

African Rhino Conservation

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During the course of the 20th century, rhino populations in Africa plummeted. As recently as 1970, there were approximately 65,000 black rhinos in Africa; by 1993, there were only 2,500 surviving in the wild – a 96% population decrease.

Intensive conservation efforts in the late twentieth century across Southern and Eastern Africa brought black and white rhinos back from the brink of extinction. Yet with the recent surge in black market demand for their horns, primarily in Vietnam and China, the rhino poaching crisis threatens to reverse decades of conservation successes and possibly drive the species into extinction.

The International Rhino Foundation (IRF) has spent the last 25 years fighting to protect these magnificent creatures. Our fight has become increasingly more difficult: while no ‘official’ final figures have yet been released for 2016, observations suggest that poaching rates continue to escalate.

In 2015, the number of rhinos reported poached in Africa increased for the sixth year in a row to 1,342 – the highest number lost since poaching rates first began to escalate in 2008 and the most reported losses in the past 2 decades. As many poached carcasses go unnoticed, this seemingly high figure is likely an underestimate.

Through 2014, across Africa, rhino poaching rates were ‘sustainable’; with about 3% of the total rhino population poached, births still exceeded deaths. Poaching of black rhino more than doubled from 2013 through 2015, with the highest losses in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (Figure 1). Rhino populations cannot sustain poaching rates much above current levels.

In response to the ongoing crisis, IRF supports several rhino conservation programs in Southern Africa that stand directly on the front lines of the poaching crisis and fight back the trend towards the critical rhino population tipping point – when births can no longer outpace deaths.

Zimbabwe’s Lowveld Rhino Trust

For more than a decade, IRF’s signature program in Africa has focused on the southeastern portion of Zimbabwe, where

we have made substantial investments in the Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT). Many other donors have pulled out of the region due to sociopolitical and financial instability, but IRF has stayed the course with a commitment to securing the critical rhino populations located there.

At the end of June 2016, the Lowveld conservancies had populations of 442 black rhinos (up from 436 in 2014) and 265 white rhinos (up from 241 in 2014). Both black rhino populations are “Key 1,” as determined by the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) criteria (i.e. >100 animals in each population).

The black rhino population in the Lowveld increased from 4% of the national total in 1990 to 90% by end of June 2016 (about 8% of continental Africa’s total). Biological management, strategic translocations of rhinos, support for anti-poaching, informer systems, and legal actions against poachers by the LRT and conservancy owners and staff have all led to this success.

In addition to direct involvement in the monitoring, management, and protection of rhinos in the LRT, IRF is working with the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) and the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) to cre-

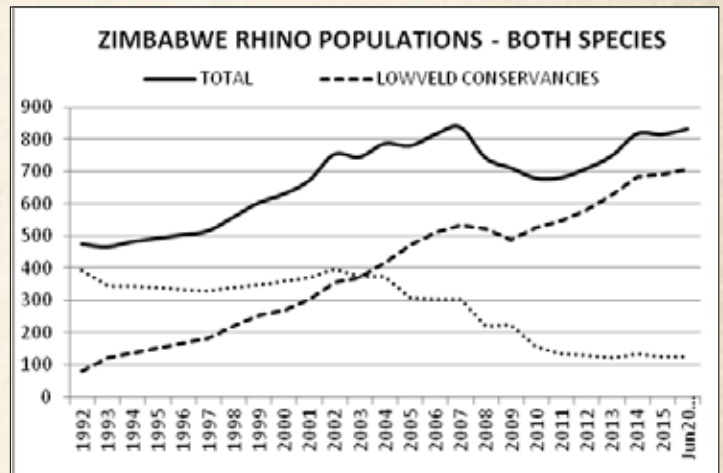


Figure 2. Zimbabwe rhino numbers 1992 - June 2016

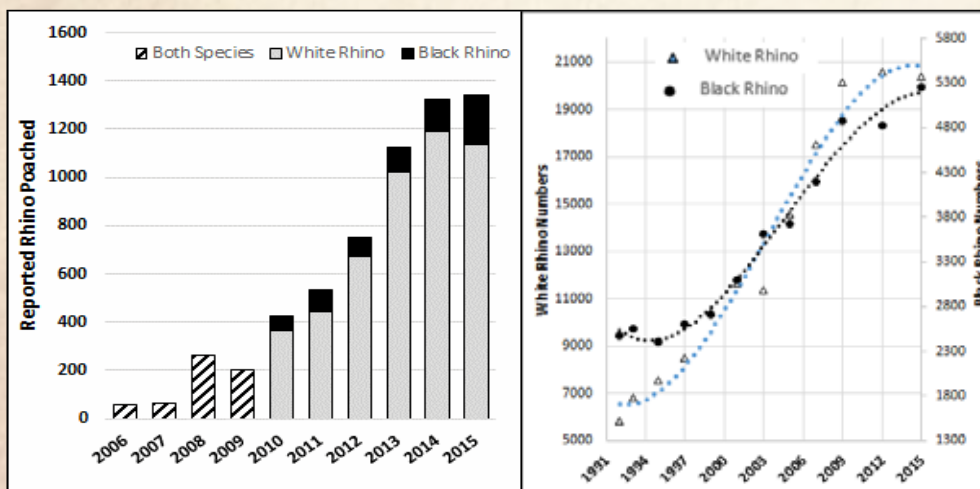


Figure 1. Reported numbers of African rhino poached 2006-2015 (left) with trends in estimated numbers of both species since 1992 (right) (IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group, TRAFFIC and CITES Rhino Working Group data in collaboration with range States; from Emslie, et al., 2016).

ate a new rhino sanctuary in Gonarezhou National Park, which shares a border with Mozambique. Developing this additional population will help insure the species’ survival and future growth.

Despite poaching and land-use/political pressures, the Lowveld rhino populations continue to grow (Figure 2) compared with populations held on state lands, which continue to decrease.

The rhino protection and management field operations require hands-on management of the animals. Between January 2014 and June 2016, LRT’s efforts included the drug-darting of 110 black and 28 white rhinos

Year	Black rhino							White rhino						
	Drug darting	Ear notching	De-horning	Transmitter implant	Translocation	Snare/bullet treatment	Other/vet treatment	Drug darting	Ear notching	De-horning	Transmitter implant	Translocation	Snare/bullet treatment	Other/vet treatment
2014	41	28	9	5	4	4	1	11	8	2	0	0	0	1
2015	48	33	12	11	5	1	1	11	8	2	0	1	0	0
Through Jun 16	21	14	4	10	5	0	0	6	4	0	2	0	0	0
Total Jan 2014 – Jun 2016	110	75	25	26	14	5	2	28	20	4	2	1	0	1

Table 1. Rhino operations undertaken by the LRT from January 2014–June 2016

(Table 1), with no resultant rhino mortalities. By tracking individual animals, LRT ensures the population is safe, secure, and growing. Responses also include snare or bullet wound treatment, de-horning as a poaching preventive measure, and ear notching, which allows for individual rhino identification from a safe distance.

Despite the increasing population, poaching continues in the Lowveld, particularly as South Africa’s anti-poaching response teams become better organized, especially in the Kruger National Park (Figure 3). As poachers are pushed out of

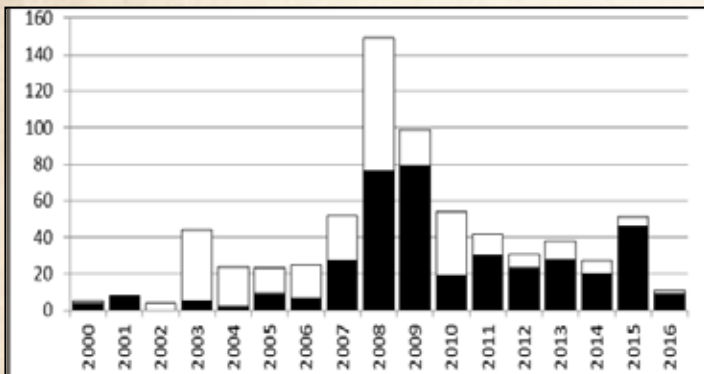


Figure 3. Rhino poaching losses in Zimbabwe known to the LRT, 2000 through June 2016.

South Africa, they are looking for nearby areas where poaching may be easier.

In addition to regular rhino operations, the LRT routinely rescues orphaned calves. In 2016, the Trust supplied formula and other supplies for two black rhino calves being raised in their hand-rearing facility. These rhinos were released back into the wild in May 2016.

While the long-term investment in the LRT has proven an effective model for rhino conservation, IRF realized that shorter-term projects would allow for a more immediate response to escalating poaching.

In 2010 we launched Operation: STOP POACHING NOW to

support the following shorter-term projects:

South Africa’s Great Fish River Nature Reserve

Great Fish River Nature Reserve is home to one of the continent’s most significant southern black rhino populations. This population is growing at a rate of more than 10% per year and has provided founder stock for the reintroduction of black rhino to Zambia’s North Luangwa National Park and other areas.

IRF has supported building and equipping a new guard post in an area where it had been difficult for staff to operate because of a lack of even modest accommodations. Building this guard post was a game-changer, helping to prevent poaching in the area and enhancing staff morale considerably. In March 2016, IRF provided a second grant to Great Fish to purchase a secure and effective digital radio communication system to allow enhanced deployment of protection units, and to increase the security of communication, which keeps private conversations and instructions to rangers from falling into the hands of poachers or those providing information to poaching gangs.

Even with the added precautions, the poaching crisis reached Great Fish in February 2016 with five animals lost, including a calf, by April (Figure 4). Another cow was lost in August under the poacher’s (full) moon; her calf survived and is now being hand-reared. This new pressure on Great Fish is a result of spillover from poaching in Kruger National Park, where security efforts have been heightened.

South Africa’s Phinda Private Game Reserve

Phinda Private Game Reserve was chosen as the first site of the WWF Black Rhino Expansion Project in 2003, when 15 black rhinos were introduced into the reserve. An additional three animals have been added since that time, and more than 10 calves have been born. Phinda has contributed to 100,000ha of black rhino range within the KwaZulu Natal (KZN) province. Phinda conserves a population of southern white rhino of Global Importance (>150 animals), one of the largest private



Figure 4. Four adults and a calf (center) killed in 2016 in Great Fish River Nature Reserve.

populations in the world, and maintains a population of national significance of black rhino (>30 animals).

Phinda has implemented a number of security measures to boost the protection of its rhino population. It was the first private reserve in KZN to partake in a government-funded Extended for Public Works Program with the selection/recruitment and training of an additional 30 armed field rangers. Rangers use patrol dogs to help them with anti-poaching efforts. Specialized equipment such as ground to air radios, thermal cameras, binoculars, ballistic body armor, and high-powered spot/strobe lights have all been incorporated into the teams.

Extensive community participation/involvement and engagement in rhino conservation and security initiatives have been and currently are taking place. Eighteen Community Field Rangers were employed from two neighboring communities. Information networks and channels have been set up and rewards given for information emanating from concerned community and staff members.

Phinda's manager recently told IRF that our early grants "provided a platform to bring people together to develop coordinated responses to poaching incursions in the area. All of the reserves near Phinda are coordinated now, with 24-hour patrols on the major roads and along fence lines. When there is suspicious activity or an incursion, our people in the area drop everything and deploy in their designated role. It's been an enormous effort in team-building; the team shares successes and even though there are sometimes setbacks, positive results get people motivated and excited." Extensive and varied community environmental education programs also are

planned to support the above efforts.

South Africa's StopRhinoPoaching.com

Since 2013, we have supported core organizational costs for StopRhinoPoaching.com (SRP), which bases its support of projects on the size of the rhino population (key populations take preference), existing security efforts, and impact of support. SRP has channeled significant support to larger rhino populations that are managed by dedicated and responsible conservation-minded rhino owners/custodians. SRP focuses on the rangers, anti-poaching units, security, and managers - the thin green line that stands between poachers and rhinos.

Rangers form the frontline in protecting our natural heritage for future generations. Their work is often dangerous, difficult, unappreciated, unrecognized, and unknown. With the current epidemic of poaching of rhino, elephant, and other iconic African species, rangers increasingly find themselves in violent combat situations - and paying a significant price for it.

In 2016, through SRP, IRF supported Operation: Embrace, a ranger well-being program in South Africa's Kruger National Park, which included counseling for rangers who have been engaged in front-line encounters, often suffering from burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other issues.

The program provides counseling for the ranger's families, who are dealing with threats from poachers often living in their own communities, as well as other associated challenges. A counselor visits the park once a week to meet with rangers, usually on a voluntary basis, although Section Leaders can make sessions with the counselor mandatory if they feel it is warranted (e.g., via increased absentee rates, personal observation of changes in behavior). A second counselor visits the park's staff housing complexes once a week as well to provide services to families.

Botswana Black Rhino Reintroduction

IRF and our partner, Wilderness Safaris, have worked for a number of years to establish a new black rhino population in the Okavango Delta. Botswana received 16 rhinos in May and June of 2014, 14 rhinos in May, June, and July of 2015, and eight rhinos in July of 2015 - all from South Africa. The present



The effects of the drought on Swaziland's rhinos. Photo © Chris Serfontein

Figure 5. The Big Game Park team attempts to save a rhino weakened by the drought.

population is 38, with three births and four deaths since the translocations began.

Swaziland's Big Game Parks

Swaziland's Big Game Parks manages three national parks where both white and black rhino populations are growing. However, with huge sums of money being offered for rhino horn by international criminal networks, conservation agencies in Africa cannot hope to sustainably compete on a financial basis. The temptation for otherwise law-abiding personnel and public to be pulled into rhino crime is just too strong for all but the most committed to resist.

Rhino poaching is motivated by the promise of quick and easy wealth. The difficult working conditions and often relatively low salary structures of most conservation organizations lends itself to be fertile ground for the recruitment of corruptible conservation staff (or ex-staff) and opportunistic individuals among the local communities. It stands to reason that if the security system of any given conservation area is of any significance, then criminal networks will go to the trouble of recruiting individuals with local knowledge to ensure a low risk and successful poaching operation.

Southern Africa is currently experiencing one of the worst droughts in living memory. The effects of this drought are

far ranging and have been particularly intense in Swaziland's Lowveld rhino habitat. In 2016, IRF provided an emergency grant to Big Game Parks to purchase and transport hay and lucerne to provide forage for the rhinos. These rhinos have now been receiving supplementary feed for nearly 2 years – this emergency grant helps to ensure that the park does not run out of hay at the end of the dry season and is the only way that these rhinos will be able to survive the drought without being moved to a new location, which may not be as secure as where they currently reside.

Continued Conservation

IRF remains dedicated to supporting those who fight on the front lines to save the remaining rhinos in Africa. The range of challenges, from the black-market demand for rhino horn to record-breaking droughts, may be daunting, but IRF continues to fight for rhinos to not only survive but to thrive.



Reference

Emslie, R.H., Milliken, T., Talukdar, B., Ellis, S., Adcock, K., and Knight, M.H. 2016. African and Asian Rhinoceroses – Status, Conservation and Trade: a report from the IUCN Species Survival Commission (IUCN/SSC) African and Asian Rhino Specialist Groups and TRAFFIC to the CITES Secretariat pursuant to Resolution Conf. 9.14 (Rev. CoP15). <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/17/WorkingDocs/E-CoP17-68-A5.pdf>

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