

Planning for more rhinos in Kenya

The urgent threat of poaching has occupied our attention for more than a decade, but we cannot neglect other factors that impact the recovery of rhinos.

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Poaching has plagued the conservation of rhinos in what can only be described as an epidemic for the past 10 to 15 years. As a result, our focus across the continent has been to increase security and preserve existing populations against an insurmountable threat. Biological management and population growth has, inevitably, suffered.

Kenya's long-term vision for rhinos, as articulated in the *Kenya Black Rhino Action Plan 2017–2021*, is “to have a meta-population of at least 2,000 black rhinos of the eastern sub-species (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) in suitable habitats as a global heritage”. This vision will see Kenya contributing towards ensuring secured, viable, growing and valued populations of the subspecies across the vast East African landscape.

Kenya has managed to contain the number of rhinos poached to less than one percent of the national population for the past three consecutive years, enabling us to record positive population growth. There are a number of contributing factors to this statistic that I won't go into here, but it does bring to our attention a new threat that we have largely neglected of late: that is, available space with the capacity to conserve and protect rhinos and increase numbers.

To understand how many rhinos can live in an area, we use the

term 'Ecological Carrying Capacity' (ECC). Using different measurements and metrics, including the amount of food, water and space, the ECC can tell us the number of rhinos that can live healthily in one place. Good practice is to maintain a population at 75% of ECC.

Many of Kenya's rhino conservancies have now reached or exceeded their ECC for rhinos, and this risks giving rise to factors that impact a rhino's biological productivity, including nutritional stress, rising tourism and increased intervals between calving. When we consider that a rhino not breeding optimally is almost as bad as poaching, this paints a very challenging picture.

Rhino conservation comprises a complex dynamic of evolving factors that require management. It is an expensive undertaking and we need innovative financing mechanisms to be developed to ensure sustainability.

In recognition that we will require more suitable habitat in order to realise our overall goal and ultimately Kenya's long-term vision, the Association of Private Land Rhino Sanctuaries (APLRS), with the support of Save the Rhino and Bently Foundation, held a workshop in November 2019 to explore the feasibility of increasing the habitat available for rhinos in Laikipia County.

Laikipia already comprises four established rhino conservancies (Ol Jogi, Ol Pejeta, Lewa and Borana) and we hope that the opportunity exists to expand rhino range into adjacent properties; improving landscape connectivity and bringing a wider group of stakeholders into our rhino conservation efforts.

This would ultimately be good for rhino conservation, but it would also serve to secure habitat for all indigenous species in this landscape.

