

Divide & prosper

With a recent increase in rhino poaching, conservationists are working harder than ever to keep the endangered populations of these remarkable animals on the rise. Here, **Ann and Steve Toon** look into a few of the most successful conservation programmes, and highlight a few that offer visitors a glimpse of the magnificent fruits of their labour.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANN & STEVE TOON WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY



Ann and Steve Toon are wildlife photographers and photojournalists with a specialist interest in conservation issues and southern Africa. Their first book, *Rhinos*, was published in 2002 by Colin Baxter. Their latest book, *Giraffes*, is out later this year.

Left: Allowing private game reserves in KwaZulu-Natal to purchase surplus rhinos from national parks and state reserves has been extremely successful in boosting numbers of black rhino and white rhino (pictured)

The trackers enter the dense stands of salvadora and tamarisk trees that shadow the riverbed through this dry, seemingly empty landscape. They remain out of sight for what seems like ages, without even a message coming through on the radio. Finally, out of the quietness comes word that they've successfully located our quarry. We are about to come face to face with Ben, a belligerent black rhino. Although we've been told to hush, my heartbeat remains deafening. We approach gingerly on foot from the cover of a small kopje, and now the only things separating us from about a tonne and half of testy black rhino bull are our experienced Namibian guides Gotlod, Dansiekie and Erwin.

It's not the first time we've had an adrenaline-inducing encounter with a rhino, and we hope it won't be the last. I still get goosebumps remembering the time my husband and I accompanied the game capture unit in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. They darted a truculent black rhino in order to move him to a holding pen before translocation, and although the bull was dazed, he was still strong enough to fight – we hung on for our lives as he bumped our jeep repeatedly like an oversized dodgem.

It's a red letter day when you have a great rhino encounter, and I never grow tired contemplating that fearsome *Jurassic Park*-like profile. So much work has been done to bring these heavyweight herbivores back from the brink of extinction that it's been heartbreaking in recent months to hear of the huge increase in poaching, particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

This month, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) is meeting in Doha to discuss what can be done to halt the alarming trend. In the last three years more than 470 rhinos have been illegally killed in Africa, and the trade in rhino horn has more than doubled in less than four years. What's worse is that over half the rhinos killed between January 2006 and September 2009 were black rhinos, the rarer and more endangered of the two African species – there are fewer than 5000 of them in the wild.

In a joint statement on the poaching crisis by Save the Rhino International (SRI) and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), two successful initiatives in South Africa and Namibia ▷



Above: A black rhino and her calf, both beneficiaries of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project's work in KwaZulu-Natal

▷ were championed as a possible way forward. Both schemes set out to conserve black rhinos by creating custodianship arrangements for them under which the species are managed on private land on behalf of the state. SRI and IRF argued that schemes like these clearly showed that rhinos have a tangible economic value for local people, providing communities with a much keener incentive to conserve and protect them.

The trend for private reserves and game ranches to purchase surplus rhinos at auction from national parks and state reserves has been extremely successful in boosting numbers and creating new territory for the species. It is a large reason why black and white species numbers have continued to increase in recent years, despite the upsurge in poaching levels.

Today, just under a quarter of the total African rhino population is privately owned. So it wasn't a huge leap for conservationists to conclude that

if you could just find a way to harness more space for black rhinos in the private sector you'd have the framework to grow this endangered animal even further. However, the main problem has been that rare black rhinos are hugely expensive items on a private reserve's shopping list at auction, especially so because a founder population of up to 25 animals is needed to ensure breeding success. This meant it just wasn't practical to trust black rhino conservation to the vagaries of market forces. So in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province the idea for the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project, essentially a novel form of controlled black rhino baby-sitting, was born. And there are now big plans for its expansion.

The project is a joint venture between the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the state wildlife body in the province. Initially the aim was to create additional black rhino populations solely within the province, but they're now eyeing up much wider horizons. Previously all black rhinos in KwaZulu-Natal were held in state-protected areas. Their protection had been highly effective, but population growth rate was slowing, possibly because concentrations were too high for the available habitat. The solution has been for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife to work in partnership with private or community landowners with suitable habitat to carry, and protect, a population of around 50 rhinos on behalf of the state. In return the private sector enjoys the related benefits, not least of which is tourism, of having rhinos on their land. They also get a 50 per cent stake in any rhino calves born on their land.

Now in its sixth year, the project has five partner sites in KwaZulu-Natal, forming homes for nearly a fifth of the black rhinos in the province. Some 81 ▷

Travel to help rhinos

Rhino Trek

Save the Rhino International (www.savetherhino.org) is running a five-day trek through the wilderness this August. Proceeds will be split between Save the Rhino International, Hluhluwe-Imfolozi, the Zululand Rhino Reserve and Somkhanda Game Reserve (all part of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project). You can find details about becoming a member or making donations to help their work on the website.

Desert Rhino Camp

Desert Rhino Camp (www.desertrhino.org) supports Save the Rhino

Trust (SRT) in Namibia.

When you visit this remote, yet luxurious, camp in Namibia's Kunene region you'll be helping protect black rhino simply by being there. UK charitable donations remain by far the major source of SRT's funding, mainly thanks to Save the Rhino International and the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation. Tourism operator Wilderness Safaris (www.wilderness-safaris.com) was selected as the private sector partner by SRT for this rhino-based eco-tourism venture. For the more active, Wilderness Safaris and SRT also run the Desert Rhino Expedition,

a safari with the SRT's rhino patrol using camels.

Black Rhino Project Partner Reserves

The following reserves and lodges are all part of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project and have tourist lodges with prices from about £35 per night per person to around £350.

South Africa

- Phinda Private Game Reserve (www.andbeyond.com)
- Pongola Game Reserve (www.pongolagamereserve.co.za)
- Somkhanda Game Reserve (the first community-owned

site to become a project partner)

- Thanda Private Game Reserve (www.thanda.com)
- Zululand Rhino Reserve (www.zululandrhinoreserve.co.za)

Namibia

- Epacha Game Lodge (www.leadinglodges.com/epacha).
- Frans Indongo Lodge (www.indongolodge.com)
- Gondwana Canon Park (www.gondwana-canyon-park.com)
- Khoadi-Hoas Conservancy (www.grootberg.com)
- Tandala Ridge (www.tandalaridge.com)

International Rhino Foundation

For more information on ways to support the work of the IRF visit www.rhinos-irf.org





Finally, out of the quietness comes word that they've successfully located our quarry. We are about to come face to face with Ben, a belligerent black rhino

▷ black rhino have been introduced on to these sites and 10 calves have been born. There are now plans to extend the project to South Africa's Limpopo, North West and Mpumalanga provinces, as well as Swaziland.

"Its clear conservation has to be about partnerships between local communities and other organisations," says Cathy Dean, director of Save the Rhino International. "The Black Rhino Range Expansion Project is an interesting model in that it provides incentives for communities to protect and breed their rhino by giving them ownership of half the offspring. In future, the communities will be able to sell their rhinos and gain direct economic benefits from giving over land to rhino and other wildlife, as well as through tourism," she adds.

The first private reserve to receive rhinos under the scheme was Phinda in northern KwaZulu-Natal. Simon Naylor, the reserve's environmental manager, endorses the boost the project gives to the local rhino population: "Rapid population growth can mean the difference between survival and extinction for an endangered species. Faster growth provides a bigger buffer against poaching or natural disaster like disease, fire or flood. It also minimises loss of genetic richness." The other plus is that visitors to the reserve benefit in terms of a richer wildlife experience.

Namibia, which hasn't had a problem with poaching in recent years, has a similar rhino-sitting scheme of its own. Known as the Black Rhino Custodianship Scheme, it oversees rhinos from donor populations, including Etosha National Park and the western Kunene, moved to private land where conditions are suitable and security risks minimal.

As in KwaZulu-Natal, the aim is to boost population growth and create new rhino rangelands. The scheme has been possible in large part thanks to the success of Save the Rhino Trust, which has helped conserve and build up the black rhino population in the north of the country. To date rhino numbers have been increasing well as a result, and there are currently more than 22 government-approved sites taking part across the country. Pierre du Preez, who heads up the project for the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, estimates that there are now more than 350 rhinos 'farmed' out under the scheme. "The project is important because it is extremely vital not to have all your eggs in one basket when it comes to rhino conservation. It's also important to have the partnership of all Namibians in the protection of rhinos," he says. "Although poaching has not been a problem so far here, perhaps to do with remoteness, we expect it could move into Namibia at any time."

Farm owners and conservancies involved in the scheme must carry out regular rhino monitoring and feed back information to the government's wildlife arm on a quarterly basis. One of the sites involved ▷



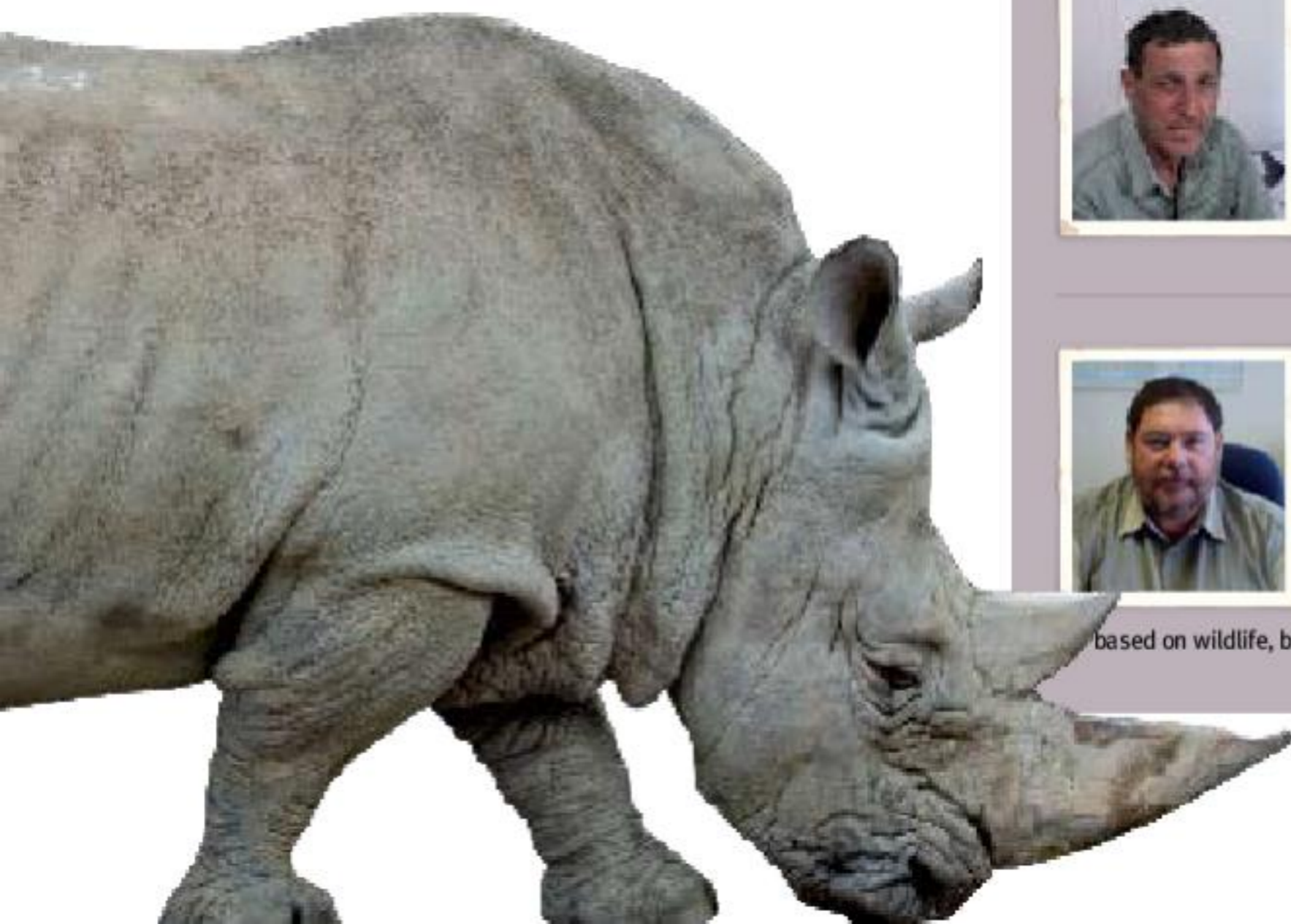
A tracker (top) from Save the Rhino Trust's Rhino Centre in northern Namibia (middle) notes a recent sighting. The long horns of white rhinos (this image) make them prime targets for poachers

“The Black Rhino Range Expansion Project is an interesting model in that it provides incentives for communities to protect and breed their rhino by giving them ownership of half the offspring”

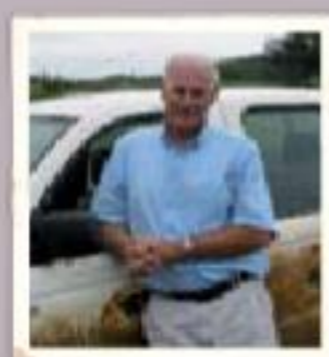
▷ is the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) near Otjiwarongo, which received its first black rhinos in 2008 and now has a total of five on its lands.

“There’s even a possibility two of our females may have become pregnant in the past couple of months, but we may not know for sure until 15 months from now,” says CCF director Dr Laurie Marker. She explained that a further benefit of having rhinos on the land is that it enables CCF to improve the grassland habitat for cheetahs. She now hopes to develop a rhino educational program for visitors to the reserve.

Already custodianship schemes account for around five per cent of the current rhino population in Africa. The concept certainly seems to be working. And against the backdrop of escalating poaching it’s comforting to know black rhinos like Ben, however bad-tempered, can be the catalyst in bringing larger areas under conservation as well as helping local communities. Perhaps one day this will not simply be the case for KwaZulu-Natal and Namibia, but for all the rhino’s key range states across Africa. 🐾



What the experts say



Jacques Flamand, WWF's head of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project

“The poaching wave highlights the importance of what the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project is doing, which is to try to boost the growth rate of the critically endangered black rhino in South Africa. Not only that, but in creating new areas that are suitable for the species, we are also spreading them around the country so as to reduce the ‘all the eggs in one basket’ problem. While this may seem risky during such a poaching wave, it also spreads the risk and cost of protection, and places the rhino in areas that are probably safer than where they are at present. In that way we hope that black rhino will be safer. The black rhino are lucky to share their habitat with white rhino who act as a buffer – poachers tend to go for them as they are easier to hunt, are more numerous and have larger horns.”



Cathy Dean, Director, Save the Rhino International

“We’re concerned the methods we’ve been using for the last two decades are perhaps no longer enough. Trying to change attitudes to the use of wildlife products in China, Vietnam and other countries would be a huge and expensive task, but we need to be creative in the way we think. Some people suggest legalising the trade in rhino horn, but I am not at all sure that we could produce enough farmed rhino horn to fulfil that demand.”



Dr Susie Ellis, Director, International Rhino Foundation

“Without commercial operations that use wildlife through both consumptive and non-consumptive processes for deriving financial returns, undoubtedly, the rhino populations in southern Africa would be much smaller than they currently are. Rhinos are valued in these countries in an overall land-use context, thereby creating the private sector or community commitment to rhino breeding.”



Rudi Loutit, CEO, Save the Rhino Trust, Namibia

“Irrespective of where the rhino population is situated, the key issue remains having sufficient funding for patrolling, monitoring and research. Without these three elements, no rhino population can be assured of survival against poachers in the long term.”



Pierre du Preez, Chief Conservation Scientist and Rhino Co-ordinator, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Namibia

“Black rhino have the potential to make a massive contribution to human livelihoods in Namibia. Of all the diverse and valuable indigenous species that can provide the foundation for land use based on wildlife, black rhino probably have the highest value.”