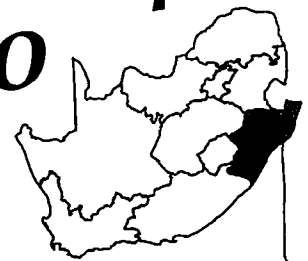




Getting communities to help protect the black rhino



Mkhuze
KWAZULU-NATAL

Historically the preserve of state conservation efforts and wealthy white game ranchers, black rhino conservation in South Africa has moved to the next level. Black communities are now taking on the shared responsibility for keeping this endangered icon from extinction. Lloyd Phillips reports.

“IT USED TO BE QUITE A MATTER OF pride in rural black communities to steal an animal to eat from a white man’s game ranch. But now our communities are realising the value of looking after wildlife, especially since they now own game ranches and reserves through the land claims process,” says a member of the Gumbi community from the Mkhuze region of northern Zululand.

The comment shows how conservation was viewed by SA’s have-nots – as an elitist practice and a low priority in the face of apartheid and poverty. However, previously disadvantaged people are now coming to realise the intrinsic and economic value of conservation, and participate actively in the process.

Land claimants around the country are increasingly becoming partners in the country’s multimillion-rand conservation and tourism industry, and this concept is developing to include the conservation of endangered species.

A new approach to new land

The Gumbi community is an isolated and poverty-stricken group that lodged land claims on five farms adjoining their tribal

area. The claims were settled in 2005, but the community did not start building houses on their new land, or divide it up into small-scale agricultural plots or graze their livestock on it at random. Instead, a communal decision was taken to consolidate most of the land into a viable and sustainable game reserve which would not only earn an income from the booming hunting and ecotourism industries, but

‘Empowering black communities is a priority in conservation, and Somkhanda is an example.’

actively contribute to conserving the country’s wildlife for future generations.

Under the leadership of iNkosi Zebelon Gumbi, the community has established the 11 500ha Somkhanda Game Reserve adjoining their settlement. They also have an additional 7 000ha of game ranch land, currently under concession to an SA hunting outfit that arranges packages for foreign hunters.

While this 7 000ha is an important generator of the income needed to develop Somkhanda into a fully-fledged

conservation area, it will one day be incorporated into the existing game reserve as planning and finances permit.

The Gumbi’s Somkhanda reserve was chosen by the WWF/Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife Black Rhino Range Expansion Project (BRREP) as community partners with the project, the first in SA. As state conservation areas become filled to capacity with endangered black rhino

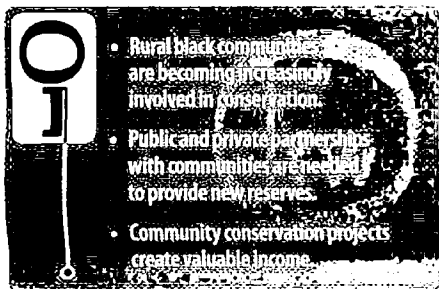
(*Diceros bicornis minor* – a subspecies) due to the success of provincial conservation efforts, the BRREP is seeking suitable privately owned conservation areas to expand the black rhinos’ range.

SA’s WWF project leader for the BRREP, Dr Jacques Flamand, says, “There are only about 3 700 black rhino left in the wild, many in reserves managed by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. However, the protected areas have finite borders and black rhino are running out of space. They could exceed the ecological carrying capacity,

LEFT: The entrance to Somkhanda Game Reserve in northern Zululand. Partnerships between public, private and community conservation bodies are essential in protecting endangered species, and an important spin-off is the creation of jobs for people like Somkhanda game guard Sibusiso Mathenjwa who proudly shows off Somkhanda's new signboard.

FAR LEFT: A sedated, bound and blindfolded black rhino prior to being released in Somkhanda Game Reserve.

PHOTOS: LLOYD PHILLIPS



resulting in a density-related decline in their population growth rate."

The BRREP's vision is to have a viable metapopulation, or artificially fragmented populations, of more than 1 000 *Diceros* throughout the species' former home range, supported by a shared commitment from the owners of private, community and state land in KZN. The project aims to have at least five key metapopulations, of which KZN is one, increasing at an average rate of 5% per year through economically and sociopolitically sustainable conservation.

Empowering communities in conservation

"Empowering black communities is a priority in conservation, and Somkhanda is an example where it is really starting to happen," Flamand explains. "This has required intensive discussions with the Gumbi community. They have also increased their awareness of the importance of protecting the black rhino and the conservation and tourism value of having black rhino on their game reserve. The Gumbi are very enthusiastic about being the first community partners in the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project."

"When land was gone, there were no opportunities," iNkosi Gumbi says. "Now there is work in security, protecting animals from poachers, and there is work at the lodges on our land. We have set aside land for farming and settlement, and some for development projects that will boost the Gumbi economy. We are asking our people to think like businesspeople. It is not just about building a place and relying on cattle any more – now we

ask people to work and get money." Recently a founder population of 11 black rhino were released onto the reserve. They are still owned by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, but as the population grows, ownership of the offspring will be shared on a 50:50 basis between the Gumbi community and Ezemvelo.

Speaking at the release of the rhino into Somkhanda, the deputy minister of the National Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, saluted the Gumbi community and its leaders for showing true courage and foresight in accepting the opportunity and responsibility of caring for the black rhino on their land: "As the first community to become partners in this important project, you are pioneering a way that we hope many others will follow."

Parental affection for the rhino Nathi Gumbi, director of Somkhanda, accepted the offer. "These may be dangerous animals that we will have to monitor with care, but we will look after them as if they are our children," he says. "Thank God that the white people who took our land also loved it. Now we have the land back and we shall also love it and look after it as our ancestors loved it."

The WWF and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife are committed to helping the Gumbi community manage the black rhino population effectively. "Partnerships with both private and communal landowners are essential for the future of conservation," says Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife's CEO, Khulani Mkhize. "For conservation to grow and thrive, local communities must become significant stakeholders with a real interest in ensuring its future. The partnership with the Gumbi and Somkhanda is an example of this principle in action, and we are proud and excited to be a part of it."

• Contact the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project on (033) 845 1856, e-mail jflamand@wwf.org.za or visit www.panda.org.za/black_rhino.htm. |fw



ABOVE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

• The financial and conservation sustainability of Somkhanda Game Reserve is set to flourish. This 11 500ha reserve is ideal for the conservation of the black rhino.

• Representatives of key stakeholders in the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project and the Somkhanda Game Reserve (from left) iNkosi Zebelon Gumbi, leader of the Gumbi community; Khulani Mkhize, CEO of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife; and Dr Jacques Flamand, WWF project leader.

• From left, Ezemvelo officer Chris Kelly with Phinda Private Game Reserve's Simon Morgan, who is helping him attach a tracing device to the horn of one of the black rhino released into Somkhanda Game Reserve.

• From left, Wanda Gama and Sibusiso Mathenjwa of the Gumbi community forming part of the black rhino monitoring team in Somkhanda.