

A tale of two species

Physically and behaviourally there's not much that's similar between rhinos and African wild dogs. Sadly, what links these two species is their conservation status and, in many respects, the threats to their survival.

Dave Robertson | Conservation Manager, Mkhuze Game Reserve

One of our conservation goals at Mkhuze Game Reserve this past year has been to introduce two separate and unrelated packs of African wild dogs. Wild dogs are the second-most endangered carnivores in Africa, after the Ethiopian wolf, and require large areas of land as they often need to cover huge distances. Wild dogs tend to disperse from their natal packs in single-sex groups, which then go 'walkabout' looking for mates to form a functional pack with. Because there are few protected areas in South Africa big enough for this dispersal process to occur naturally without a high chance of inbreeding (Kruger National Park at 20,000km² is probably the only one), we generally have to intervene and end up getting two separate disperser groups, from completely different areas, and bonding them together in a holding boma before releasing them as a functional pack. All

sounds a hell of a lot easier than it is (arranged marriages don't always go any smoother in the animal world than they do in the human one!).

We decided to call the first pack we released the Murphy Pack, because of all the things that had gone wrong with their introduction –

it's a long story and there's no space to tell it here. Suffice to say they made sure a whole bunch of people earned their salaries for a good while! When we eventually deemed they were sufficiently strongly bonded, we released them, and the alpha female denned right outside the boma and had eight pups!

As the pups grew, they moved off and started establishing themselves in the north west of the Reserve.

Snaring is an ever present scourge in Mkhuze, despite a huge amount of effort to combat it, and wild dogs are particularly susceptible to this. Because of the strong social links within a pack, and the way that they hunt, it's likely that more than one dog will get caught if they hit a snare line.

To try and mitigate this threat, we have a dedicated wild dog monitor who locates the dogs by radio telemetry twice a day (and tries to get actual sightings as often as possible without disturbing the dogs). We even have thin steel plates made up which attach on to the radio collars fitted to the dogs – the idea being that, even if a dog gets caught in a snare, the plate will prevent it cutting in or strangling the dog, but they only work if the snare tightens around the collar (we're trying to come up with a more effective design). Over the months, half of the pups died of natural causes which, although sad, is to be expected. The remaining dogs had been doing really well until 10 February when disaster struck. The monitor reported that they had run into a snare line and three of the dogs, including the alpha male and female, had been killed. Words can't describe the anger, sadness and frustration that everyone involved with the dogs felt. You end up questioning whether it's worth it. Are you making things better or worse for the dogs to release them in an area where there is so much snaring? Especially as it is such a slow horrible way to die.

Anyway, enough about the wild dogs – this is *The Horn* after all, but the story of the wild dogs has strong relevance for our rhinos. Wild dogs aren't the only 'by catch' victims of snaring. Rhinos also get caught in snares from time to time, and it's usually the more endangered black rhinos, because these tend to spend more time in the thickets where the snares are set. They normally manage to break the cable, and run off with the snare tight around a leg or their head or neck.



Above: Innovative technology is required to reduce the snaring risk to wild dogs
Above right: The dogs en route to Mkhuze

Most of the snaring here on the Mkhuze Game Reserve is carried out by well-organised gangs who sell the meat



Just some of the snares that have been collected from Mkhuze. Staff in the field often work under extreme conditions, at all times of day and night and under extreme weather conditions





DENNIS KELLY

If left untreated, snares can cut progressively deeper into a rhino's limb, cutting off blood flow and often causing gangrene



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In a short space of time, this cuts deep into the skin and can cut off blood supply. Because of our strong focus on rhino

monitoring, we usually find these animals and are able to dart and treat them in time to save their lives, despite some obviously painful injuries. Occasionally though, by the time we see a snared animal it's too late to save it. In 2009, a female black rhino was found with a snare around her leg, and when she had been darted, the vet could see the snare had cut right through her leg to the bone, and she had to be euthanised.

The irony is that there is a lot of focus on actual rhino poaching at the moment, with potentially stiff sentences for convicted poachers, but all too often poachers convicted for snaring get a very lenient sentence (often wholly suspended), even though the end result of the poaching (a dead rhino) can be the same. Although snaring is seen as 'subsistence' poaching for food, the truth is that most of our snaring is carried out by well-organised gangs who sell the meat.

But it's not all doom and gloom. Distressing though individual poaching incidents may be, I believe we are still winning. We are making a difference, and the world is a better place for endangered species because of reserves like Mkhuze, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and so many others.

Mkhuze has a long history of rhino conservation. The Reserve, which was proclaimed in 1912, has one of only two original populations of black rhinos in

KwaZulu-Natal (the other being in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park), which makes them very important from a genetic point of view.

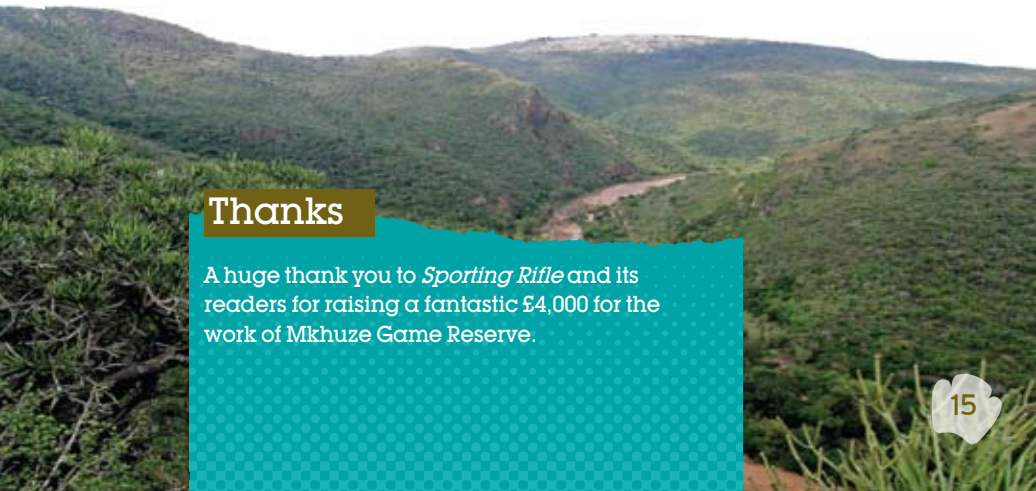
A lot of effort is put into rhino monitoring and protection, and training and equipping our field ranger force and anti-poaching unit is a top priority. We have also developed good working relationships with the local police stations and do a lot of combined operations with them, particularly following up after a poaching incident to arrest suspects in communal land outside the Reserve.

It's also thanks to organisations like SRI that we are able to carry on and do what we do, and I'm always impressed that a group of people living on an island thousands of miles away from any natural populations of rhinos can be so passionate about saving them (if running marathons in a rhino suit that any medieval torturer would have been proud to design doesn't show passion, then I don't know what does!) We've also had great support from *Sporting Rifle* magazine, who wanted to get on board and help with a rhino conservation project. We're about to purchase some much-needed equipment for our anti-poaching unit thanks to them, including: torches, overalls, backpacks and boots. Apart from the obvious benefits of receiving this equipment, it is a major boost to the morale of the guys, and the fact that people overseas are raising money to assist us to conserve rhinos really helps re-affirm to everyone on the Reserve the importance of what we're doing.

It's often said that nothing worthwhile is ever easy, and there are probably few instances where this is truer than in the field of wildlife conservation. Rhinos globally are facing the biggest threat to their existence ever, and we are the generation who must ensure that they will still be around for the generations to come – the alternative is simply not an option.



BRIANNE NEWMAN



Thanks

A huge thank you to *Sporting Rifle* and its readers for raising a fantastic £4,000 for the work of Mkhuze Game Reserve.