

RHINO NOTES

Update on the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project: local community receives black rhinos

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History was made recently when 11 black rhinos were released onto the Somkhanda Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Somkhanda is the first community-owned land to become a partner in the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project.

The project is a partnership between WWF and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and is supported by the Mazda Wildlife Fund.

Somkhanda Game Reserve is owned by the Gumbi community, which successfully claimed five commercial game farms under the land restitution process. Rather than turn the whole area into settlement and farming, the community leaders decided to zone their land for economic sustainability. The zones include areas for conservation, development and commercial cattle farming.

WWF's Dr Jacques Flamand, leader of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project, said empowering black communities to become stakeholders is a priority in conservation, and Somkhanda is an example where it is really starting to happen.

iNkosi Zebelon Gumbi, head of the Gumbi royal family, explains: 'When the land was gone, there were no opportunities. Now there are opportunities. There is work in security protecting animals from poachers. And there is work at the lodges. We have set aside some 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. We are living in modern times. It is not just building a place and relying on cattle any more. Now we ask people to work and get money.'

But conservation always involves the heart as well as the head. Nathi Gumbi, director of Somkha-

nda Game Reserve, says: 'When the Gumbis were moved from their land, we had no choice. But thank God the white people who took our land also loved it. So our land is still beautiful. Now we have the land back and we shall also love it and look after it as our ancestors loved it.'

The founder population of black rhinos—the 11 that are being released now—belongs to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. When the population grows, ownership of the offspring will be shared 50/50 between the Gumbi community and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. 'But the reality is that these animals belong to all of us—to KwaZulu-Natal, to South Africa, to Africa, to our children and our children's children,' said Rejoice Mabudafhasi, deputy minister of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, who attended the release. 'They are our heritage, our responsibility, our privilege. The Gumbi leadership has shown the courage and foresight to accept that opportunity and that responsibility and we salute you for that. It may not always be easy. There will be challenges and setbacks. It will be hard work. But it will be worth it. As the first community to become partners in this important project, you are pioneering a way that we hope many others will follow.'

The black rhino is still critically endangered, although numbers have increased to about 3700 from a low point of around 2500 in the 1990s. The Black Rhino Range Expansion Project supports ongoing protection of existing populations but also aims to increase land available for black rhino conservation, thus reducing pressure on existing reserves and providing new territory in which the animals can rapidly increase in number. This is done by forming strategic

partnerships with landowners within the historic range of the black rhino. The first three partner sites were Mun-ya-wana Game Reserve, Zululand Rhino Reserve and Pongola Game Reserve.

There are now 70 black rhinos on project sites in KwaZulu-Natal, of which 6 are calves born on

the sites. These rhinos comprise approximately 15% of the black rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal. Through the project, black rhinos have been reintroduced onto nearly 70,000 hectares of land so far.

Conservation strategy for black rhinos and management guidelines for white rhinos launched in Kenya

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The third edition of ‘Management strategy for the black rhino in Kenya and management guidelines for the white rhino in Kenya, 2007–2011’ was launched on 31 October 2007 at Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) headquarters in Nairobi. The occasion was presided over by the chair of KWS Board of Trustees and attended by a multitude of rhino stakeholders including donors, conservation organizations, the private sector, local communities, the diplomatic corps, IUCN, and the African and Asian Rhino Reintroduction and Veterinary Specialist Groups.

This five-year rhino conservation and management strategy was developed at a rhino stakeholders’ workshop in February 2007. A draft document was circulated to other stakeholders including the African Rhino Specialist Group for comments and input before its ratification by the KWS Board of Trustees. The process aimed at ensuring that KWS continues to make the most appropriate strategic approaches in managing, making decisions and using its resources, in line with its 2005–2010 strategic plan. Figure 1 presents facets of the strategy graphically.

During the next few years, Kenya will move into a new phase of black rhino conservation. This third edition of its management strategy and guidelines retains the vision of conserving in situ at least 2000 black rhinos in Kenya. It includes revised goals and strategic objectives, and it emphasizes the 2007–2011

strategy period as the turning point in significantly increasing black rhino numbers. The current goal for the eastern black rhino in Kenya is to maintain a minimum growth rate of 6% per annum in established sanctuaries, achieve a minimum population of 150 black rhinos in free-ranging areas, and realize population growth of a minimum of 20 rhinos in montane forest areas—all aimed at achieving 700 black rhinos by 2011.

The long-range vision of 2000 black rhinos cannot be achieved within fenced areas alone and therefore the remaining still-extensive range and intact habitats in Tsavo, Meru and northern Kenya will need to be secured and made available over the next five years to enable the planned translocation of black rhinos from sanctuaries that have attained ecological or social carrying capacity. With sound science, effective protection, and monitoring and community engagement, this should be possible. Aiming towards this goal, the KWS Board of Trustees approved implementing an intensive protection zone (IPZ) in Tsavo West National Park, where black rhinos will be translocated in 2008. Land held by individuals, local communities and authorities will continue to play an important role as breeding reservoirs to complement the official black rhino conservation areas, particularly the IPZ.