



INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE

The changing role of a ranger



On 1 April 2006, I moved into the ranger house at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. During my first two years, I patrolled extensively, getting to know the local Zulu names of each hill, valley and river, familiarising myself again with big game. I would often go out and take photographs for monitoring our amazing black rhinos. It was during these early years that I had some close encounters.

Dirk Swart | Section Ranger,
Manzibomvu, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

One day in 2008, I bumped into an adult bull. I stalked up to him in the long grass and took some photos. He was unaware of my presence but walking towards me, just five metres away.

I shouted to chase it away, but this boy was not having any of that. He charged. I made a dash for the nearest tree. Luckily the rhino went straight past, but I was now bombarded by angry buzzing insects around my head. I sprinted, shouting and waving my hands about. Eventually I stopped, accepting that I would be badly stung, only to find that the buzzing sound was from the flies that frequent rhinos. They obviously thought the perspiration on me was more tempting.

When I first arrived in Hluhluwe Game Reserve, early warning signs of what lay ahead were starting to become evident. A sting operation ended in the arrest of two suspects, who had posed as guests at the lodge, in possession of rhino horns. In 2007 we began to lose some rhino in the south. By 2009 there were significant losses.

In 2011 we got aerial support, acquiring a small aircraft from the sponsorship of donors, and a helicopter funded by the public. Both would help us to keep a better eye on the whole of the Park.

It was in 2012 that I got a real wake-up-call: three rhinos were shot just off a tourist road, their horns savagely hacked off. From there, the poaching onslaught grew exponentially. Suddenly, all of our work became directed at counter poaching

and other conservation activities such as routine rhino monitoring took a back seat.

A ranger's work went from long days to long days and long nights, patrolling anywhere and everywhere that poachers may strike next. Field rangers were camping up to 10 days in the bush. The need for specialised equipment was vital. Our relationship with Save the Rhino was paramount during these years, receiving essential kit despite our constant budget cuts.

In 2016, we began to work with a professional police unit from the Government, specifically tasked with actions to counter rhino poaching. Now, in 2018, we have set up an Operations Centre in the Park, increasing our ability to relay information quickly and detect poaching activity early. Our rangers have developed their skills, but poaching still continues.

The dramatic shift in the situation has changed a Section Ranger's job to that of almost a full-time law enforcement officer, with little time for anything else. Gone are the more carefree days. My duties now are to put as much protection and deterrence out there as possible. I'm older, wiser, and definitely more experienced than those early days, when my main worries were about avoiding being charged by an angry black rhino.

Since the rhino poaching crisis began, it is often difficult to get away from my station. But despite all of this, I'm determined to continue and keep up the fight, however long it may take.

ALL IMAGES DIRK SWART