

From Survival to Sustainability – Conservation in Practice

THE AUTHOR



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Abandoned. You would have excused Angie Genade of thinking the rhino conservation project at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary had been abandoned when she took on the role of Executive Director of Rhino Fund Uganda (RFU) in September 2008. Abandoned by most of the donors who had funded the Project since its inception in 1997; abandoned by most of the technical advisors listed on the organisation chart but who had not been on site for years; abandoned by most of the RFU board of directors who were nowhere to be seen; abandoned by many of the originally trained rangers who had left and by many who had stayed but whose dedication was questionable; and abandoned by the

four people who had previously held the title of Executive Director RFU. It was not a pretty sight.

Rhino Fund Uganda was an NGO established principally to re-introduce rhinos into Uganda after they had become extinct in the early 1980s. The fenced Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary (ZRS) was opened in 2005 in a tidal wave of enthusiasm by RFU and its donor funding organisations. This enthusiasm was unfortunately not accompanied by a realisable long term sustainability plan or underwritten support from the Ugandan government and the Ugandan Wildlife Authority.

Aside from donor funding, income for the sanctuary operations was planned to come from tourists who visited in order



Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary is home to the only wild rhinos in Uganda.



Problems of water-logging and road erosion were prevalent.

to be taken on foot to see, and hear about, the rhinos. Most of the visitors were brought in by tour companies going to or coming from Murchison Falls. Understandably, these companies had to be confident that their guests would get a good experience from the visit but it takes time to build this confidence up and there were problems!

Despite there being only limited tourist traffic, problems of road erosion

and water-logging were prevalent. Some 30% of the sanctuary is permanent or semi-permanent swamp with rainfall averaging over 1000mm a year. Swamp land, sand based roads, high, often torrential, rainfall and increasing vehicle traffic result in potholes and bog and the inevitable stuck vehicles – a tour company nightmare.

Before becoming a dedicated rhino sanctuary, ZRS had been a cattle ranching area of mostly woodland with an under-storey of dense bush and tall grasses. Not only was this not ideal habitat for the rhinos, it meant that visitor sightings could be poor especially from late morning to early afternoon when the rhinos had settled down to rest from the hot sun but which was the time most tour companies called in.

The torrential rains also eroded the sandy soil into which the fence posts had been sunk. In places the soil would be completely washed away leading to the fence collapsing. The electric

fence was solar powered but there were periods of cloudy, dull weather when power was limited and back-up batteries were failing.

Sanctuary vehicles and motorcycles were all but unusable having been bought second hand at the outset. Staff were demoralised - due to poor wages, worn out uniforms, long treks to work as no bicycles were available and crumbling accommodation – and unhealthy due to a poor diet and no medical assistance. There were only four working radios and no repeater leaving half the area without communication.

Undeterred, Angie set about pulling the project together. At the start of 2009, the sanctuary had a settled founder population of six White rhinos. The security of these animals was the top priority which meant 24-hour-a-day monitoring by dedicated and hard working rangers. It also meant a 100% efficient and effective electric fence which needed daily maintenance.



Soil erosion around fence posts.



This required money so, if there was to be any future, the parlous financial situation of the sanctuary had to be addressed. Any activity that was not focused on rhino security was put on the backburner and overdraft and credit facilities maximised.

All the major tour companies were approached to put ZRS on their itineraries and to their credit, almost all were very supportive. This resulted in a more than doubling of the visitor number, and therefore income, in one year. Income generating programmes such as naming new rhino calves and adopting a rhino were introduced.

A vital financial donation was acquired from the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) whose Executive Director at the time, Moses Mapesa, was a staunch supporter of the project. UWA

also loaned the project two old vehicles, one of which was usable after servicing, and two motorcycles. Augsburg Zoo also made a significant and on-going donation and Nile River Explorers organized a, now annual, fund raising Raft Race with the help of a range of local businesses. TOTAL provided support which enabled the essential maintenance of the roads and fence to be carried out. Several other Ugandan

companies gave in-kind support. Angie, an experienced and accomplished money manager and book keeper, introduced the QuickBooks system, to ensure financial accountability and transparency.

At the same time as stabilising the finances, staff morale and performance had to be improved. Increasing funding enabled staff wages to be raised, new uniforms provided and radios and bicycles to be purchased. As a paramilitary organisation, a “forces” approach was needed based on discipline and training. Help for this was at hand as Johan Genade, Angie’s husband, had served in the South African Army and her son Nico was a mixed martial arts coach. The rigorous training course covering fitness, drill, self-defence and discipline was run alongside technical training following the African Rhino Specialist Group’s course on the conservation, biology and monitoring of rhinos given by a technical specialist.

Improving the visitor experience was vital for the long term success of the project. This meant improving the visibility of the rhinos and ensuring appropriate rangers were trained in guiding. Bush was cleared by controlled burning which created new grass growth while the long grass was shortened by allowing the controlled grazing

TOP: Angie Genade, Executive Director of Rhino Fund Uganda.

BOTTOM: A school visit – part of the rejuvenated education programme.





Rigorous ranger training included discipline and drill.

of cattle from the local community. Guides were selected for their clarity of communication and knowledge of rhinos and given in-field assistance in delivering a safe and interesting experience.

The infrastructure needed urgent attention. Erosion issues were countered by creating water run-offs so the soil around the fence posts was never under water. The weakest points especially corner posts were strengthened with struts. Sand that had washed down and covered the bottom wires was cleared. Damaged roads were repaired and re-graded and culverts built where the flooding was causing problems for vehicles.

With only three maturing females available to the two maturing males, there was bound to be a battle for “mating rights”. The stronger male Taleo easily outfought the more placid Moja whenever the two met. This led Moja to investigate safer areas to live. On one occasion when the fence lacked suitable charge Moja barged through the wires after a fight and wandered into the nearby countryside but was easily cajoled back into the sanctuary. Another time, Moja followed the fence

into the permanent swamp and, despite shoulder high water, found where the fence ended (the originally planned for mining wire extension was never completed) and swam out. Again he was cajoled back to the sanctuary. Tackling these problems required the purchase of new back-up batteries to power the fence and a sunken gate like structure to stop rhinos getting out of the swamp.

Rhino fighting was not the only on-going problems as with any other business human problems persist. The two most often recurring issues are those relating to the over consumption of the cheap local beer leading to rangers being drunk on duty and the stealing of company and staff property. Perpetrators cannot be tolerated and often highly competent rangers have had to be replaced.

Monitoring and recording the behaviour of the rhinos was clearly important to their management. It was clear that the original systems were unnecessarily complex, detailed and difficult to analyse to produce useful management information. A revised system maintaining hourly data collection by monitoring rangers was introduced with automated data

analysis. The quality of the data captured was improved to a standard which has allowed the publication of a first management paper in the peer reviewed journal *Pachyderm*.

The volunteer programme was overhauled to ensure it benefited both the volunteer and the sanctuary allowing additional management information to be collected. Volunteers are mainly sourced through internships from Uganda’s Makerere University and from foreign university students although open to anyone who can make a positive contribution to the sanctuary. While volunteers are given a complete Sanctuary experience, they must also carry out a management project. Outcomes have included a vegetation map, detailed analysis of rhino monitoring data on fighting, mating and drinking and an important report on the potential long-term effect of the community cattle grazing programme.

The lack of finance confronted by Angie meant that most community and education programmes had already been or had to be mothballed. This was against her instincts and wherever possible the local communities were supported. Angie established an animal



Well trained, knowledgeable guides ensure a high quality visitor experience.

ZIWA TOURIST VISITS

2008	2193
2009	4945
2010	8097
2011	9479

rehabilitation nursery. Orphaned or injured animals reported by the communities were captured and hand reared until they were able to be released. A building was allocated and upgraded by volunteer effort to be a now-thriving primary school for children of the staff and nearby villages. A crocodile translocation team was established and trained so that rogue individuals that threatened the communities using the permanent swamp and dams could be re-sited.

Most recently, the education programme has been revived with great success under the watchful eye of an experienced and energetic educator. A school visit may involve up

to 100 children who are kept busy with conservation games, quizzes and a trek to see the rhinos.

An additional source of finance for the sanctuary came with the opening of Amuka Lodge in August 2011. Privately owned, the Lodge pledged 10% of its profit to RFU in addition to the income from guests going on rhino or bird tracking. The Lodge is a particular draw for Ugandan residents looking for a weekend retreat.

In 2009, Ziwa recorded the first successful birth of a rhino in Uganda for 25 years and it has been followed by a further five births with each of the three adult females having calved twice. All three second births occurred in under a 30 months calving interval, a testament to good rhino management.

Tour operators are clearly very supportive of the project with visitor numbers, the life-blood of the sanctuary, continuing to increase, a testament to good infrastructure management.

There is no room for complacency as success breeds problems. More female

rhinos are needed to speed up the breeding performance and reduce the fighting among the males while easing the potential stress on the current population by enabling visitors to be more widely dispersed.

Finance is an on-going concern and is not yet at a fully sustainable level. More rhinos will mean more rangers will be needed to provide security. To cover the increased cost, visitor numbers must carry on growing which will put more pressure on the infrastructure. As with many conservancies, staff issues mostly associated with drinking, stealing and in-discipline, are ever present.

Angie Genade’s persistence and perseverance has turned the Ziwa rhino project from being based on idealism to realism and from being focused on survival to sustainability. More of the same is vital to its future. ●

Further information on Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary can be found in SWARA 2009:4 Bringing rhinos back to Uganda and on the website www.rhinofund.org