

## A beacon of hope for black rhinos in Kunene

Namibia is one of the driest countries on earth. Rain here is hugely variable, with an average of 650 mm per year in the north-east to as little as 150 mm per year in the north west. Since 2012 the entire north west of Namibia has been experiencing a longer dry period than usual.

Lorna Dax | Programmes and Partnership Development, Save the Rhino Trust Namibia

With El Niño set to come into play during our upcoming summer months here in the southern hemisphere, we are preparing for the worst. Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) has been active in the arid north-west for more than 40 years. During this time, staff members of the Trust – some of whom are still part of the team today – have lived through several boom-and-bust cycles, typical of the desert environment. These cycles are characterised by a succession of wetter-than-average years followed by drier-than-average years, and are linked to global weather trends.

Several dozen natural springs dot the 25,000 km<sup>2</sup> landscape where we operate. These springs represent lifelines for the desert-adapted fauna of the region, like the Southwestern black rhino. Less rain during the past decade means that many of these springs – fed by underground aquifers – have dried up completely.

One area, named the ‘Top Barab’ patrol zone, has been significantly impacted by the dry weather. Previously, it has been a core rhino-breeding location, thanks to the water provided by springs. In the early 2000s, more than a dozen rhinos moved freely in this area. However, the combination of an upsurge in poaching and the more recent absence of naturally occurring water has meant that rhinos have largely left this zone.

One of our general principles at SRT is to allow natural events to take their course, and this is particularly true with the complex underground water table in the region. We have been mindful of not upsetting the natural water cycle, which has evolved and characterises the area. Therefore, we have set out to restore the spring at Top Barab through traditional pit excavation techniques, as opposed to invasive borehole drilling. Our team has successfully dug out the well (*top right*), giving hope for the black rhino population and diverse wildlife that roam the region.



Although we are hopeful for the spring to provide adequate water for the rhinos and patrol teams, more needs to be done. There is

a need to conduct proper testing and analysis of underground water levels, and to open or uncover more natural springs and ensure they are sustainable long-term.

The story serves as an inspiring narrative of teamwork, innovation and adaptive management as the patrol team put “all hands on deck” to restore water supply in the area.

### El Niño is part of the natural climate phenomenon called the El Niño Southern Oscillation.

The name ‘El Niño’ is widely used to describe the warming of sea surface temperature that occurs every few years. An El Niño is declared when sea temperatures in the tropical eastern Pacific rise 0.5°C above the long-term average.

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