

PROTECTING GHOSTS IN THE CHYULU HILLS

In June 2015, several gunshots rang out in the darkness of the Chyulu Hills of southern Kenya. Hearts sank and everything stopped as Big Life Foundation rangers worked round the clock with their counterparts from the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to find out what had happened.

Jeremy Goss | Conservation Project Manager, Big Life Foundation

The men searched high and low and couldn't find any carcasses, but nor could they find any sign of the black rhino Tara and her young calf. For three months, the rangers combed her home range, searching for any clues that they were still alive. There was no good news. Time passed and Big Life Foundation slowly and sadly accepted that poachers had likely killed the two.

But without the bodies there was always a chance they were still alive, and that small glimmer of hope recently turned to celebration after a camera trap produced a photograph of Tara and calf, both looking strong and healthy.

This story demonstrates how challenging this terrain – home to a small remnant population of black rhino – can be for our rangers. It's like a lost world; inhospitable and untamed. Every bush has thorns that tear at unclothed pieces of flesh; the volcanic rock underfoot is sharp as razors and eats ranger boots for breakfast.

Rhinos living here are completely wild. The population has never been managed in any way; they are true survivors from a time when Africa was without the huge pressures of urban development and rural agriculture. It is the Big Life community rangers, supported by Save the Rhino International, who are the forefront of the fight to protect them.

Kipalero Lenkilasi is one of these rangers and, unlike many of his colleagues, he has been lucky enough to see one of these secretive animals. It takes a lot of effort to protect something that you can't see, and even more dedication. The men working in this area have the latter in spades, and put in huge amounts of the former. Thanks to additional support from the Zoological Society of London, Big Life is increasingly able to recognize our rangers for the work that they do, something which can, too often, go unnoticed by the rest of the world.

GPS devices carried by the rangers monitor the time and distance walked on their daily patrols, allowing ranger commanders to more effectively plan their teams' movements, as well as identify and recognize the best performing rangers. Lenkilasi was the first ranger to receive



Left, below: There was huge relief when Tara and her calf were spotted by the camera trap looking strong and healthy

this award. He is someone who started off as a staff cook for a field unit, becoming a ranger nine years ago and finally working his way up into a senior leadership position in his unit.

Lenkilasi and his peers are doing something extraordinary under highly challenging conditions. They are protecting one of the last free-ranging black rhino populations in Kenya, which although few, are uniquely important.



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Grants

Since November 2015, we have sent the following to Big Life Foundation for its black rhino monitoring and protection work: \$5,013 from Gary Slight in honour of his daughter Chrissy, \$5,000 from SRI Inc., £2,000 from Treasure Charitable Trust, £10,000 from Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust, £1,755 raised at our Sundowner dinner, £500 from Kiboko Trust and \$50,000 from USFWS RTCF.

Below: The Chyulu Hills are a volcanic mountain range in eastern Kenya with fertile lava flows home to rhinos and other wildlife

