

Rhino custodians

Unlike white rhinos, which can be privately owned, all black rhinos in Namibia are owned by the State. Originally, this meant that they were only found on national parks or reserves.

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However, since 1993, many have been moved onto private or communal land, as part of the Government's activities to boost the number of black rhinos in the country. Sparked by Namibia's 'Vision 2030' for its black rhinos – to re-establish the South western black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) in viable, healthy breeding populations throughout its former range – the Black Rhinoceros Custodianship Program (BRCP) started in 1993. Through the programme, black rhinos are translocated onto private or community land, and landowners, under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), become their custodians, reporting back to MEFT regularly on their status, and bearing the costs and benefits that the rhinos may provide.

In the first year, 11 animals were translocated to two freehold farms with a combined area size of 29,300 hectares. Today, there are 27 partnerships in the BRCP, covering an area of 847,100 hectares, and hosting a significant black rhino population.

The black rhino population in Namibia's Custodianship Programme has, to date, outperformed all other black rhino populations in the country, with an annual growth rate of 7.8%. And this is despite the substantial impact of poaching during 2018 and 2019. However, the Programme's success is also its downfall: many properties have reached (and some exceeded) their biological carrying capacity (the total number of rhinos that the area can hold while ensuring the population is healthy), causing a decline in the annual growth rate. Now, our challenge is to find more suitable habitat to house the 'excess' animals to allow populations to continue to grow, while also ensuring enough capacity within MEFT to manage the population as it becomes larger.

Custodians join the Programme to support black rhino conservation, and often this comes at a cost. No financial support has ever been available to them, even to provide security, which – particularly since the beginning of the current poaching crisis in 2008 – is very costly. This is testimony to the commitment of those involved. At MEFT, we are currently drafting a new Black Rhinoceros Custodianship Strategy: rewarding the custodians who have shown such commitment in recent years is an important factor that will be addressed.

Nevertheless, the Namibian Black Rhinoceros Custodian Programme is a true conservation success story. The number of Southwestern black rhinos has significantly increased in the country since 1993, reaching more than 1,800 today. The programme, alongside our other initiatives, will hopefully continue to provide the iconic black rhino with a future in Namibia.

They adapted to the rocky terrain like a duck to water. (We're going to set a trend for a new metaphor: like a mule to the desert!) Even on high mountains and up sheer rock formations, the mules seemed to thrive.

Now came the final test: introducing them to wildlife. The first animal they met was a lion that got into their stables. The incident showed us that the mules would protect each other and have a clear leader. The leader mule fought the lion and protected its herd but, sadly, later died. When they encountered a trumpeting elephant, two mules fled with their rider, while others stood fascinated. So far, they've not seen a black rhino. It will be interesting to see how they react.

Another very interesting observation was their keen sense of smell, demonstrated one day by bringing their nostrils down to the ground while following the scent of a leopard.

We expect a lot of adventure, learning and hidden challenges with our mule project. However, we are convinced that the mule project's mission to access and provide better coverage to more remote areas and increase black rhino sightings will ultimately become yet another effective and innovative tool in our rhino conservation kit.



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