

Comrades, rhinos, marathon men...

In a fit of January madness (must be something to do with turning 50!), I decided to see if I could train up enough to complete the 86.9km (54 miles) 2008 Comrades Marathon between Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

Richard Emslie
Scientific Officer
IUCN SSC African Rhino Specialist Group

It has a justified reputation as a very tough and challenging race and sadly two runners died last year. Apart from being more than two standard marathons long, the course is hilly and on this year's "up" run, the cumulative climb was around 3,100m with a further 2,500m of decent.

I am part-time Scientific Officer for IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) and have worked on rhino conservation in Africa since 1980. SRI is one of a group of conservation organisations that helps support my AfRSG rhino conservation work. It therefore seemed to be a natural progression for me to try to raise some funds for SRI while doing the Comrades Marathon.

The race went to plan initially, and at half way (44km) I was less than two minutes over my 10hr-45min race plan. However, I hit "the wall" at around 52km and despite taking magnesium pills, rehydrate and lots of energade, water

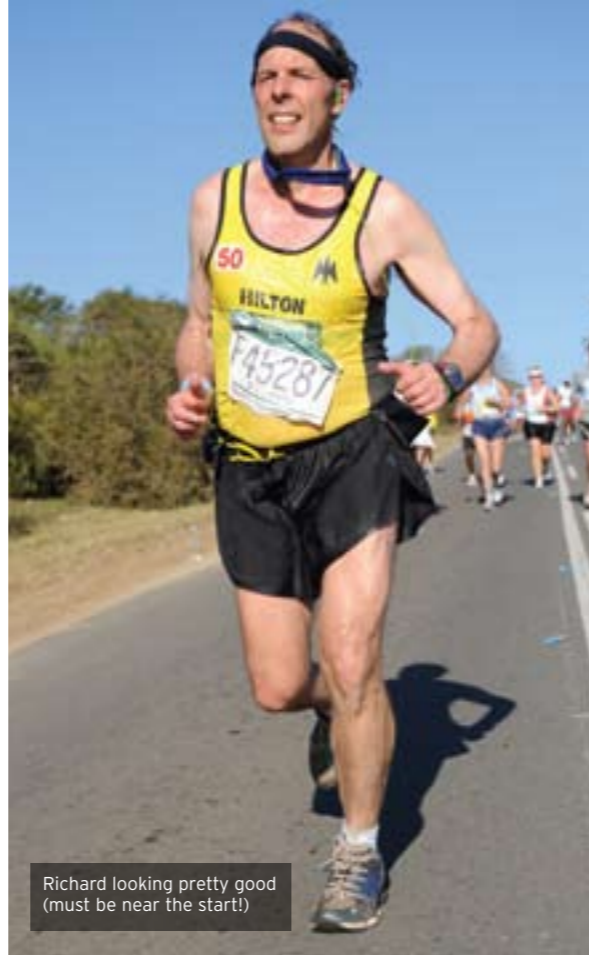
Thanks

A huge thanks goes out to Richard for completing such an amazing challenge and raising in the region of £1,900. We have decided to grant out the money (less the Gift Aid) to support the work of the AfRSG and consider it money well-earned!

“Of the 11,140 that entered, only 8,612 finished before the cut-off of 12 hours.”

and coke, I got intermittent cramps from 54km onwards for the next 33km. The enforced gap in training of fifteen days due to illness in Tanzania so close to the race probably didn't help. While I didn't manage to make it in under eleven hours as I'd hoped, I am still chuffed I managed to make it in time (11hr 38min) to get a medal. By the end my legs were shot and I could only walk / trot slowly like an 85-year old. It certainly was one of the toughest things I have ever done in my life. As soon as I got home I had a bath, climbed into bed and slept for ten and a half hours (interspersed with waking up with cramp).

This year was especially tough due to unusually hot winter temperatures (27-29°C). The reflected heat for runners on the road was reported to be as high as 32-36°C! People dropped out like flies with many dehydrated, vomiting or cramping up. Of the 11,140 that entered,



Richard looking pretty good (must be near the start!)

only 8,612 finished before the cut-off of 12 hours. I consoled myself that I was doing a lot better than the many casualties I was passing strewn by the roadside and in medical tents (including two on oxygen, flat out on camp beds). In my category (males 50-59 years old), of the 1,307 that started the race, 301 didn't make it. Of those that finished, 407 were treated in the medical tent with eight of these ending up in hospital. It is not known how many were treated en route.

It really was an amazing atmosphere and the crowd support along the way was great and certainly it was a day I will always remember. I also won the Hilton Harriers club award for their runner who had to dig deepest on the day based on estimated energy expenditure given body mass, age and time. The trophy was a wooden plinth with what looks like a Christmas-pudding-sized lump of mud with a trowel stuck in it!

A big thank you to all who sponsored me this year. Next year is a "down" run and I am going to try to get my bronze medal (under eleven hours). If you are up for the challenge why not try Comrades for yourself and raise some funds for SRI while you are at it?

African Rhino Specialists at work

The 2008 AfRSG meeting was held at Lake Manyara National Park in Tanzania in May. Unlike the previous meeting in Swaziland, I wasn't "dry" while training for an ultra-marathon, and those all-important conversations over a beer were - I'd venture to say - just as productive as the rest of the 6-day conference.

Cathy Dean
Director

As always, there was a tasty agenda, with reports from each range state on their rhino populations, poaching pressures, prosecutions, horn stockpiles and management plans. The great news from the conference was that black rhino numbers are up from 3,725 (31 Dec 2005) to 4,180 (31 Dec 2007); while white rhino numbers have shot up from 14,540 to 17,480 over the same period. Those are increases of roughly 6% and 9.7% year-on-year respectively; the target annual growth rate is 5%.

(These figures are announced at the very end of each biennial meeting. As the week goes on, an expectant buzz begins: How do you think we're doing? We talk about "The Numbers", like the confused survivors of *Lost*.)

This fantastic success was somewhat missing in the press coverage that followed, which focused on the virtual extinction of the Northern white rhino in Garamba; just as, two years ago, the news was about the presumed extinction of the Western subspecies of black rhino in Cameroon. I do feel it was a pity that

all the amazing work done by so many of the people at the meeting was glossed over, in the search for a shock-tactic headline.

One of the hottest potatoes was the discussion of the emerging misuse of white rhino trophy hunting permits in South Africa. As has been widely reported, the illicit trade is apparently linked to organised criminal syndicates and, according to one article, has seen hundreds of horns smuggled out of South Africa in recent years. The racket allegedly involves private game farms in Limpopo and the North West, which buy rhinos on auction, usually from national or provincial parks. They acquire hunting permits from provincial conservation authorities, who do not then check whether the hunts actually occur. Sometimes there is no hunt and the permits are used to launder illegally obtained horn; in other instances the hunt serves as a smokescreen to send horn overseas that would otherwise be banned in terms of the international ban on horn trade under the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Solving this problem is important, as the sustainable and

properly controlled trophy hunting of white rhinos - creating an economic incentive to encourage people to give over land to rhinos and other wildlife - has been a major factor in the growth of white rhino numbers.

Another economic incentive was discussed in Jacques Flamand's presentation on the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project. This involves identifying new areas of land within the rhino range, translocating founder populations of rhinos, and custodianship agreements between KZN Wildlife and the landowners. KZN retains ownership of the founder population, and half of the offspring, while the landowners gain ownership - and the right to sell in future - the other half of the calves born. It's in everyone's interest, therefore, to ensure that the rhinos are protected and the habitat restored and maintained, so that optimum breeding conditions are achieved.

One of the highlights of the meeting was, inevitably, the field trip to Ngorongoro Crater on Day 4. As we dropped down into the Crater, the clouds lifted, and we had stunning views across the floor. Spotters on the rim directed us to two pairs of mother and calf, and a female rhino (cow) so massive around the neck that she had everyone convinced she was a bull, until she turned round and presented her tail, allowing us to reassign her gender. (There was quite a lot of teasing of our most experienced field experts.)

The next meeting will be in 2010, probably in South Africa. We lobbied for it to be held during the World Cup, but there's a rather more important need not to clash with the rhino ops season in March-June, so that key people can attend. I've been asked to facilitate a workshop on the importance of environmental education programmes for rhino conservation and, to be honest, I can't wait...



ALL PHOTOGRAPHY CATHY DEAN

Main image: This enormous female confused even the most experienced field guys

Left: Some of the specialists enjoy a Tusker at the Lake Manyara Serena Lodge