

MAKING THE MOST OF LAIKIPIA

Save the Rhino International has put funding into Laikipia-based organisations since 2002; the area is one of our biggest grantees. The reason is simple: nearly half of Kenya's black rhinos are held on private or community land in Laikipia.

Cathy Dean | Director

However, the land available for rhinos is shrinking: in the last 18 months both Mugie Conservancy and Laikipia Nature Conservancy have had their rhinos taken away due to poaching. Paradoxically, the greatest threat to Kenya's rhinos is not poaching, but the lack of suitable, secure habitat, without which the breeding rate at metapopulation level will decline, threatening the future growth in rhino numbers.

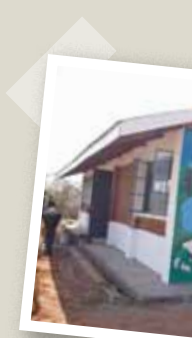
In September this year, I visited Laikipia together with Dr Maggie Esson and Dr Roger Wilkinson, Head of Education Programmes and Head of Field Conservation and Research respectively at Chester Zoo. With our 'combined hat' of environmental education and black rhino conservation, we were keen to meet as many people as we could in

the space of six days to get their perspectives and to enable us to prioritise our support.

We began with the Laikipia Wildlife Forum, whose Community Conservation and Environmental Education and Eco-literary Programmes we have both supported. We spent two days with Sammy Njoroge, the EELP Officer, who

impressed me with his enthusiasm for wildlife and for teaching. Sammy's particular love is wetlands and the creatures that live there, and he spoke enthusiastically about a birding group he is working with in Nyahururu, over on the western side of Laikipia. (He appreciated Roger's specialist birding knowledge!)

We joined Sammy for a field trip with the new USFWS-funded bus to OI Pejeta Conservancy. Kenyan teachers being on strike at not having received a payrise in over a decade, he had swiftly and enterprisingly rounded up a private school instead of the one planned. Sitting in the back of the bus with the students and Sammy (new recruit Jackson, the EELP Assistant, was driving), we could immediately see the advantages of the new bus over the old one: a much quieter engine, better all-round visibility and an intercom between the cab and the passengers. Sammy has constructed a well-planned day, with a briefing on expectations and learning outcomes in the classroom before setting off, activities throughout the trip, and facts and figures about animals downplayed in favour of discussion of interdependence and adaptation. ('You can look up the other things in your textbooks!')



“ The greatest threat to Kenya's rhinos is the lack of suitable, secure habitat without which the breeding rate will decline ”



The following day we went with him to the opening of the Kimanjo Resource Centre, a formerly derelict building adjacent to a secondary school in Kimanjo village, up in the north of Laikipia. Although the teachers were also on strike, the Head Teacher and others turned out to meet us, and the schoolchildren were making the most of their time off to help paint and decorate the Centre. Observing that no one had painted a rhino on the mural that ran around the walls, we talked about when a rhino had last been seen in the area – over 30 years ago. More pressing these days is the extent of cutting down trees for charcoal, and on the return home, we saw many sacks of charcoal for sale beside the road. Although illegal, it seems that checkpoints turn a blind eye if the right sum is offered.

We then turned our attention to rhinos with visits to OI Jogi and Borana Conservancies. Jamie Gaymer gave my first experience of being charged by a rhino and her calf: we were in a vehicle, and drove away safely, but the snorting and

Hills, rhino poaching is not regarded as a serious crime; the law is hideously out-of-date. Without much stiffer sentencing guidelines, there is little point in arresting rhino poachers. Just yesterday, I came across a news story that six suspected rhino poachers arrested in the Nakuru area had been let out on pitifully small bail; I wouldn't like to lay bets on them returning for the court case.

- Concerns over the pro-active management of Kenya's metapopulation of rhinos, in order to ensure maximum productivity. Among other things, this entails monitoring inter-calving intervals, so that any drop in performance can be identified quickly and addressed; strategically translocating selected animals for



ALL IMAGES SRI
Jamie Gaymer, Wildlife Manager at OI Jogi, with one of the Conservancy's bloodhounds used for tracking poachers. OI Jogi also has a team of 'attack dogs' trained to bite and hold a poacher's arm



Right: Baracka, the blind black rhino at OI Pejeta Conservancy, with the school group



Left: Kimanjo Resource Centre, with its mural featuring Mt Kenya



sound of her feet pounding towards us certainly got my adrenalin going. Jamie also provided extraordinary interactions with rehabilitated orphan elephants (*left*) and a semi-wild cheetah, as well as a pretty relaxed family group of white rhinos on the airstrip (*above*). Then Michael Dyer picked us up in his small plane, to fly us along Borana's boundaries, so that we could see the ideal rhino habitat as well as all the security measures in place, ready for Borana to receive Lewa Wildlife Conservancy's overspill (Lewa having been extraordinarily successful at breeding black rhinos over the last 20 years).

In between, we had formal and informal meetings with LWF Board members, OI Pejeta Conservancy staff, and Antony Wandera and Bradley Cain, who had worked on the dung DNA study of the Chyulu Hills population of rhinos a few years ago. A number of themes emerged:

- Kenya will move towards a decentralisation of government after the next general election in March 2013, with the creation of counties (Laikipia has already become a county) and county councils. Some people see this as a great opportunity to work with the county council to make them better aware of the importance of conserving rhino and other wildlife, not just for tourism and economic reasons, but also as a sustainable land use model. Others are worried about having more politicians close to hand, who may want to squeeze every last drop out of the local taxpayers... The LWF has a key role to play here.
- Frustration at the continuing lack of progress over updating the Wildlife Bill. As I mention in the article about the Chyulu

greatest genetic diversity; and managing habitat and water points. In order to breed well, rhinos need space, browse, water and security: give them these things and they will get on with it just fine.

- There is widespread optimism over the formation of the National Rhino Steering Committee, with the remit to oversee and monitor the implementation of the 'Conservation and management strategy for the black rhino in Kenya, 2012–16'. With some energetic people involved, we hope that the key objectives identified for this five-year period will be delivered. The Association of Private Land Rhino Sanctuaries intends to appoint a full-time APLRS Coordinator, who will be based at the KWS headquarters in Nairobi, to assist with monitoring members' progress against project milestones, with a counterpart from KWS doing the same for Kenya's rhino-holding National Parks.

My thanks to all those who hosted us and who gave their time to talk with us about rhino-related issues: the LWF team, particularly Sammy Njoroge; John and Gill Elias at OI Lentille; Jamie Gaymer at OI Jogi; and Michael and Nicky Dyer at Borana Conservancy.

Grants

Our Trustees have just agreed to award another £4,500 to the Association of Private Land Sanctuaries, for its Emergency Fund for black rhinos, through which 50% of the costs of treatment for injured or poor condition rhinos are reimbursed, with the custodian sanctuary covering the remainder. We have also earmarked £5,000 (again from core funds) for a project within the LWF's EELP.