



SAVING NAMIBIA'S RHINO

Financed by a few thousand rand from the sale of artwork and driven by the passion of one person, Save the Rhino Trust had humble beginnings.

Over thirty years ago Blythe Loutit had the desire to put an end to the drastic decline of black rhino in the Kunene, then Damaraland and Kaokoland. Using her own Land Rover, rhino monitoring patrols began in 1982 and Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) was born.

Simson Uri-Khob
CEO, SRT

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During those three decades, the population of black rhino in the region has increased with an average annual growth of 4 – 5% through the joint efforts of SRT, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) and Community Conservancies, which are legally recognised, geographically defined areas formed by communities who have united to manage and benefit from wildlife and other natural resources on their land.

Through strategic partnerships within Namibia and beyond, SRT has also raised the profile of this conservation effort at an international level.

As a result many other species have flourished in the region and the Kunene now boasts some of the leading examples of eco-tourism in Southern Africa.

SRT provides consistent patrolling and monitoring of Kunene's unique desert adapted black rhino. This is undertaken by several teams of trackers either from vehicle, camel or foot as well as air reconnaissance.

These activities, along with community development, are the heart of SRT's success. Teams are well supplied with equipment and support to allow them to spend the maximum time in the field.

They feed data back to the SRT team so that the database and detailed knowledge of the rhino, their whereabouts, challenges and community support activities can be maximised.

SRT does not have an easy job – it operates over more than a million hectares of land that has no national park status, few fences and no entry or exit control measures in place.

The fast pace of poaching

The wholesale slaughter of rhinos for their horns has spilled over from South Africa into Namibia. After nearly three decades of population growth this past year we lost 24 rhinos in our area of operation.

The full extent of the poaching came home in November 2014 when MET began a major dehorning exercise in the region. The exercise was helicopter-based and reached areas that had not been covered on foot for some months.

As the programme progressed, more corpses were found. It became clear that poachers had turned what people thought was the region's greatest strength into a weakness – this vast, difficult terrain that was thought to be a natural barrier to poaching was in fact creating a focus point for poachers because of the concentration of rhino and the difficulty of monitoring both wildlife and people in these areas.

With organised crime syndicates now targeting the rhino of the Kunene with terrifying military precision, SRT held an internal review to determine how we needed to adapt and intensify our efforts in the face of this threat. The main conclusions were that a

365 day coverage was vital, and that monitoring rhino alone was no longer a deterrent – people movements need to be followed and reported too.

With support from the Namibian Police and Special Field Force new deployments began late last year. A formal Operations Centre was formed, with funding sought for Koos Verwey, a very experienced and respected conservator, to run the operations.

Though the project was making progress, two weeks into the dehorning operation that involved two fixed-wing aircraft, a helicopter and all the teams deployed, a cow and calf were poached near Palmwag where the SRT headquarters are located.

This presents new risks and threats to SRT teams who now need to be trained and equipped for stealth and night operations.

Adapting to the challenges

The SRT camel team, which Tusk has so generously supported over the years, has done amazing work in the past by reaching otherwise inaccessible areas.

However, with the new threat SRT is facing, the visibility of the patrols and predictability of their schedules, their usefulness has become extremely limited.

After careful consideration, we have reached the conclusion that

we need more feet on the ground, which means disbanding the camel patrols. By selling the animals and specific equipment, SRT will be able to generate some desperately needed cash to meet the new challenges.

Rhino Ranger Incentive Programme

SRT strongly believes that the most cost-effective means of reducing the poaching threat is maintaining a consistent on-the-ground presence while ensuring that local people are engaged and benefit from rhino.

It is clear that in order to protect the black rhino and continue to have their habitat open to them, communities must see direct benefits and be involved in their protection.

In 2011, local community leaders and game guards recognised the need to improve their capacity to protect the rhino on their lands and better fulfil their obligations as 'Rhino Custodians'. In response to this local demand, Save the Rhino Trust, with support from the MET, spearheaded a new initiative called the 'Rhino Ranger Incentive Programme'.

This programme utilises rhino monitoring experts to train a new generation of Rhino Rangers. Groups of local people, chosen by and accountable to their

PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP & BOTTOM
A desert adapted black rhino female with her calf.

Blythe Loutit with the original SRT team.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE L-R
Simson dehorning a rhino.

Black rhino with ear notches for ease of identification.

SRT scouts on a monitoring patrol.

communities, now conduct the rhino monitoring.

The programme provides an enhanced training curriculum, state-of-the-art rhino monitoring and field patrol equipment, and performance-based cash bonuses that enable and incentivise Rhino Ranger teams to complete quality patrols.

Once they acquire the basic skills to effectively monitor the rhino on their land, training in rhino conservation tourism will help guide the development of community-led rhino activities.

The aim is to improve rhino security by generating the critical finances needed to sustain rhino monitoring and enhance the value that people place on keeping rhino alive.

At the heart of this approach is the belief that a future for Africa's wild rhino will only be secured when poaching is no longer tolerated by the local people, when rhino become more valuable alive than dead, and where innovative solutions – grown from the grassroots – are supported through authentic partnerships between government, NGOs and the private sector. 🌱

“ In the 1980s we faced a similar crisis, and together we prevailed. Together, we can do so again. Our strategy includes: dehorning our rhinos in Namibia to discourage the poachers; strengthening cooperations with relevant Conservancies through MOU's involving Rhino Rangers – this has led to an increased workforce giving us more boots on the ground to help patrol and monitor our rhino; and more cooperation with relevant stakeholders such as the MET, Namibian Police and Defence Force, through workshops and joint security patrols.

