

Dealing with drought conditions in uMkhuze Game Reserve

“Usually we’d be looking at thigh-high grass at this time of year,” said Eduard Goosen, uMkhuze’s Conservation Manager. “But we’ve had severe drought for the second year running, and the animals are suffering.”

Cathy Dean | Chief Executive Officer

It was late February, and I was in uMkhuze with colleagues Susie and Josephine, and Save the Rhino Patron Friederike von Houwald from Basel Zoo, at the end of a South African trip that had included the African Rhino Specialist Group meeting and a trip to KwaZulu-Natal’s flagship, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. We’d begun to help Eduard with his annual proposals to the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 2014, and have since found other donors for the Reserve, but this was our first visit and we were keen to explore further.

After a briefing in his office, Eduard laid on a Grand Tour that included visits to several ranger camps to see the impact of our grants: solar panel installations, boreholes and pumps, water tanks, new lighting and power sockets for charging radios and torch batteries, and a new hangar for the helicopter to be based in uMkhuze.

While all of that was very gratifying, it was brought home to us just how tough



the rangers’ lives can be. They’re rotated through different camps every six months, and there aren’t a lot of entertainment options for them when off duty. We would

dearly love to be able to fundraise for a few “luxuries” to improve their morale: a dartboard, basketball hoop, gym equipment... Anyone out there?

uMkhuze has black and white rhinos. Only 80 km from the Mozambique border, the Reserve is roughly rectangular in shape, and a quick-footed poacher can run from the middle of uMkhuze to the relative safety of the boundary in less than an hour. While canine units have been effective in other rhino sanctuaries, we understood why they wouldn’t work here: by the time rangers had heard gunshots and deployed teams, the poachers could be long-gone. The helicopter, however, will come in handy.

Despite Eduard’s best efforts, we didn’t see a rhino – black or white. Extreme drought had forced Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the state department that manages KZN’s parks and reserves, to translocate white rhinos out uMkhuze and into neighbouring iSimangaliso. Grazers rather than browsers, white rhinos are particularly affected by any loss of grass cover. Black rhinos (browsers) can survive drought conditions better, but they kept themselves hidden.



Mantuma Camp has basic but comfortable cabins to rent but the real highlights are the impressive hides built out over some of the waterholes, the perfect spots from which to gaze at the day-long

procession of animals and birds coming in for a drink. The Fig Forest Trail, which takes you up into the canopy, is wonderful, and we got envy-making sightings of Rudd’s apalis but missed the Pel’s Fishing Owl.

Above all, we were extremely impressed the hard-working rangers, Lawrence and Pila from the anti-poaching units, the Park Ecologist Bridget and Honorary Rangers that we met, led by Eduard. On our first night, Eduard had invited 20 or so people, plus us, to a braai at his home. A prayer for the safety of his team, beers round the fire and some of South Africa’s finest outdoor cooking. We were so pleased that we have been able to recruit donors for uMkhuze: it may be the little, less well-known brother of Hluhluwe, but it deserves our support.

Grants

Since November 2015, we have made various grants to uMkhuze: \$35,565 from USFWS for communications equipment, tactical jumpsuits and solar panel installations, €2,000 from rhino’s energy, €1,500 from Zoo Madrid and Parques Reunidos Foundation, £1,812 + €5,000 from Stichting Wildlife and £2,068 from our own core funds for other kit items.



Thank you to **rhino’s energy GmbH** for its continued support kindly donating €1,000 each quarter. Last year it donated €2,000 for the Rhino Dog Squad campaign, helping towards veterinary care, equipment and training, and €2,000 for vital equipment for rangers in uMkhuze Game Reserve, South Africa

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Main, right: Varied ration packs help boost rangers’ morale while out on extended patrols, but many of the camps lack sports equipment, games or even a communal dining area



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