

Zero rhino poaching for the first time in two decades

2020 was a year that we are all likely to remember because of the Covid-19 global pandemic; lockdown, facemasks, travel restrictions, vaccinations, economic depression, job losses. The list goes on. But in Kenya, and certainly in conservation circles, 2020 is the year that we shall remember as the first year in more than two decades that we managed to experience zero rhino poaching as a nation for one calendar year.

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IMAGES JAMIE GAYMER

Whilst we cannot relax our vigil against the ever-prevalent threat of rhino poaching, we can take a moment to celebrate and analyse how and why we have managed to achieve this milestone.

We speculated that poaching cartels would leverage the opportunity to enter conservancies if security was low due to the economic pressure induced by the pandemic. However, we were fortunate to ensure that security remained high: our thanks to the many donors that supported these efforts.

However, Covid-19 was almost certainly a contributor to our zero-poaching achievement. Travel restrictions and government enforcement agencies made it more difficult for poachers to access conservancies and to transport rhino horns. And it's almost certain that the rhino horn consumer prices fell due to the global economic downturn, as well as the spotlight on the illegal trade in biological products. But ultimately, the success cannot be attributed to a single factor. Rhino conservation involves a complex dynamic of evolving parts, too numerous to mention here.

Work in progress

Kenya has managed to reduce and maintain rhino poaching at less than 1% of our national population for several years now, but it has been a work in progress. I firmly believe that government support and the political will to reduce rhino poaching is the primary contributing factor to our success. Kenya has developed a strong collaborative approach to rhino conservation, with the government, communities, private sector and partners working together. It is through this transparent partnership approach that we have been able to develop robust systems to combat rhino poaching.

Due to this achievement, not only did we reach the zero-poaching milestone, but Kenya was also able to surpass the target number of black rhinos in the Kenya Black Rhino Action Plan 2017–2021 (our 5-year national rhino strategy) for the first time. Many conservancies have now neared or exceeded their rhino carrying capacity (the healthy number of rhinos that a specific area can hold) and we are threatened with a lack of space.

Alongside keeping poaching at zero, we desperately need to increase our capacity by securing more land to responsibly conserve rhinos so that they can continue to grow in numbers. It won't be easy, but it's necessary to achieve Kenya's goal of at least 2,000 Eastern black rhinos in suitable habitats across the country.

