

Going wild for rhinos

Going wild or 'rewilding' is a recent focus for many species, including African rhinos. Black rhinos in late 2021 numbered 6,195, of which 164 were in semi-wild areas with only few in intensive conditions (mostly in South Africa) and 218 were in *ex-situ* collections (zoos and sanctuaries outside of rhinos' natural habitat).

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Of the Eastern black rhino subspecies, 10% are in zoos, and these animals could help improve wild populations if they can adapt when returned to nature. It is different for Southern white rhinos. By 2021, 37% of the 15,942 Southern white rhinos lived in semi-wild and intensive areas (4,883), or *ex-situ* collections (1,077).

The biggest semi-wild Southern white rhino population is in South Africa. A private owner, John Hume, acquired 957 rhinos from 98 different sites in South Africa from 2008 to 2016, when poaching was a huge threat. His rhinos increased at 9% per year at the beginning and, more recently, at 7.5% per year. By 2023, there were about 2,000 rhinos in total. Good management practices have maintained genetic diversity.

The initiative, called Platinum Rhino, has expensive security costs, which its owner can no longer afford. Platinum Rhino was put up for sale earlier this year. At the time of writing, negotiations are underway for its purchase and for the potential rewilding of many of the rhinos.

Platinum Rhino has showed how well intensive breeding can perform for Southern white rhinos, while raising awareness. Although this subspecies does well in captivity or semi-wild conditions, it also has the lowest risk of disappearing of all five extant rhino species. Most precarious are the Sumatran and Javan rhinos: with total populations of fewer than 80; both species are at the brink of extinction because of poaching and habitat loss.

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The trade-offs around intensive and *ex-situ* rhino populations rely on analyses of conservation needs of all species. In Africa, the role of rhinos in the wild is key for species diversity and recovery in large ecosystems. There are always lessons to learn. Policies that incentivise rhino conservation can have unintended consequences. Governments should support initiatives but, as in South Africa, cannot be responsible for non-sustainable private models.

Currently, there are more Southern white rhinos than any other rhino subspecies (or species), but there are not enough safe places in the wild for them. This means, at a place like Platinum Rhino, breeding needs to be slowed down to allow time to find or create safe places, and rewild all the rhinos over a 10 to 15 year period. Finding safe places for rhinos in Africa, with increasing pressures on land, has become critical.

Thanks to Lucy Vigne, Susie Ellis and Mike Knight for their contributions to this article.

