

BENSON - FROM KITCHEN WORKER TO SECURITY CHIEF AT SOLIO

It's people who make conservation. In the first part of a new series, conservation characters, Felix Patton talks to Benson Irungu Kimani, head of security at Kenya's Solio game reserve.

BY FELIX PATTON

Benson Irungu Kimani, as Head of Security, is responsible for the day-to-day management of Solio Game Reserve in central Kenya. The 69 km² reserve is a fully fenced sanctuary for a host of East African wildlife, especially its world renowned population of black and white rhinos. Many people might envy him the job.

“People think this is an easy job but it comes with a lot of stress. I can be called on at any time of day or night but that’s OK for me because I am passionate about conserving the rhinos,” says Benson.

A Kenyan, 35-year-old Benson hails from a small rural village some 50km from Nakuru. With six brothers and

five sisters, he grew up in a close knit family spending his time on schoolwork and helping look after the maize and beans on the family *shamba* (small holding). When not at work or collecting firewood for his mother, the brothers would play football, a passion for which has resulted in life-long support for the English side Arsenal! On leaving school at 18, Benson joined his storeman brother at Solio Ranch in Laikipia County in 1998.

Initially Benson was employed in the kitchen garden of the then General Manager. After six months he was transferred to the Game Patrol Team whose job it is to maintain the infrastructure of the Reserve –



Benson Irungu Kimani

ensuring the fence is in good order, the power supply is adequate and the bridges and the artificial water supply are operational. When Solio director Edward Parfet took on the general manager’s role from his father in 2000 he was quick to appreciate Benson’s



PHOTOS BY: FELIX PATTON

Understanding rhino behaviour is essential to safe monitoring.



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TOP LEFT: Training rangers in rhino identification in the field.
TOP RIGHT: Checking the fence power levels with the game patrol.
BOTTOM RIGHT: Receiving his certificate for successfully completing the KWS Wildlife Conservation Security Course.

potential and promoted him to head up the team.

Over seven years he gained a detailed knowledge of the habitats and wildlife species in the Reserve and where to find the many endangered rhinos. “Every morning we would feed our two semi-tame orphaned black rhinos and watch them to ensure they were healthy. As I learned about their behaviour, the more fascinating they became. Touching a rhino is an amazing experience.”

With this knowledge, Benson became the key guide for any visitors demonstrating both passion for the animals and a natural ability to

communicate with guests. While Solio had not originally set out to be a key tourist destination, there was some traffic passing through and mobile camping safaris wanting assistance.

Following a period of intensive rhino poaching between 2000 and 2005, it became clear that the introduction of a dedicated monitoring and security team based inside the Reserve was essential. Benson was asked to lead the new team and manage all the daily running requirements. The most pressing job was to locate and database all the critically endangered Black rhinos in the Reserve, the number of which was unknown. Using his hard earned knowledge, Benson tracked down each rhino for a specialist to photograph and create an identification database, the backbone of the new monitoring system. This was not without some danger as Solio rhinos were not used to humans and some took exception to being photographed.

In order for the new team to carry out the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) standardised monitoring system, Benson attended a week long KWS course along with rhino managers from other conservancies to establish and maintain an effective patrol and information capture system. Today, the team consists of 24 rangers plus a game patrol team of three.

There are four pillars to the management of Solio Game Reserve – security (anti-poaching), rhino and other wildlife monitoring, logistics and personnel. Solio rangers are stationed within the Reserve while a unit of the Kenyan Police General Service Unit (GSU) is stationed outside to cover the surrounding ranch. Following the recent surge in poaching, a large unit of

CONSERVATION CHARACTERS

KWS rangers and a track dog team are now stationed throughout the Reserve. Managing security involves a great deal of interaction and close cooperation with those in charge of the GSU and KWS units not the least of which is the sharing of intelligence gathered from each organisations informants networks.

An important aspect of security for Solio is a good relationship with the surrounding communities. Over the years Benson has become a well-known figure around the area and built up a personal network of contacts essential for obtaining an early warning of any

strangers coming into the area who may have rhino poaching as their agenda.

“I am not one for giving lectures to groups but I always try to chat with our neighbours and remind them that, as Kenya’s wildlife belongs to them, poachers are stealing their property,” he says.

In addition the Head of Security works with armed KWS rangers following up poaching related incidents at any time of day or night. How does Benson feel about this side of the job?

“We recently lost a black rhino mother and her calf. The mother was brutally killed by poachers who hacked



PHOTOS BY: FELIX PATTON



TOP RIGHT: A section of Solio rangers at the KWS training.
BELOW: Checking data at the central operations room.

off its horns. The eighteen month old calf was also brutally killed – eaten alive by lions. The system was meant to protect them. Once again it failed.”

One of the most recent developments within Kenya has been the decision by KWS to train conservancy rangers as part of the process for them to be granted Kenya Police Reservist status. The KWS training involves a three month intensive course at their Law Enforcement Academy (formerly the KWS Manyani Field Training School) in basic paramilitary procedures, management information systems (MIST), human wildlife conflict, enterprise development models, marketing of products and services, compensation claims and procedures as well as the KWS organizational structure and operations among other disciplines. Basic first aid is also included. Benson led a team of 15 Solio rangers on the gruelling ‘Wildlife Conservation Security Course’, all of whom graduated.

Solio rangers are split into teams each of which has a sector of the Reserve to patrol and monitor the rhinos and other wildlife reporting data to a central operations room. Any major incident that occurs within the Reserve has to be attended by and documented by the Head of Security. As such, Benson has responsibility for the main Reserve vehicle, which occasionally requires him applying his knowledge of some “bush mechanics”



Discussing security issues with KWS platoon commander David Wanyoike.

Safe movement around the Reserve is not only essential for effective security but also for the reasonable comfort of tourists. Rather than disturb the natural environment of Solio with tarmac or murrum, the road network is based on soil. This means that before the onset of the two rainy seasons it is essential that there are appropriate runoff channels and, after the rains, some re-grading. It is also essential to ensure the fence and the four bridges are in kept to a high standard. Overseeing and managing this work represents the major logistics challenges for the Head of Security. Essential to the success of the Reserve is a healthy and well motivated staff.

In 2007, the new luxury Solio Lodge was opened within the Reserve managed by safari operator Tamimi. The Lodge and Reserve managers work closely on a daily basis to ensure that clients get the best possible and safe game viewing experience. In addition, Solio driver/guides are also able to act

as a source of information as they drive around it.

Of course, the routine management is interrupted by special events. Injuries to animals may involve veterinary intervention. If it's a rhino it has to be tracked and its identification confirmed before being sedated. Or maybe the rhino is among a group to be moved to another sanctuary which could require fixed wing and/or helicopter support, capture vehicles, camping areas and so on. The Head of Security not only has the job of organising Solio's staff and resources and co-ordinating with KWS personnel but also takes the lead in the field in identifying the correct rhinos for capture. "Seeing healthy rhinos leave the reserve to start new populations is the true reward for all the hard work," he says.

As the most senior wildlife manager on site, Benson often represents the organisation at meetings with KWS and the Association of Private Land

Rhino Sanctuaries. He has also helped film companies, on and off camera, with accurate information on Solio and rhinos.

There is no such thing as a regular day in the life of Benson Irungu as Head of Security for Solio. Highs and lows are a feature of the role. Benson is passionate about his contribution to conservation which is clear from the smile on his face when reporting a new rhino birth but also in his obvious despair when standing by a poached rhino.

From a humble start to a member of the management team in one of Kenya's leading wildlife conservancies, Benson's story is a lesson in the importance of identifying untapped potential in one's staff and encouraging it to develop. How does he see his future?

"I hope to do this job up to my old age. I cant see there is any better job than this." ●