

Saving Sweetwater's Rhinos : By Michael Skidmore

In September 2007, I was lucky enough to be part of an EarthWatch (EW) expedition in Kenya. "Saving Sweetwater's Rhinos". I work at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago in the Regenstein African Journey area, working with 1.1 Black rhino. The area around Sweetwater was recently opened up to combine wildlife, tourism, and cattle in what is now called the OI Pejeta Wildlife Conservancy. This is great news for the rhinos since they went from having 22,000 acres to around 90,000 acres to roam. The conservancy more than doubled their number of rhinos, taking in around 40 rhinos from areas that had reached or exceeded their maximum carrying number. The conservancy now has 75 black and 5 white rhino, plus hopefully a new calf or two.

For anyone not familiar with EW they are a non-profit organization that supports scientific research in a variety of fields by offering volunteers the chance to join research teams around the world. Experience is not necessary, and unlike many other volunteer opportunities there is not a large time investment. Most teams operate from one to three weeks. The cost may be higher than other projects, but that money is what funds the research, and in most cases expenditures are tax deductible in the US. Go to www.earthwatch.org for specific details.

Through a combination of luck, timing, perseverance and some very nice people, I was able to go on this expedition for a fraction of the actual cost. I had saved up my airline miles for years for something like this, so I just paid \$99 for a plane ticket to Kenya. I ran into Mary and Bruce Feay who run the Chicago branch of EW during a lecture at the Field Museum, and they generously offered to sponsor me! They paid the almost \$3000 expedition fee. The fee includes travel from the meeting site, emergency travel insurance, and meals while you are on the trip. You do have to get to the meeting site on your own, usually located in a major city nearest the research area. I also received funding and paid days off from Lincoln Park Zoo.



The OI Pejeta Conservancy is being run and monitored to maximize the rhino population. All animals except the rhinos can leave the conservancy, a very simple combination of posts and a steep rock wall keeps the rhinos in. About 1/2 of the rhinos have transmitters located in their horns for radio tracking and others are ear notched. The rangers and guards in the conservancy are remarkable, almost uncanny in their ability to not be seen and to just show up wherever you might be. You learn to trust their judgment quickly since there is some element of danger. The original title of the expedition was "Walking with Rhinos", but after the population of rhinos was increased there had been too many close calls in the thick brush, so volunteers do not accompany the rangers on foot when they are looking for specific rhinos. The rangers for the most part carried rifles that could only be fired once before having to reload. With so many rhinos in the area poachers are always a possibility. While on foot we had close encounters with male lions, a female black rhino with a calf, and a herd of buffalo that stalked us for about 1/4 mile.

Among the duties I performed were game transects: Walking around 5-8 miles using a GPS and counting anything in sight. We also had the fun job of counting elephant dung piles, again using a preset course, we counted any piles within 5 meters of our path. An important task is measuring vegetation growth and destruction, especially involving acacia trees. Other various tasks we performed were measuring previously recorded acacia tree plots for growth or damage, counting acacia seedlings in new plots, and counting types and measurements of other types of vegetation in new and old plots. Since the research area is now almost 4 times larger there is a lot of work to do and data to be collected. At night we went on night drives spotlighting wildlife and entered the data collected that day. We went out on rhino patrols with the rangers, starting with climbing a hill and using radio tracking to see which area of the park the rhinos were located. The new rhinos stayed put for the first six months, but now are starting to expand their territories and look for mates. If the rangers had not seen a particular rhino for a while, they would try to see it with the naked eye. The conservancy has a "tame" black rhino, Morani, which is kept in a 60+ acre enclosure (if only all rhino exhibits were so big!) due to injuries suffered in a fight with another male. One job was for us to follow him and record behaviors, one team observed him using his horn to pull down out of reach vegetation. He was twirling his horn and winding the leaves around his horn. All this work is done in the shadow of Mt. Kenya while being right on the equator.

This was my third EW expedition. I also went on a "Mexican Forest Carnivores", and "Eucalyptus Forest Life" expeditions. I recommend an EW trip to everyone. You go to out of the way places, see animals in the wild that you work with, and meet interesting people and gain a lot of experience. The best thing that happened is that the Feay's and Lincoln Park Zoo have started the Feay Earthwatch Grant which will send a member of our collection staff on an expedition each year with approximately 80-100% of the trip paid for, depending on where you go, and which expedition you choose. Anyone who would like more information about EW can contact me at mskidmore@lpzoo.org.

