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Black rhinos moved to Kenya's Loisaba Conservancy as species recovers

by **Graeme Green** on 13 February 2024

- *Twenty-one critically endangered black rhinos are settling into their new home at Loisaba Conservancy in northern Kenya.*
- *The translocations were prompted by the fact that Kenya's 16 black rhino sanctuaries are running out of space — a remarkable turnaround from rampant poaching in the 1970s and '80s that reduced the country's rhino population from 20,000 to fewer than 300.*
- *The translocated animals, 10 bulls and 11 cows, arrived at Loisaba from Nairobi National Park, Ol Pejeta Conservancy, and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.*
- *The animals were carefully moved over a period of three weeks and released into a fenced sanctuary covering nearly half the conservancy, marking the first time the species has been present at Loisaba since 1976.*

Twenty-one critically endangered black rhinos have been safely delivered to Loisaba Conservancy in northern Kenya from other parts of the country, part of a wider mission to secure the long-term future of the species in Kenya.

"It's been a massive operation," says Tom Silvester, CEO of Loisaba Conservancy, who oversaw the process. "It's incredible to see black rhinos back in Loisaba after an absence of 50 years."

Wildlife translocations are usually driven by a need to create new breeding strongholds and return native species to locations where they've gone locally extinct. But the primary motivation in this case is the fact that Kenya's 16 black rhino sanctuaries are running out of space — a sign of a remarkable turnaround in the country.



Two flatbed trucks carrying rhinos and a police escort vehicle wind through the hills of Loisaba Conservancy to where the animals will be released. Image © Lewa Wildlife Conservancy/Jeff DeKock.

Four decades ago, black rhinos were on the brink of extinction in Kenya, with numbers down from around 20,000 in the 1970s to fewer than 300 in the mid-1980s. According to the last count, in December 2023, there are now an estimated 1,004 black rhinos, with the government aiming to have 2,000 by 2037.

“After the big poaching crashes that brought rhinos right down, we’ve reached a point where sanctuaries on government or private land are on or above their ecological carrying capacity,” Silvester told Mongabay. “They’re overcrowded. Overcrowding means you get territorial fighting, bulls killing other bulls, and a steep decline in the birth rate.”

Black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*) are native to Eastern and Southern Africa. The IUCN, the global wildlife conservation authority, lists the species as [critically endangered](#), with just [6,468 across the continent as of the end of 2022](#). According to the IUCN’s African Rhino Specialist Group, at least 10,000 rhinos across Africa have been illegally killed over the last decade to feed the demand for rhino horn on the black market. Rhino horn is popular in China and other

parts of Asia due to the false belief that it has medicinal properties. At least 561 rhinos were poached across the continent in 2022.

Loisaba, a 23,500-hectare (58,000-acre) wildlife *conservancy* in the highlands of central Kenya, was previously home to healthy populations of eastern black rhinos (*D. b. michaeli*), the same subspecies being returned to the area. But they've been locally extinct since 1976 due to rampant poaching.

The translocation project is a collaboration between Loisaba Conservancy and the state-run Kenya Wildlife Service, with support and funding for the translocations (at around \$10,000 per animal) and care, monitoring and protection for the rhinos' first five years at Loisaba coming from conservation NGOs The Nature Conservancy, Space for Giants, and San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance.

The animals — 10 bulls (male) and 11 cows (female) — were transported to Loisaba from three locations across Kenya: Nairobi National Park, Ol Pejeta Conservancy, and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.

"This is an exciting milestone for Kenya's efforts in black rhino conservation. The heartbreaking decline witnessed in the 1970s through the 1990s has been reversed, necessitating more space for this once near-extinct species," said Munira Bashir, Kenya program director for TNC. "What's even more heartening is that the devastating impact of poaching, which wreaked havoc on our rhino populations, has dramatically decreased. It's been hovering around zero year after year."

Kenya has managed to almost eliminate poaching. "The government took a big step by passing the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act in 2013," Bashir said. "This law didn't mess around — it slapped hefty penalties on anyone involved in wildlife crime, especially those targeting critically endangered species, like rhinos. Security got a serious upgrade in state-owned areas, local communities, and private conservancies, which played a key role in putting the brakes on the poaching problem."

Other countries can now learn from Kenya's example, Bashir added. "It boils down to a combination of the government's commitment, support from conservation organizations, and the cooperation of communities living near protected areas to protect the wildlife. While we've made significant progress,

Kenya's rhinos still confront various threats, including climate change, diseases, resurging poaching, and habitat degradation."



The rhinos, each weighing up to 1,400 kilograms (nearly 3,100 pounds), were tranquilized, captured, and loaded into individual wood-and-steel crates, which were then transported in sets of three. Image courtesy of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance.



Kenya Wildlife Service veterinarian Dr. Matthew Mutinda monitors a rhino at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy as a helicopter herds it away from the team attending to a nearby tranquilized rhino. Image © Lewa Wildlife Conservancy/Jeff DeKock.

The three-week translocation of black rhinos to Loisaba began on Jan. 16. The animals, each weighing up to 1,400 kilograms (nearly 3,100 pounds), were tranquilized, captured, and loaded into individual wood-and-steel crates, which were then transported in sets of three, with the final animals arriving on Feb. 2.

Translocations are risky processes that have previously caused animal fatalities. “The biggest challenge, from a veterinary perspective, is making sure you keep them alive during the phase where they’re knocked out,” Silvester said. “They’re under M99 [etorphine], a very strong immobilizing drug. Just like humans, where some people react badly to anesthesia differently, you can get a rhino who reacts badly and stop breathing, and it can be critically dangerous. We cause the animals as little stress as possible. We don’t have them in the crate for too long. We don’t have them under anesthetic for too long. We make sure everything is quick, organized, and calm at release.”

In 2018, a similar attempt to translocate 11 black rhinos in Kenya ended in disaster, with all the animals dying shortly after they arrived at Tsavo East National Park. Ten died of stress, dehydration, and salt poisoning due to a higher salinity in their new water supply, with the sole surviving rhino later picked off by lions. Wildlife NGO African Parks also lost four out of six black rhinos they'd moved from South Africa to Zakouma National Park in Chad in 2018, due to the animals not being able to find the right nutrition.

"Because of the catastrophic result in 2018, when black rhinos were translocated to Tsavo East in Kenya, all the protocols were revisited and everything was gone through with a fine-tooth comb," Silvester said. "KWS were keen to make sure the same mistakes wouldn't be made again. There's been a lot of mitigation planning, with every scenario thought through. But we're dealing with wildlife, with lots of factors that may or may not result in potential fatalities. There are inherent risks, but you try to mitigate for as many as possible."

The 21 black rhinos were released straight into a specially created, fenced sanctuary that covers nearly half of Loisaba's total area.

"When we did the ecological assessment on browse, to make sure there's enough food, we got a gold-star rating. There has been rigorous testing of the water, which is what went wrong down in Tsavo," Silvester said.

"What I'm worried about is the rhinos getting out of the sanctuary fence — when they first arrive, they're careening around all over the place, looking for scent or a place to make a territory. They're disoriented and hitting the fence," he said. "Then there's the issue of predation. We've got a lot of lions, which haven't seen rhinos ever in their lives, and suddenly these things turn up that look rather tasty to lions. That will be a challenge."

Despite the dangers, this kind of wildlife translocation is seen as vital to securing the long-term future of rhinos and restoring healthy ecosystems.



The black rhinos' presence is expected to boost tourism and deliver other benefits. "Black rhinos are interesting beasts, almost like a 'dinosaur-unicorn,'" Silvester said. "There are a lot of jobs being created and benefits for the community. The security for the rhinos benefits the communities who live around the protected area."

Once the rhinos are settled, it's hoped they will multiply. "Within the next 24 months, we want to see births in Loisaba," Silvester said. "Within a year, we might have a calf on the ground, which would be a big deal. Going forward, the measure will be to lose none and breed lots. In 10 years' time, if we've got a healthy population of more than 30 rhinos, I'd be really pleased."

With 21 the "magic number" agreed by scientists as being sufficient for a breeding rhino population, there are currently no plans to bring additional black rhinos to Loisaba. But the recent arrivals could be joined by other "cousins" in future, with Silvester watching with interest a high-tech mission in Ol Pejeta

Conservancy to bring northern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) back from functional extinction.

“Southern white rhinos [*C. s. simum*] were never in Loisaba,” he said. “That’s why we haven’t looked at bringing southern white rhino back here, as they’re exotic. But northern white rhinos would’ve been here, so if there’s success in bringing northern white rhinos back from the brink of extinction, then we could see northern white rhinos here again.”

Banner image: A black rhino in Loisaba Conservancy. Image courtesy of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance.