been removed, no bullet wounds were detected. The animal was known to have been very old, and an investigation concluded that its death was probably the result of natural causes rather than poaching.

Today, the number of black rhinos in Namibia is not published (as a security precaution), but the news

is good; fully one-third of the animals in Africa are found here. Such a remarkable statistic stands as a clear indicator of effective and innovative management policies.

In general, the rights to utilise wildlife assets reside with the governments of both Namibia and South Africa. However, freehold conservancies (organisations of individual farm owners) were established here in 1992, followed by communal conservancies (organisations of residents on communal lands) in 1996.

Conservancy members agree to practise co-operative management of wildlife assets to benefit all their members, and a recognised conservancy acquires certain benefits and rights to manage wildlife in its area that are not offered to others. According to the Conservancies Organisation of Namibia (CANAM), more than 88% of Namibia's wildlife is found outside national parks. With 43% of the country's total area designated as freehold farmlands, and 40% as communal farmland, it becomes clear that the growth of the conservancy movement has a direct and significantly positive impact on conservation. By contrast, up to 90% of the endangered animals in South Africa are found in national parks and nature reserves.



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Hundreds of rhino have been darted...

The MET has played a key role in rhino conservation. Ministry personnel have been trained in tracking, data collection, law enforcement, weapons handling and crime scene investigation. The MET has also established monitoring programmes, and maintains a nationwide database on the black rhino. In developing regional rhino security strategies, hundreds of rhino have been darted to install monitoring devices of various kinds; and new and innovative security procedures, (which remain classified) have been implemented.

"It's not just the Namibian Government trying to help the rhinos – it's everybody," comments Simson Uri-Khob, Director of Community Outreach, Research and Training at the SRT.

Pierre du Preez, the MET's Rhino Coordinator, believes one important factor in Namibia's anti-poaching success is the Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programmes that are now in place.

In his recently published book, *An Arid Eden*, renowned Namibian conservationist Garth Owen-Smith documents the development of the CBNRMs, which have helped make Namibia a world leader in the field of wildlife conservation. Mr Owen-Smith compares the community game-guard programmes of Namibia's CBNRM to those of Zambia's Luangwa Integrated Resource Development Project (LIRDP), which proved unsuccessful in preventing the widespread poaching of elephant and rhino. Zambia's 'wildlife scouts', who were part of the government structure, were required to meet certain physical and educational standards. They received formal training, and worked from camps. The focus of the programme was anti-poaching law enforcement.

By contrast, the Namibian Community Game Guards (CGGs), even when paid by an NGO, remain responsible to their individual conservancies. Most of those



...to install monitoring devices of various kinds

selected are older, experienced men, with little or no formal education, who operate from their homes. They are tasked with monitoring game, working on community projects, and reporting suspected illegal activities to the conservancy administrators and conservation officials. Their duties do not include law enforcement.

With the support of traditional authorities and the involvement of long-time community members as game guards, attitudes toward wildlife began to change. The MET has begun a strategic programme to translocate some of the burgeoning rhino population in national parks into conservancies and to private custodians who meet stringent criteria, including the establishment of their own game guards, who are trained in tracking and data collection by the SRT.

Before rhinos are translocated into historical range areas, the approval of local citizens must be obtained. Once approved by the community, an integral part of the reintroduction process is to bring the still-tranquillised rhino to a place where it may be seen and touched by community members, who give it a name before it is released. The animal thereby becomes a part of the community, rather than being viewed as something forced upon it by others. "We have translocated quite a few breeding populations to communal conservancies under the custodian programme and have not yet lost one to poaching," notes Mr du Preez.

He says that the SRT is an important strategic partner of the MET in the north-western region. "They assist us in implementing rhino strategies, such as



A joint MET/SRT team collects data in the Kunene Region

expanding the range, and supplementing small populations. "Without their participation, our chances of successfully conserving the Kunene population would be significantly in danger."

"I want to make it very clear that here in Namibia we have zero tolerance for poaching... It is no secret that our country is a world leader in rhino conservation and we are extremely proud of this achievement," says Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, Namibian Minister of Environment and Tourism.

The SRT works hand-in-hand with Government to carry out its programmes, providing training in tracking and monitoring rhinos for MET personnel, conservancy guards, the staff of freehold rhino custodians, and others. The NGO conducts joint patrols with the MET, Community Game Guards, and other agencies, and collects extensive data for inclusion in the national database.

The SRT has developed a Tracker Guide, to ensure that all game guards receive the same training, and that data collected from differ-

ent sources will be uniform. As a result, the reliability of the information added to the MET's database is substantially improved. The Rhino Viewing Protocol ensures that trackers, tour guides, and other parties concerned will keep human-induced disturbance to an absolute minimum. (See box on page 47)

Other agencies also play an important role. The Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) programme is an NGO that provides technical, logistical and financial support to more than 50 registered and emerging communal area

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conservancies. Other key contributors to Namibia's success include the Namibian Police (NAMPOL); INTERPOL; the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations (NACSO); and the South African conservation authorities. A recent agreement between the MET and communications giant MTC has resulted in the establishment of a Rhino Security SMS Hotline, to allow citizens to report any poaching incidents or suspicious activities.

With innovative thinking and strong leadership, rhino poaching in Namibia has reached an all-time low, an accomplishment of which government authorities are justifiably proud. With the continuing support of the SRT, the many other governmental and non-governmental agencies involved, and most importantly, with the assistance and support of local communities, the black rhino may yet survive in the wild, to be appreciated by future generations.

<http://savetherhinotrust.org/>



A future game guard learns to identify and document ear notches



With the assistance and support of local communities, the black rhino may yet survive in the wild, to be appreciated by future generations

RESPONSIBLE *rhino tourism*

With recent successes in reintroducing endangered black rhino into historical ranges, rhino tourism will continue to expand, bringing sorely needed revenue into otherwise impoverished communities. The Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), with the cooperation of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), has been in the forefront of efforts to develop a Responsible Rhino Tourism protocol, allowing tourists to see these unique animals in their natural environment, with minimal disturbance to their natural behaviour patterns.

Conservancies taking part in the MET Custodianship Programme are required to hire game guards, trained by the SRT to follow the recommended guidelines.

For self-guided touring, the following procedures should always be strictly adhered to:

- **Stay on track:** Driving off-road to approach a rhino destroys sensitive desert vegetation while encouraging other tourists to follow suit.
- **Respect waterholes:** Desert rhinos need to drink at least once every other day, so avoid camping within one kilometre of any waterhole.
- **Keep your distance:** A minimum of 100 metres has been found to be a reasonable distance for viewing a sleeping rhino, for a maximum period of 20 minutes. The closest approach to an alert rhino should be 150 metres, and it should be for no longer than five minutes. Most desert rhinos will tolerate viewing at these times and distances without taking off.

- **Note the wind direction:** Always observe rhinos from downwind.
- **Be patient:** Do not attempt to wake a sleeping rhino; remain at a safe distance, and be patient.
- **Keep your seats:** Unless accompanied by a skilled tracker, do not approach a desert rhino on foot.
- **Do not attempt viewing rhino with young:** Avoid trying to view and disturbing rhino cows with small calves until the calf is at least six months old.

In addition to the obvious dangers posed to humans, failure to follow such common-sense suggestions can have a long-term negative impact on rhino behaviour, their condition and breeding performance. Any irresponsible tourism practices that you observe should be reported to the MET, or the SRT.