

S. Africa:

A pool of rhino know-how

Imagine going on an anti-poaching patrol unarmed after a gang of four who are each carrying Kalashnikovs and attach no value to human life.

Nick Tims
Trustee

Or imagine being unable to respond when you know when and where they are operating but can't operate yourself in that area as you haven't got the kit to stay out there. These are potentially very real scenarios facing the field rangers and anti-poaching units in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), that iconic area for rhino conservation which has been largely responsible for the white rhino's not becoming extinct in Africa.

Hluhluwe-iMfolozi currently has about 1,800 white rhinos and around 270 black. It is the second-oldest national park in the world and is centred on the pristine

wilderness that Zulu kings chose as their own hunting grounds. Its fame lies not just in having so many rhino, including the greatest density of blacks anywhere, but in what happened here to allow the white rhino's population in Africa to grow from fewer than 20 in 1900 to today's figure of c.14,500. Animals from Hluhluwe were translocated to parks all over the continent and the species was saved. While Mozambique managed to have its rhino disappear twice, they largely began to thrive again elsewhere, and this can all be traced back to animals from Hluhluwe. While that is a phenomenon in itself, the importance of the rhino work here now lies in what could be achieved in the future. The sheer expertise in monitoring, game capture, translocation and anti-poaching, along with such significant rhino populations, all in a stable country, mean that Hluhluwe could be arguably the single most important factor in the black rhino's fortunes. Clearly, it must be protected at all costs.

I spent a day with Dave Robertson, one of the two Section Rangers, and an expert on the rhino work carried out in Hluhluwe. I was in the Reserve for a week and soon began to see why it has been such a role model for rhino conservation techniques. Of course, it benefits hugely from having the macro back-drop of South Africa and the legacies of the old parks system with its military efficiency. But the expertise is incredible and should be studied by anyone involved in rhino conservation. Monitoring of black rhino is the most advanced anywhere, with ear-notching being carried out by foot and horseback patrols every 1-2 years. This has been going on for 20 years and the records kept by Dave are extraordinarily detailed. 65% of the population are "known", and this is likely a significant understatement, given how tough the recognition criteria are.

But, while its importance and potential are clear, there are issues facing Hluhluwe. The Reserve budget is under some pressure, with a recent cut in its allowance, a huge amount having to be spent on controlling the invasive Chromolaena or Triffid Weed (ZAR 12m



Main picture:
Black rhinos

Info

Since Nick's visit, we have learned of two poachers, posing as tourists and staying at an upmarket lodge in the Reserve, who managed to kill two white rhinos and steal the horns. They have been arrested and await trial.

Hluhluwe Game Reserve has been selected as one of the EAZA Rhino Campaign projects, and will benefit from European zoos' fundraising efforts. In addition, Safari Club International teamed up with Save the Rhino to hold a fundraising auction in September in central London in aid of Hluhluwe.

budget this year for this alone), and there will be inevitable revenue sharing as a result of the successful land claim on the Corridor area. On top of that is the ever-present poaching threat, which could escalate.

With new South African firearms legislation, the ability of the Reserve to contain a resurgence in poaching could be seriously compromised. Under the new Firearms Act, all their gun-safes are non-compliant, and compliance is required by the end of the year. They were already struggling with using old 7.62mm weapons - when the Army and Police switched calibres, ammunition and servicing resources which they had shared dried up. The new Act also requires far more range work, meaning that ammo is getting used up fast. To get



Left:
A dehorned white rhino

JONNY ROBERTS

compliant, they need 40 small safes and three larger ones urgently. iMfolozi will also need this, but the application has only so far been made by Hluhluwe.

Secondly, they need equipment to be able to stay out in the bush for extended periods. The aim is to have 250 man-days per annum camping, in order to be able to hit the poachers when they are active at last light or during full moon. For this they need tents, packs, hiking mattresses and proper torches. Without this, they are largely restricted to their day-time patrols, not really the time when the poaching gangs are about. This equipment will make a significant difference.

The Reserve has a budget from KZN Wildlife and the WWF have been strong supporters, but there are clearly strong and urgent funding needs that these two bodies cannot cover. The importance of the rhino work here is such that it simply must not be threatened and it probably wasn't an exaggeration when a recent commentator described Hluhluwe as the most important pool of rhino know-how and probably the best reason why the black rhino might come off the endangered list. A bold assertion, and Hluhluwe's blacks are only one of the three surviving sub-species, but directionally valid.

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Light at the end of the tunnel

The Hluhluwe Game Reserve covers some 96,000 ha and contains an immense diversity of fauna and flora.

Petra Fleischer
Fundraising Manager



The story here is very much the same as in other National Parks and Game Reserves around the world - dedicated ranger teams live in the hilly topography alongside wildlife, protecting the animals from poachers that opportunistically trespass into the protected areas. Five of the rhino field ranger outposts at Hluhluwe Game Reserve are in remote areas, where rangers often spend long periods when on patrol. Many are trying to continue with their studies, reading by paraffin lamp at night.

An immense morale booster for the rangers, and really a very simple measure if you live in a sunny country such as South Africa, would be to get a solar-powered electricity supply for their field accommodation. Currently each camp has one solar panel and one 12V battery, and upgrading these would provide lighting for the ranger accommodation (useful for night-time studying) and supply electricity for the fence around the outpost to keep elephants away. Thinking ahead into the future, ranger teams want to switch to

rechargeable batteries for torches and GPSs, saving money in the long run. Again, an upgraded electricity supply would do the job.

This is where Safari Club International (SCI) made a difference to rhino conservation in South Africa. The Club organised a fundraising action (the first of its kind in the London chapter) in support of Hluhluwe Game Reserve. Approximately 70% of the funds raised from the 52 lots auctioned at Holts in Kensington will be split between the Hluhluwe Game Reserve and the SCI Foundation and will be used to upgrade the electricity supplies at remote ranger posts. In total, Hluhluwe received a wonderful £10,000 from SCI London.

Funds raised at the event will also pay for new sets of night-time binoculars. Most of the wildlife crimes at Hluhluwe Game Reserve take place at night, making it harder for the field rangers to detect poachers. With the new camping kit bought with the EAZA funding, the night-time binoculars... oh my! I wouldn't try my luck as a poacher.