



Where there's a rhino there's a (collaborative) way

Kenya holds over 82% of the world population of Eastern black rhino and is therefore home to several programmes supported by SRI. I was lucky enough to visit Kenya in February to see how they worked and the challenges they face, but most importantly, to see them working with local communities and each other.

Lucy Boddam-Whetham | Fundraising Manager

“ My job, in a nutshell, is to know the field programmes inside and out so that I can liaise with field staff on needs and challenges, successfully apply to grant-making organisations and, of course, report fully on how grants have been used. This is done from our office in London with my (usually!) fast internet connection, armed with the fundraiser's dictionary of 'objectives', 'indicators of success', 'outputs' and such like. When fighting endless deadlines, it's surprisingly easy to lose sight of the reality of rhino conservation in the field and the challenges faced by the field staff. I was soon to see the realities for myself.

The game scouts told me how they had recently discovered a large snare which was set on a frequented rhino trail

My first stop was the Mbirikani Group Ranch adjacent to the Chyulu Hills National Park to learn about the Maasailand Preservation Trust (MPT)'s Game scout and rhino programme. I have worked very closely with MPT throughout my time at SRI, and I thought I knew it really well, but I was amazed how useful it was to see the programme for myself and to spend time with key field staff. It was great to see the new offices that Chester Zoo helped to pay for, and the shiny new patrol vehicle for which SRI fundraised.

understanding of the challenges they face. Living in isolated, basic conditions, patrolling and monitoring can be quite tedious and requires strong motivation. Often these men are putting their lives on the line to protect rhinos and other wildlife. We soon came upon fresh tracks, dung and a dust bath of one of the elusive black rhino. The game scouts told me how they had recently come across a large snare which was set on a frequented rhino trail. Luckily, the scouts had found it first and the bloodhounds were brought in, a scent picked up and the perpetrator tracked down and arrested. It was sobering to know this was a direct attempt at the rhinos. Another recent poaching attempt saw poisoned pineapples laid down for the rhinos but again, thankfully, due to the informer network, arrests were made before any rhinos were harmed.

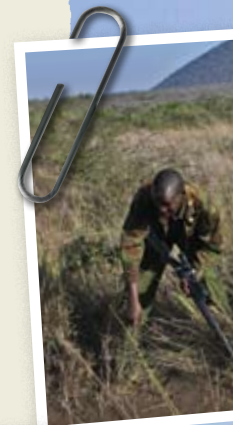
While there I took the opportunity to camp out overnight by the waterhole, which is being supplied by the recently completed borehole. With night-vision equipment ready, I was hopeful of seeing my first wild black rhino. The only visitor was a buffalo noisily lapping up the water. He suddenly sensed we were there and started stomping about in protest! Alas, the rhinos were not thirsty that night.

I was sad to leave Chyulu Hills but, safe in the knowledge that key grant reports had been worked on and future developments and funding needs had been discussed, I headed off to the Laikipia District to witness the work of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum (LWF) and visit a few of the area's key wildlife conservancies. I left Chyulus thinking that the key to successful conservation is the full backing and involvement of the local people and was therefore even keener to see LWF's community work.

I quickly saw how busy things are. I spent five days with the legendary Richard Bonham, boss of MPT, and his dedicated Project Manager Fred Njagi.

Throughout the week, there were constant interruptions from the phone with reports of human-wildlife conflict, or from people turning up at the offices who had walked for miles asking Richard for a scholarship or for a job. It's not easy to deal with all of these requests and get done everything you had set out to do.

I was also lucky enough to accompany the game scouts on a rhino monitoring patrol, which gave me a good

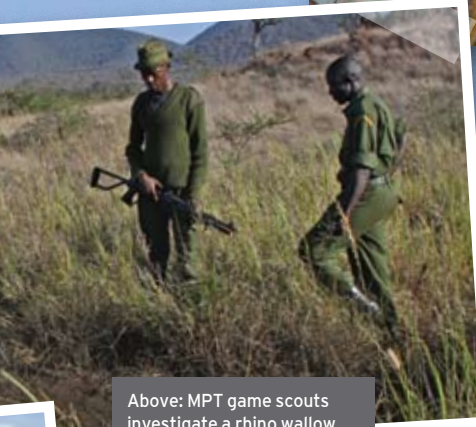


Meeting at Lewa Downs Conservancy with Josephat Musyima, Ephantus Mugo and Geoffrey Chege

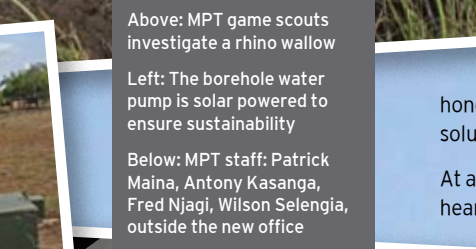
ALL IMAGES SAVE THE RHINO



MPT Chairman Richard Bonham with the new Landcruiser, the purchase of which was made possible through kind donations from USFWS and the Van Tienhoven Foundation



Above: MPT game scouts investigate a rhino wallow



Left: The borehole water pump is solar powered to ensure sustainability



Below: MPT staff: Patrick Maina, Antony Kasanga, Fred Njagi, Wilson Selengia, outside the new office

Shadowing the staff of LWF and its projects, I was able to get a clearer understanding of how the Forum works. It really is trying to put the responsibility in the hands of the people and encouraging them to manage their natural resources, whether that's water, soil or wildlife, in a holistic and sustainable way. I spent time in the Community Liaison Officers' monthly meeting to hear progress on projects such as honey production, water management and solutions to mitigate human-wildlife conflict.

At a meeting with the Pesi community, hearing about the challenges of making the West Laikipia Fence work in preventing elephants from crop raiding, my Swahili skills were to be tested! Despite only understanding every fifth word, I could see that by the end of the meeting the communities felt more empowered, understood the impact of their actions and appreciated that the success of the project was in their hands. Fingers crossed, they will be able to look after their section of the fence a little better.

From fences to grass

The next day I was whisked off for a quick explanation of how holistic management of grazing is improving the area's soil and grass, and how cattle

are being managed to the advantage of the environment. The capped ground is broken up, vegetation evenly eaten, the old grasses from last year are broken down and the paddocks are intensively fertilised.

My whistle-stop tour also involved seeing the preparations for rhinos at Borana Ranch, an impressive set up where they are making sure they are 100% ready before 20 rhinos descend on Borana (see page 21), and the final touches to the Central Capture and Translocation Facility (C&T) at Ol Pejeta Conservancy (OPC) (see page 24). At Lewa, I met with Ephantus Mugo, previously the Environmental Education Officer at Laikipia Wildlife Forum. Ephantus has taken on a new job at Lewa Downs Conservancy and is incredibly enthusiastic and keen to implement the skills he has learnt at LWF and ensure that the same key messages are delivered at Lewa. Whilst there, I met with Geoffrey Chege, the Chairman of the Association of Private Land Rhino Sanctuaries to discuss the implementation of the Emergency Fund for the C&T facility at OPC and talked in general about rhino conservation in Kenya.

I met with key staff from all of these programmes, and the question I always asked was: is the threat to rhinos increasing in Kenya? Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

So what can we do?

Having heard everyone's comments, I think Kenya needs to make it clear that there is zero tolerance of rhino poaching. We need everyone who works with Kenya's rhino to work together to push for a complete clamp down and call for tighter and more severe sentencing and prosecutions. At the end of the day, Kenya's people will not profit from rhino poaching, it will be the very few, often not Kenyans who benefit. We also therefore need to encourage a national pride in Kenya – 'hands off our rhinos'.

The natural world should not be something separate, it is our home and our workplace, everything comes from nature, I think it is only too easy to lose sight of this reality.



Thank you

I would like to express a huge thanks to British Airways Communities and Conservation for providing a complimentary flight to Kenya. Thank you also to all of my lovely hosts and field staff for spending time with me. Thanks also to recent funders of the Chyulu Hills Game scout and rhino programme, including Chester Zoo, USFWS, Annéville Zoo, Van Tienhoven Foundation, Van der Hucht de Beukelaar Stichting (Foundation) and Ernst Kleinwort Charitable Trust.