

The **Rhino Ark Fence** skirting the Aberdare National Park & Conservation Area ranks as one of the most ambitious, and important, conservation projects ever undertaken in Kenya. Its success has been the result of unparalleled collaboration involving Government agencies, private individuals (in the shape of 'Rhino Chargers'), local communities, international donors, and – now, increasingly – big business as well.

The **Safaricom Foundation** recently weighed in with funding for an 'elephant corridor' linking the Aberdare Forest with the outlying massif of Kipipiri...

Rhino Ark Fence

When a Black Rhino charges, it simply lowers its head and comes directly at you in a straight line – no matter what lies in its path.

This is the idea behind the Rhino Charge, the uniquely challenging off-road motoring event that for nearly 20 years has been staged annually in Kenya to raise funds for the conservation of wildlife and threatened forest habitats on the Aberdare Mountains, the nation's most important water catchment area.

Restricted to 60 entrants, the Charge sees drivers in a variety of 4x4 vehicles – often suitably modified – tackle uncompromising terrain in a bid to clock the *shortest* distance in getting to visit all 12 of the guard posts on the route by negotiating as straight a line as possible between posts. Money is raised through the sponsorship of participating teams.

The Rhino Charge is the brainchild of Rhino Ark, a charitable trust set up in 1988 when the Black Rhinoceros was on the brink of being extirpated from Kenya. Then, the species' numbers countrywide had – within just a few decades – plummeted from well in excess of 20,000 to fewer than 350 animals. Most were poached for their horns, which could then fetch as much as US\$ 1,500 a kilo on illegal markets. The huge carcasses of the animals were simply left to rot in the sun.

Rhino Ark's initial objective was to help the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to raise funds with which to build a fence around the Aberdares Salient: that eastern 'tongue' of the Aberdare National Park where the two celebrated forest lodges – Treetops and The Ark – are sited, but where the poaching of rhinos had long presented a problem.

The success of this initial operation led Rhino Ark to embark, with the KWS, on the vastly more ambitious

task of erecting a game-proof fence around the *entire* Aberdare National Park and Conservation Area.

The fence would be strong enough to keep elephants and other wild animals inside and away from people's farms, so defusing human-wildlife conflict, while at the same time keeping poaching gangs and illegal loggers out of the Aberdare Forest, which is *the* vital catchment area on which many millions of Kenyans (including *all* Nairobi's residents) rely for their supplies of water.

Some 18 years in the making, the resulting fence – running to 388 km and enclosing an area of more than 1,500 km² – is on schedule for completion before the end of this year: 2007.

Fund-raising for this mammoth undertaking began in quite a small way. The inaugural Rhino Charge in 1988 netted just KSh 250,000 (about US\$ 3,500). And for many

Further information on the **Rhino Ark Aberdare Fence**, as well as a complete list of all the project's corporate sponsors, is posted on < www.rhinoark.org/news >.

years. *all* the Rhino Ark Aberdare Fencing Project's funding came from dedicated Rhino Chargers – and from their sponsors, who in those early days were often just committed private individuals and friends. Year after year, as each successive Rhino Charge became larger than the one before, the fence went up, slowly yet surely.

The 18 Rhino Charge events held to date have collectively brought in some KSh 500-million (the equivalent of about US\$ 7-million). There are certain teams of avid Chargers that, year after year, raise more than KSh 1-million through their participation alone. And some teams – notably those of Mike and Sarah Higgins, in Car No. 22, and Alan McKittrick, Bruce Knight and Nick Hutchinson, in Car No. 5 – regularly drum up sponsorship worth more than KSh 5-million (roughly US\$ 70,000) a time. Indeed, these two teams have between them managed to raise an astounding KSh 54-million (US\$ 770,000) over a ten-year period!

Over recent years, as the benefits the Rhino Ark Conservation Fence have become more apparent, so the project has been able to attract substantial *direct* funding as well, over and above sums brought in solely through the Rhino Charge. Major project donors have included the European Union's Biodiversity Conservation Programme, which between 2002 and 2006 contributed KSh 24.2-million (about US\$ 345,000), and the Nation Media Group's Nation Aberdare Forest Fund (with a contribution over the same period of KSh 18.4-million, or US\$ 262,000).

The Safaricom Foundation has weighed in too – with direct funding of KSh 4-million towards the construction of a fenced elephant corridor between the western Aberdare and the outlying massif of Mount Kipipiri. This corridor, while not provided for in the original Fence Plan, has been included in a bid to eliminate the serious human–elephant conflict that has been experienced in the past as elephant herds move back and forth across the upper Wanjohi Valley separating the Aberdare Forest from the Kipipiri Forest, on land that comes under the jurisdiction of the Kenya Forest Department.

In April 2005, moreover, staff with Safaricom Limited visited the Mathioya River Valley on the eastern slopes of the Aberdares to help with the erection of another section of the fence. After carrying tools, wire, and poles up steep and slippery forest tracks, the hands-on staff members were able, despite the rough terrain, to help extend the fence by nearly 400 metres.

The Rhino Ark Conservation Fence Project is justly hailed as a triumph, not just of productive collaboration between Government agencies (in the shape of both the KWS and the Forest Department) and private individuals, on the one hand, and big business and the donor community, on the other; it is also a model of local community participation. The Kekika Fencing Committee, representing farmers from the Kereita, Kinari, and Kamae communities on the SW Aberdares, has – for example – contributed labour worth KSh 2.7-million (about US\$ 38,000) towards construction of a section of the fence.

Donations big and small continue to be solicited, meanwhile, through regular advertising on TV, radio, and in the print media, with the result that Kenyans from all walks of life now appear (in a rare show of unanimity in the country today) to be fully behind the project.

All the project's original aims are today being vindicated: There is far less conflict between elephants and other wild animals on one side of the fence and farmers on the other side. In the forest, populations of some wild species – such as the Mountain Bongo and the Giant Forest Hog – are showing welcome signs of a recovery. And much of the forest cover is now far better protected against the depredations of loggers and charcoal makers.

The Rhino Ark Conservation Fence, when complete, will enclose Kenya's largest ecological island. The fence will then be managed and maintained in perpetuity, ensuring that this – one of Africa's most important conservation areas for water catchment, as well as for both wildlife and indigenous forest and upland flora – will *remain* protected for posterity.

– Storm Stanley



Partying to the cause: Intrepid Rhino Chargers on wheels (above) have, over the years, raised millions of shillings towards construction of the Rhino Ark fence. Below: Safaricom staffers play their part in erecting a section of the fence.

