

# Tourism and rhino conservation

Similar to many reserves in South Africa, tourism is an integral aspect of the day-to-day running of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP). Tourism brings in much-needed funding, helping to pay staff, maintain infrastructure, and support our biodiversity and community conservation activities.

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

**T**ourists visiting the Park are treated to the spectacular feeling of being in the wild and experiencing nature first-hand, whether that's by enjoying a rhino sighting, spotting our many bird species, witnessing nocturnal life on night drives or walking through the Reserves' stunning wilderness. On occasions however, their visits can also be a wake-up call.



DIRK SWART

Nothing is more shocking for a tourist than coming across a poached rhino with its horns hacked off. This quick reality check raises awareness more than any television programme or talk ever could. The tourist's concern leads to greater awareness in the public and more support to stop poaching, as well as huge anger not only towards poachers, but sometimes also to the staff battling day and night to try prevent it. While social media is an excellent tool for spreading the word, stories can be sensationalised, and misdirected anger

and unproven facts can cause more damage to the staff struggling on the ground than good, as well as interfering with ongoing investigations.

One of the main priorities for us at HiP is rhino security. This major concern obviously affects

the tourism sector. In the past, poachers have posed as tourists, so we cannot afford to be anything but vigilant: vehicles are randomly searched at gates and inside the Park, and if a tourist decides not to follow the rules, they should not be surprised if they are pulled over and interrogated.

As with any wildlife reserve, there are norms, standards and general rules that make common sense, such as not driving too close to a rhino and keeping your distance on a guided walk. It is not only the tourist's life in danger if these rules are broken: if a rhino catches a scent and charges towards a group because they are too close, the animal's life is also endangered because of the need to protect the tour group in self-defence.

However, maintaining a safe distance is not the only issue. Photography is part and parcel of tourism and there are concerns about sharing geo-located photos of rhino on social media. Common sense would say that potential poachers are also watching, so this activity is frowned upon and, thankfully, usually self-governed by concerned nature-lovers. However, there are many positives of tourism. We have had helpful tourists spot injured rhinos that required timely treatment and some individuals have prevented possible poaching incidents. Tourists are part of HiP, they are with us for up to 19 hours a day, and on the law enforcement side, they can also be our eyes and ears.

At Hluhluwe-iMfolozi, we salute the responsible tourists that come and join us to enjoy the Park and the incredible wildlife we have. Without tourists, HiP would be very lonely place indeed and the beauty of what we protect would remain unshared.

