

Life as a Section Ranger

Every day differs in conservation work. Some days can be very busy with challenges and close shaves with animals, especially if reacting to situations on the ground, like animals breaking out into communities or law-enforcement related operations. Other days can be mundane, especially when doing administration work, which is all part of being Section Ranger.

Dirk Swart | Section Ranger, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

The majority of a Section Ranger's job is the management of staff. I am responsible for a squad of general labourers and their duties as well as five field ranger camps and the planning of their patrol coverage and daily operations. I have a Principle Field Ranger who assists me with these duties.

I will talk about an interesting day's work on Thursday 17 January 2013. The previous evening, I received information that a white rhino had been found poached near the public corridor road that splits Hluhluwe from iMfolozi and is over 16 km long. I was requested to fly aerial surveillance over the

area to lookout for other carcasses, which may not have been discovered.

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ALL IMAGES HLUHLUWE-IMFOLOZI PARK



Right: Motorbike patrol and the carcass of a dehorned rhino

Below: Rangers in their camouflage uniforms



I woke at 04.30, put on my flight uniform and then rode my Section's motorbike to the new Bantam

hangar. At 05.30 I arrived at the airstrip, only to find an early morning fog layer that prevented any flying, despite it being clear less than 500m away. I prepared the aeroplane and had coffee with another fellow pilot, chatting about work and aviation's 'hangar talk'. Around 06.15, the fog cleared and I was able to take off to patrol the area in the Bantam

Ultralight. I kept in contact with ground staff via the ground radio and spotted field rangers sweeping the area. The rhino had been killed in a thickly vegetated area and after about 30 minutes of extensive flying, I reported not being able to see any other carcasses.

I then attended the crime scene investigation. The white rhino had been shot once and died under a tree in thick bush. Both horns were still intact, showing that poachers were either disturbed or the rhino managed to flee its attackers before dying. I have attended a number of scenes, but you never get used to the horror you have to face. The vet did a post mortem and DNA samples were taken. The horns were recovered by the Duty Ranger. I then flew a quick surveillance flight on the way back to Hluhluwe; it's nice seeing the rhino below you, resting in mud pools or under the shade of acacia trees.

That afternoon I went with some field rangers to investigate an incident whereby a community member complained about a leopard killing one of his goats. The individual showed me the carcass of the goat; it was clear that the throat had been ripped out and the lungs and heart had been consumed. We walked to the area where the goat was killed and noted the pad prints of a leopard. I explained that we would set a leopard trap and the methodology of how to use it. On leaving the scene I received another report of a cow having been killed by leopard on the opposite side of Park.

I went to our main offices where I did paperwork regarding securing the rhino horns, having then realised that it was now 18.30 and the sun was setting fast. I instructed my staff to visit the site the next day and report, as I had an aviation medical. I returned home around 19.30, just enough time to have supper with the kids before they went to bed.

Grants

Our grateful thanks to Knuthenborg Safari Park, which donated €2,586 that is being used to pay for camouflage uniforms and Landcruiser tyres; and to Julie Mather, Bruce Simpson, Peter de Wit, Vlok, Daniel Holland and other donors, who raised £4,830 that we sent over to help pay for gas canisters and for tractor repairs, so that water can be delivered to outposts. We also sent £3,200 raised from the raffle at our ADVENTURE! Dinner last October.

