

Rhino orphanages

To fund or not to fund?

The escalating poaching crisis has thrown a spotlight on the slaughter of rhinos for the illicit horn trade and the threat of extinction faced by these magnificent animals.

Katherine Johnston | Communications Manager

Often, the most headline-grabbing stories focus on one of the more upsetting outcomes: a huge rise in the number of orphaned rhino calves. In the wild, rhino calves will usually stay with their mothers for three to four years while they learn the skills needed to become an adult themselves. When poachers strike, sometimes calves are killed for their tiny nubs of horn. Often, they are left to suffer and, even if found nearby by rangers, are in a highly stressed state; severely dehydrated and with injuries of their own. Without the milk and care of their mothers, the future for many orphaned calves can seem bleak.

Across South Africa and other countries, a range of rhino orphanages have sprung up; aiming to meet the need for appropriate care. Many have the laudable, long-term aim of reintroducing the fully grown orphans back into the wild. But how well do rhino orphans fare, and how do they work with *in situ* conservation efforts? And, most importantly for Save the Rhino International, are they a strand of work we should consider funding?

A welfare need

Rhino orphanages bring many benefits, perhaps most obviously in their key animal welfare and husbandry role. And every rhino is valuable – literally and figuratively. With every year that the poaching crisis continues, we are more likely to reach a tipping point where the number of poached animals outnumbers live births. It makes sense to try to save every animal.

Protecting overall numbers also plays an important part in maintaining genetic diversity of future populations. Helping orphans to survive and, in future, return them to the wild, could potentially help smaller rhino populations reach the minimum number for genetic viability: twenty unrelated founder animals. Rhino orphanages or hand-rearing facilities also offer opportunities to learn about nutrition, veterinary issues and social behaviour.

Rhino orphans are, of course, particularly appealing to the general public. The antics of well-known calves such as Ringo at Ol Pejeta (which subsequently died) tug on the heartstrings of people who might not otherwise be keen conservationists, and help inspire younger children with compelling conservation education messages.

The best use of funds?

However, rhino orphanages also raise important questions about how limited funds are best spent. Do orphanages risk diverting funds from *in situ* conservation efforts? And are all orphanages genuinely working to reintroduce their rhinos back into the wild? At Save the Rhino International, all grants put towards rhino conservation across Asia and Africa – including our demand reduction programmes in Asia – have to meet one key objective: “to conserve viable populations of rhinos in the wild.” Despite the benefits outlined above, the rise of orphanages has also raised some questions in conservation circles. We have considered how a focus on individual animals can blur the broader issues Save the Rhino stands for. Our approach to how we spend your money is, above all, pragmatic and results-focused. We want to make the biggest impact with limited funds available and believe that *in situ* conservation efforts still offer the biggest “bang for your buck”: focusing on viable populations as a whole has more impact on the long-term future of the species than preserving individual animals.

We have yet to see a proven cost-benefit analysis for rhino orphanages, or evidence that releasing the animals back in the wild can work on a larger scale. Rhino orphanages often experience high up-front costs linked to hand-rearing calves that need round-the-clock care. Recently, SANParks highlighted the huge cost of caring for its orphaned rhinos: R300 per rhino, per day.

We have also seen a proliferation of new so-called rhino orphanages offering pay-and-play sessions to the public. Cathy Dean, Save the Rhino’s Chief Executive Officer comments: “Organisations that charge a fee to play with a rhino, and have a constant stream of visitors handling the animals on a day-to-day basis are behaving irresponsibly. This type of handling vastly reduces the animal’s natural instincts and diminishes its chances of learning rhino behaviour vital for living in the wild.”

Now or never

A passionate advocate of rhino orphanages is Thomas Ropel, a Googler based in Hamburg, who offers pro bono support to a range of rhino-focused charities in his capacity as a global digital marketing expert. A current project led by Thomas

is The Now or Never African Wildlife Trust, linking a range of orphanages and related organisations to form a joint strategy to support orphans from the poaching crisis, as well as natural causes. According to the team, in South Africa they expect around 300 orphans every year.

Thomas explains that to have the best chance of success, orphans need to be rescued within 24 hours to avoid attacks by predators such as hyenas, and estimates that around 10–20% of all orphaned calves are currently rescued by orphanages. When it comes to successful release, the Now or Never team has identified a best-practice route for ensuring their survival, from a 24-hour helicopter task force, specialised vets, minimal human

interaction after the first year, and release into a safe stronghold after three years. “A good rhino orphanage minimises rhino-human

interaction” says Thomas. “Rhino calves aren’t pets and tourists shouldn’t be admitted. A good project will have the required expertise and experience – including equipment – and the clear commitment and objective to release the orphan back into the wild.”

One of the first orphanages to have joined the Now or Never Trust’s network is The Rhino Orphanage. Set up as a specialised and non-commercial centre, the team has one aim: to rehabilitate calves back into the wild. Laura Ellison, a carer for calves, explains: “We have to be sure of normal development of natural and social behaviours and interactions, as well to ensure minimal human imprinting.” To reduce this risk, The Rhino Orphanage is not open to the public or paying volunteers. Calves are allocated set human carers without interaction from other staff, and interaction is limited to specific areas, such as bomas.



Left, below: Calf Ntombi suffered deep axe wounds to the head when her mother was poached, requiring daily, intensive treatment to control the risk of infection and sepsis



“I had worked with rhinos in a zoo before coming to The Rhino Orphanage and working here has exposed a whole new repertoire of behaviours displayed by rhinos, whether it be the trauma you witness when they first arrive, or observing their social structure and the development of their unique bonds formed with other rhinos.” The complexity Laura describes is exactly why rehabilitation poses huge challenges, not least financial.

The way forward?

Save the Rhino’s primary focus will always be on *in situ* conservation projects and tackling the root causes of the horn trade through education work in countries where demand is highest. Our focus will not change to prioritise animal welfare-focused charities, but we certainly will continue to support the rescue, care, and rehabilitation of orphaned or rejected rhino calves as part of larger programmes that support wild populations of rhino. Whether stand-alone orphanages ever become partners in our work or not, we certainly wish the dedicated professionals making a difference to rhino calves all the best in their work.

Rhino projects

The Rhino Orphanage is based in Limpopo, South Africa, founded by Arrie Van Deventer in 2012 and is the first specialist, dedicated, non-commercial centre for orphaned rhino calves requiring hand rearing and rehabilitation.

The Now or Never African Wildlife Trust aims to connect all critical organisations on the ground to safeguard all rhino orphans by solving current problems within the rescue chain.



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