Kenya:

Putting rhinos on the map

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Scott (bottom right) with the Maasailand Preservation Trust team.

IMAGES: SCOTT WILSON

I awoke to the sound of the elephants camped out at the water-hole. On the balcony, the bulbuls were waiting patiently for their morning biscuit, while the view of Kilimanjaro was impressive to say the least. Just the start of another day at the office! Let me explain...

The Mbirikani Group Ranch in Kenya is dominated by fertile plains shared by wildlife and Maasai alike. Flanking the ranch is the steep, forested, volcanic landscape of the Chyulu Hills National Park, home to black rhino, the reason for my being here.

There are about a dozen Chyulu rhino, an integral part of the government's conservation strategy for the species: a native population that survived the mass poaching of the 70s and 80s due to their elusive behaviour and the rugged terrain they inhabit. Ironically, the very reasons for their survival now make life difficult for the people striving to protect them. Rangers from the Kenya Wildlife Service and game scouts from the Maasailand Preservation Trust (MPT) work all year round to monitor and protect the Chyulus' rhino. They also tackle illegal activities such as wood harvesting and poaching for bush meat. Each year they arrest dozens of poachers and remove hundreds of snares from the Park.

So, why was I here and how was I going to help? The answer is with GIS.

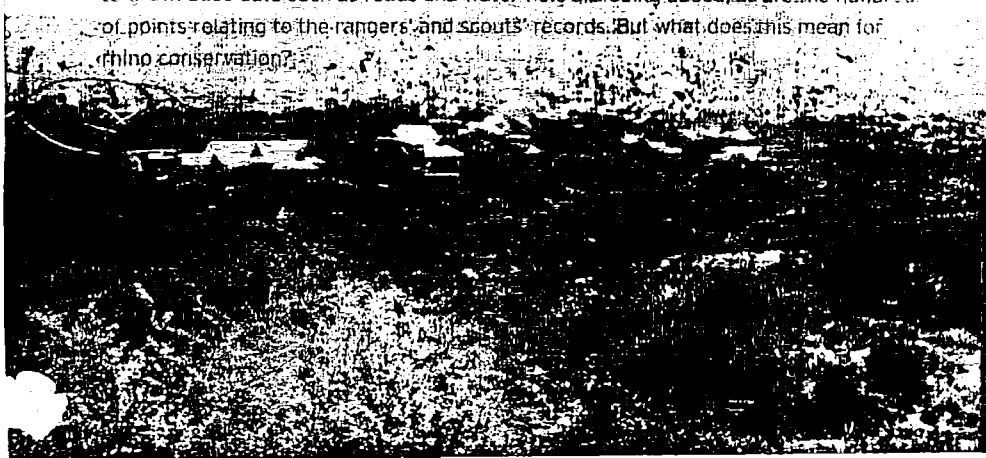
Geographical Information Systems (GIS), put simply, are databases, allowing data to be easily browsed and queried, the spatial results of which can be viewed as maps. More complex functions allow the analysis or theoretical modelling of relationships between different layers of spatial data, say, species distribution and habitat type for example.

On arrival at the MPT offices I was astounded by the piles of journals detailing the information gathered by the rangers. Each and every rhino sighting, sign, and incident of poaching had been meticulously logged along with a GPS location. My role was to help train MPT staff to use GIS in order to make the most of this wealth of information. The starting point was data entry, and there was a lot of data to enter. Luckily, this was completed before my arrival and we were able to concentrate on the basic training of adding and editing GIS data and, more importantly, using that data to answer questions. The MPT staff soaked up a wealth of training in a week. The GIS database continues to grow. Base data such as roads and water-hole are being added, as are the hundreds of points relating to the rangers' and scouts' records. But what does this mean for rhino conservation?

A GIS database is often only limited by the questions you ask it. It can allow you to look at hotspots of poaching activity throughout the season. You can ask how far rhinos are ranging: do they stay within a certain distance of water? These are just two examples of questions that are quickly and easily answered using GIS.

The rhinos' protection and future still depends on the hard work of the rangers and game scouts. However, as the GIS database develops, the information gathered by rangers can be used to its full potential to inform decisions concerning the protection and management of this important rhino population. This project is in its early phases but has plenty of scope for growth. The training so far is already proving its worth.

I continue to assist the project remotely but am suspect that, as the project develops, further training will be required. I will be ready to forsake the luxuries of sunny Chester to volunteer again. Besides, the bulbuls will be missing their biscuit.



Thanks!

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