

A surreal Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

Driving along the main road from Memorial Gate to Hilltop in mid-April 2020 was a surreal moment for me. Animals had made these well-established roads into new walking trails, made obvious by miles of dung, and rhino middens centred on the road. Driving in my vehicle, I would have to wait patiently for large herds of buffalo to cross, oblivious to the fact the humans had ever commuted up and down these roads.

Dirk Swart | Section Ranger, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

Right: A white rhino at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

Below: Wildlife roadblocks through Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park during lockdown.

The bewildered look of buffalo, impala and lion on seeing a vehicle was clear and extraordinary. I had the sense that these animals, in such a short time-frame, had relegated vehicles and human activity to a distant memory. During the last week of March 2020, the Government of South Africa put the entire country into lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

With the discovery that staff could be exposed to the virus by tourists, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi was put into a total lockdown at least three days before the Government's official date. Due to the urgency of the situation, only three hours were given for day visitors and for staff to prepare before all gates were to be locked. Initially, tourists were locked into the Park and arrangements had to be made to determine how we would deal with such a situation.

After an emergency meeting, it was decided a day later that all tourists and non-essential staff would have to leave the Reserves before the Government's full lockdown began. All law enforcement staff, however, had to remain. Field rangers, some who had already worked for up to six weeks – and were therefore due some time off – were forced to stay, while staff wanting to return were told to stay home.

The Government acted quickly: strict curfews and many regulations, including road blocks, meant that moving around the country was very difficult. In turn, poaching incidents dropped almost to zero during the first six weeks. By this time, a lot of staff had burned out, working day and night without relief. But they continued: protecting rhino, checking fences, burning firebreaks and sustaining the integrity of the Park.



The lack of tourists during this period also meant zero income, which affected budgets and expenditure. Purchasing maintenance equipment and essential items became almost impossible.

By early August, gates were opened, tourists were let back in, and overnight accommodation allowed. Gradually, a sense of normality is returning; however the Park and the surrounding area has a huge mountain to climb to bring business and livelihoods back to normal.

During this period, Save the Rhino initiated a Covid-19 appeal to assist with fundraising for our needs. Some of this has already assisted with personal protection equipment for our rangers and wider team to help prevent the spread of the virus.

It's also helped to maintain day-to-day operations, which have been extremely effected due to the knock on effects of the pandemic. Thank you to all of you for caring for us during these very difficult times.

As I sat in my vehicle a day before the gates were to be opened again, I thought to myself that, for the first time in the modern history of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, the Park had been without visitors for a sustained period of time, quiet, almost undisturbed. It was surreal, but a sense of emptiness prevailed, only fulfilled when the public could once again share in the Park's beauty and glory.



ALL IMAGES: HLUHLUWE-IMFOLOZI PARK