

“ One of those days when the devil has just gone berserk... ”

An email from Samar Ntalamia, Programmes Manager at the Maasailand Preservation Trust in the Chyulu Hills in Kenya, on 21 August 2012:

“Yesterday, at 9am Kenyan time, the result of gun shots heard by our game scouts in the rhino area on 17 August, was found: a badly injured, middle-aged rhino bull, with seven bullets: five in the front legs and two in the flanks. The Kenya Wildlife Service vet realised there was nothing he could do to save it, and put the animal down.”

Cathy Dean | Director

Samar continued: ‘Yesterday was one of those days when it seems like the devil has just gone berserk. Right after breakfast, one tragedy after another kept being reported, starting with a lion speared on the outskirts of Amboseli National Park; three elephants succumbing to poachers’ bullets in Tsavo West National Park, the injured rhino bull being found after combing the brush and thicket for three days by our game scouts; a brush fire had us scrambling and calling out for whatever manpower we could get; and then, to seal it all,

in Kenya belong to the government, the strategy won’t succeed unless all parties pull together.

Fortunately, MPT has a good ally in Cedric Khayale, Research Scientist at KWS with a particular remit to cover rhinos in the Tsavo ecosystem, and recently appointed member of the African Rhino Specialist Group. During a comprehensive meeting with Cedric onsite, we talked through the objectives for the Chyulus’ rhino population in the 2012–16 strategy, and what steps were needed to make these come about.



The borehole, funded mainly by USFWS RTCF and KWS with other donor support pieced together by SRI, is pumping 9–12,000 litres of sweet, fresh water every day



a murder in the evening, of a lady by a serial rapist, who after being tracked and found by our dog unit, slit his own throat with a sword he had in the scabbard. We thank God that this dreadful day is behind us.’

I wondered what I would find in the Chyulus, five years after my last visit. To my immense relief, Maasailand Preservation Trust’s (MPT’s) game scouts were not completely demoralised but resolute and determined to find the poachers and prevent any further rhino losses. But, more than that, MPT is actively planning how it will work more closely with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) in future to secure the future of the Chyulus’ black rhinos.

Let’s take a step back and recap two things to put this in context. Firstly, the Chyulu rhino population is based mainly inside the Chyulu Hills National Park, which is patrolled by the Kenya Wildlife Service, but the rhinos’ home range extends out of the Park onto the neighbouring Mbirikani Group Ranch, where cattle and shoats mingle with wildlife, and where MPT’s game scouts are able to patrol. And secondly, Kenya produces black rhino conservation and management strategies at five-year intervals. With the latest incarnation, to cover 2012–16, I’d say there is a growing realisation that this strategy needs to be delivered by KWS and other stakeholders. Although black rhinos



A productive meeting between MPT and KWS. Left to right: Joseph Katoke, Maggie Esson, Roger Wilkinson, Cedric Khayale, Richard Bonham, and three members of the KWS rhino unit, led by OIC Madura on the far right

The actions include increasing the manpower density in the Chyulu Hills, by signing an MoU between KWS and MPT that explicitly allows joint patrols inside the Park; and building a fence along the eastern side of the National Park, to prevent incursions by potential poachers and to reduce human–elephant conflict in that more densely populated area. The KWS has already carried out an Environmental Impact Assessment into constructing the fence,

ALL IMAGES SPRLINLESS, NOTED



so now we need to put together a funding plan. We are also looking at creating a second waterhole for the rhinos, deeper inside the Park, fed by a pipeline from the borehole constructed two years ago.

Alongside these development plans, I also wanted to get up-to-date with the day-to-day running of the Game scout and rhino programme. As in Laikipia, I was accompanied by Dr Roger Wilkinson, Head of Field Conservation and Research at Chester Zoo, and by Dr Maggie Esson, Head of Education Programmes at Chester Zoo; both Save the Rhino, and Chester Zoo (through its Act for Wildlife brand) have supported MPT since 2004.

The news was very positive. We spent valuable time meeting the senior team at MPT:

- **Samar Ntalamia**, who took over from Fred Njagi as Programmes Manager in May 2012. Samar was born on the Mbirikani Group Ranch and studied business administration before getting what he called his 'dream job' at MPT
- **Patrick Maina**, Accountant, who began in January 2011, revolutionising MPT's accounting and budgeting processes
- **Francis Legel**, in charge of the whole Game scout operation, who clearly leads by example. His men all respect his experience and leadership skills

We met another very important member of staff, Officer Jazz, one of the two Belgian Malinois dogs bought with USFWS funds, to take over from the bloodhounds. Sadly, MPT has lost two dogs to tsetse fly, and we heard Richard Bonham, the hands-on Chairman of MPT, instructing a team driving back through fly-infested areas after a successful operation to arrest poachers, to keep the dog inside the vehicle, away from the biting insects. Officer Jazz's compound has a blackboard tallying recent arrests he has helped to make.

One morning, we went over to the rhino base camp, to see the living conditions for the Game scouts while they're not on patrol. It's looking a bit dilapidated, and there's no single area under cover big enough for them all to eat together. This might sound like a luxury, but after days in a bivvy bag, somewhere to eat and talk that's not in the dormitory is quite a big deal. We'll try to put funding together for this too.

Then we went to inspect two of the six camera traps that had been bought by Chester Zoo at the end of last year. One had immediately been destroyed by an elephant, but the others are working well and starting to yield good results. We were thrilled when Antony showed us a new image of a rhino with a very distinctive ear notch, torn on the thorny acacias of the Chyulus (*below*). This animal is very easy to recognise!

This rhino was shot at by poachers, euthanised and had its horns removed by a KWS vet



Two of the Game scouts, together with Joseph and Francis, inspect one of the camera traps for good rhino ID photographs



Officer Jazz with one of his handlers. Belgian Malinois need to be trained six days a week to keep them at the top of their performance; they are highly intelligent and get bored easily



- **Joseph Katoke**, who participated in the exchange visit to Zimbabwe in July 2011 and who has been promoted to head of the Chyulu Game scouts (Wilson Selengia is in charge of the Amboseli Game scouts)
- And **Antony Kasanga**, who works on the law enforcement side to monitor the outcome of court cases and prosecutions, as well as on GIS mapping

We also saw how a recent grant from Chester Zoo, to build a new mess and kitchen for the senior staff, as well as accommodation for visiting donors like us, has greatly improved team morale (*second left*). Somewhere to have meals together, with a television so that they could share in the global delight when the Kenyan Maasai runner David Rudisha broke the 800m world record at London 2012, makes a tremendous difference.

On the final day, as we were driving back to Makutano with Joseph, to meet the taxi to take us to the airport, we received a radio call from MPT Game scouts saying they'd arrested five poachers (*centre*). We met up with them: in a sack were the skinned and jointed carcasses of seven dikdik, tiny antelope that they'd caught in just one night, using a Kaduu torch (a combination of a light and a horn that causes the dikdik to freeze, allowing the poachers to hamstring them with long machetes). We asked what the likely sentence would be: one year in jail for each of the poachers; this wasn't poaching for the pot, but poaching for the game meat markets. The pity of it is that stealing a goat brings a sentence of seven years, while poaching a rhino incurs a fine of just 10,000 Kenyan shillings (about £85 or US\$125).

MPT and KWS are going to need our support if the Chyulu rhinos are to survive and prosper.

Thanks

Our very grateful thanks to USFWS RTCF, which has just awarded a grant of \$49,500 towards the ongoing running costs of the Game scout and rhino programme; and to ongoing donors Chester Zoo, Amnéville Zoo, the Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust and the Dischma Charitable Trust for their support for MPT through Save the Rhino.