

LEARNING THE ART OF RHINO TRACKING

AS A TEMPORARY CUSTODIAN, MANAGING THE UMKHUZE SECTION OF THE ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN KWAZULU-NATAL IS A PRIVILEGE THAT I DON'T TAKE LIGHTLY. IN SHORT, THE FUTURE OF OUR HERITAGE LIES WITHIN THE ABILITY TO UNLOCK AND MANAGE HUMAN POTENTIAL. AS SUCH, THE EMPHASIS OF ALL THE PROJECTS AT UMKHUZE HAS BEEN TO SUPPORT OUR STAFF THROUGH IMPROVING LIVING AND OPERATIONAL CONDITIONS.

Eduard Goosen | Cluster Conservation Manager, uMkhuze Game Reserve

Michael Langley | Rhino Monitor



Being a game ranger is not what it used to be. Nowadays we jokingly refer to ourselves as techno rangers! Just about everything has been digitised. Yet, in this era where the fight against rhino poaching is becoming more modernised, we tend to neglect the importance of the human element. There is a critical need to look after our most important assets: our staff. All the technology in the world means nothing without the correct application of the boots on the ground, and that's where the support of Save the Rhino and its donors – USFWS, Rhinos energy, Stichting Vrienden and Zoom Torino – has been so helpful.

With the assistance of USFWS, in February 2017 we appointed a new graduate, Michael Langley, as our latest Rhino Monitor. Michael interned as a cadet at uMkhuze in 2016 and, as a direct result of his hard work and commitment, was offered the two-year contract. He tells us:

“Monitoring black rhino means spending endless hours of patrol on foot. It requires excellent bush skills. This is not easy, and it is extremely dangerous. Einstein was right when he said the basis of all knowledge is experience. I am most privileged to be working with one of the best trackers in the game. Lance Corporal Peterson Myeni has been a field ranger at uMkhuze for more than 30 years. His tracking skills, knowledge and love for this place is unsurpassed. Peterson, like most Zulus, starting plying his trade as a young boy tending his father's cattle. He is renowned amongst his peers not only for his skills, but also for his love and understanding of black rhinos.

“One morning we were on patrol in some really thick bush. We had been walking for four hours but hadn't picked up a single set of rhino tracks since dawn. When we finally came across fresh tracks we started following them, taking our time to make as little noise as possible so as not to 'bump' the rhino. As we came into a clearing, we saw where the rhino had been feeding on a Tamboti tree; there was fresh saliva dripping from the branches. He was eating a metre above my head so he was really big boy! Whilst inspecting, we heard the snap of a twig behind a thick clump of bushes, not more than 20m away. We immediately retreated to put our backpacks down and get our binoculars and camera out. Suddenly, it started pouring with rain – good news as it would deaden our footsteps.

“We managed to sneak around in the treeline and get a good visual of one of his notched ears. We still needed to see his other ear when a strong gust of wind carried our scent straight to him. He immediately charged towards us but the rain seemed to confuse him. He spent the next minute or so running in all directions, with us doing our best in the pouring rain to see his other ear and avoid being gored. Eventually he gave up and charged off into the thicket.

“The thing that really stood out about that moment for me was looking at this rhino and feeling a sense of absolute vulnerability to such an amazing animal. It is extremely rewarding to come back from a patrol with good data and to know that my efforts are contributing to the survival of these magnificent creatures.”