

The African Rhino Community Centre (ARCC): A Collaborative Strategy to Protect Rhino in the Eastern Cape of South Africa

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The black and white rhino (*Diceros bicornis* and *Ceratotherium simum*, respectively) are being poached at a rate of approximately 1,500 per year in Africa. The crisis is most acute in South Africa where poaching has increased by more than 9,300% since 2007. The indications are that the wild populations of rhino may have surpassed the “tipping point” and are now in decline. While strict law enforcement is certainly critical in the fight against poaching, there appears to be no single answer to combat the current crisis. However, conservationists generally agree that a multi-faceted approach is needed, that includes:

- 1)strengthening ongoing anti-poaching and monitoring patrols, including enhanced aerial surveillance, the deployment of K9 and equine units, and real-time GPS tracking of animals;
- 2)developing a nationally-coordinated enhanced breeding and population recovery plan, including veterinary care for the region’s rhino populations and translocation of animals where appropriate;
- 3)targeted demand reduction and awareness campaigns across Asia; and
- 4)socio-economic development programs based on the conservation of wildlife for rural communities living with, and adjacent to, wildlife areas.

We believe this last point is a vital, albeit frequently overlooked, component of rhino protection programs, because the vast majority of poaching incidents can be linked to information on animal location leaking from local communities adjacent to the reserves, if not to direct participation of individuals from those communities. Thus, community outreach and education programs must be focused on developing sustainable community benefits and buy-in. In this paper we present the vision and strategy behind the African Rhino Community Center (ARCC). Located in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the ARCC project is establishing a facility from which to develop a holistic conservation program that brings together protection, awareness, wildlife management, community participation, and law enforcement in a coordinated collaboration of individuals, rural communities, organizations, and government to ensure the future of rhino and other wildlife in the wild. For the past year, Texas Christian University (TCU) has partnered with the Amakhala Game Reserve, along with several other non-profit organizations, to help conceptualize, design, and build this collaborative education, research, and protection facility. The role of ARCC is to provide protection; to enhance the breeding and, thus, grow the population of rhino; to create awareness and educate people as to the plight of the rhino and to the ramifications of poaching and, ultimately, the loss of the species. It is also to use the conservation of the rhino to, critically, further the socio-economic aspirations of the rural people of Africa, and to do so by recruiting the active participation of those communities in wildlife conservation. We highlight examples of programs that we are piloting and beginning to implement including, among others, an ongoing educational program for young South Africans (ages 10-12) from rural, economically-disadvantaged communities that is focused on wildlife conservation. It is these young people who are able to spread the word, influence their elders and who will become the decision makers of the future.