

Black rhino released onto Zululand Rhino Reserve

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In October 2005, 21 black rhinos were released onto a major game reserve, the Zululand Rhino Reserve, in northern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. This reserve covers 24,000 hectares of savanna bushveld made up of more than 30 neighbouring properties whose owners have recently removed their internal fences to create a significant, barrier-free haven for endangered species, including the black rhino.

These rhinos form the second founder population of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project, a partnership between the global conservation organization WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife that aims to boost numbers of the critically endangered species by increasing the land available for their conservation, thus reducing pressure on existing reserves and providing new territory in which they can breed quickly.

‘In just two years through this project, the black rhino has acted as a catalyst in creating about 40,000 hectares of barrier-free land for conservation,’ says WWF project leader Dr Jacques Flamand. ‘Much of the land was already under conservation but in relatively small pieces divided by internal fences, which is not ecologically optimal. The courageous decisions of landowners who have committed themselves to creating these large areas have enormously benefited black rhino and many other species that live alongside them.’

The 21 black rhinos, which are being intensively monitored, stopped exploring the area within two weeks and have settled down, says Dr Flamand. ‘There have been no clashes, some have been seen together and they all seem relaxed. So far we can consider it a success.’

The Black Rhino Range Expansion Project’s first founder population of 15 black rhinos, released last year onto Muniyawana Game Reserve, also in northern KwaZulu-Natal, also settled extremely well. ‘There have been no losses through fights or accidents. Matings have been observed so we’re looking forward to the prospect of lots of calves. As the idea

of the project is to increase the growth rate of the overall black rhino population in KwaZulu-Natal, we’re well on the way,’ says Dr Flamand. The first black rhino calf, from a rhino that was already pregnant when released, was born at Phinda Private Game Reserve, part of Muniyawana, earlier this year.

Initially, the focus of the project is on finding suitable sites within KwaZulu-Natal, but once these have been saturated, the project will look further afield. ‘We’re looking for strategic partnerships with landholders within the species’ historic range. They needn’t have been traditionally involved in conservation and we are currently in negotiations with community landholders whose land could become future project sites,’ says Dr Flamand.

Black rhinos became critically endangered following a catastrophic poaching wave in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s that wiped out 96% of Africa’s wild black rhino population in only 30 years. At the lowest point, there were just 2450 black rhinos left. Intensive protection efforts by organizations like Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife helped stabilize the situation and the number of black rhinos has gradually increased to around 3600.

‘Tight security for the black rhino is essential but it’s only one part of the solution,’ explains Dr Flamand. ‘The other part is ensuring that black rhino numbers increase as fast as possible in order to reduce the threat of extinction from possibilities such as increased poaching, drought, flood and disease. The highest breeding rates are achieved by establishing relatively large populations, such as these, on areas of land with a high carrying capacity for black rhino. This also stimulates breeding on existing reserves from where the black rhino are removed by reducing population pressure there.’

The WWF/ Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Black Rhino Range Expansion Project is made possible through funding from WWF-Netherlands, through WWF-South Africa, and is supported by the Mazda Wildlife Fund.