

Kenya:

The art of being treed by a rhino

The Chyulus are a range of staggeringly beautiful volcanic hills in Kenya, adjacent to Tsavo West National Park and Amboseli.

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Project Advisor

The lava that once flowed from these hills has some of the most dense and varied acacia growing from its dark, solid mass. It is in here that the elusive black rhino hides, and it is here, due to increased human activity in the Park in recent years, that the rhinos have become more vulnerable to poaching.

On my last visit to the Chyulu Hills National Park, I saw an enormous stockpile of sandalwood at the Park headquarters, which had been confiscated from the local Kamba people illegally trading in this expensive commodity. Charcoal burning is another major problem.

Due to the increased threats, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), in collaboration with Richard Bonham and his Mbirikani game scouts, has stepped up its presence, patrolling the Park and keeping an eye on the rhinos' whereabouts. More recently, with funding from SRI, Chester Zoo, the International Rhino Foundation and US Fish and Wildlife Service, waterholes for the rhinos have been built, vehicles supplied, and equipment and training provided to aid these men in their anti-poaching and monitoring work.

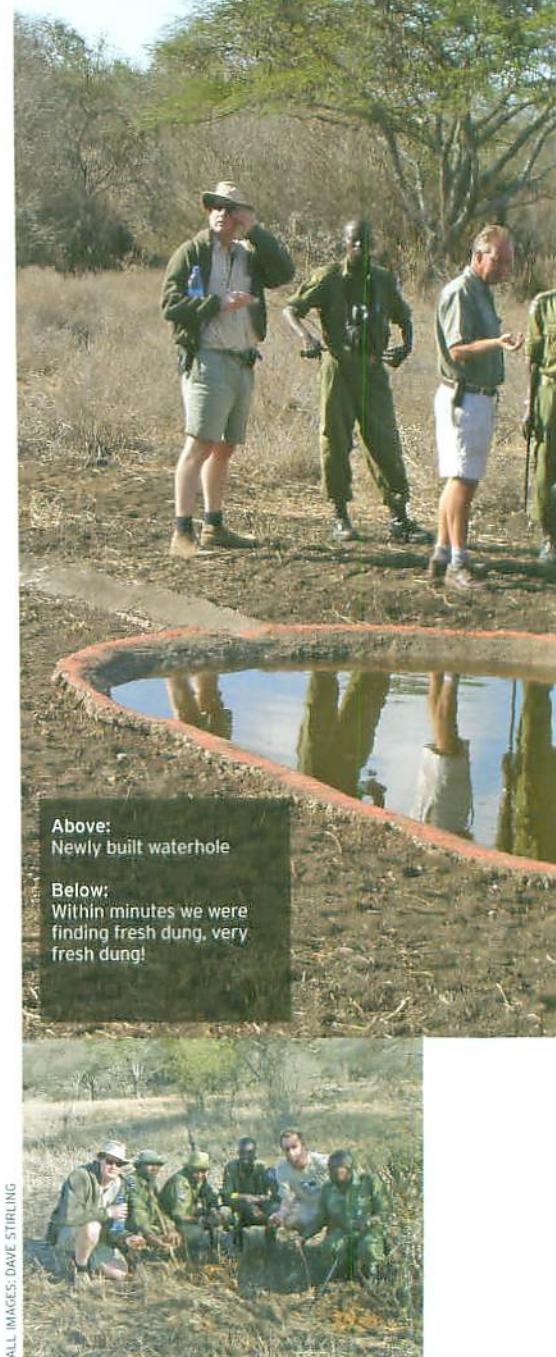
I made two trips to the Chyulus in the past three months, on the first occasion with Tom Kenyon-Slaney, one of Save the Rhino's Trustees. Tom and I, as usual, were on a tight schedule, so a dawn patrol with Richard's scouts seemed a good use of our short time there. We set out from the newly built waterhole and within minutes were finding fresh dung, very fresh dung! Brimming with enthusiasm (and perhaps



Verb,

*intransitive:
to be treed*

lacking a little in tracking nous), the scouts pushed on, eager to find a rhino for us. The lava flow is tricky to walk on. Its hard and uneven basalt ground rips through walking boots whilst the acacia, particularly the wait-a-bit thorn, rips your legs and arms. What was intriguing about this seemingly dry landscape were the numerous succulents, mainly from the euphorbia plants that thrive here, which perhaps explains why the rhinos are not yet needing to use the waterholes. We passed one euphorbia which had most



Above:
Newly built waterhole

Below:
Within minutes we were finding fresh dung, very fresh dung!

ALL IMAGES: DAVE STIRLING

certainly been upturned by a rhino. The spongy root was filled with liquid which poured from your hand when squeezed.

Having never seen more than months' old dung on my previous rhino patrols in the Chyulus, I was very excited to see such fresh dung and browse. As I was musing over this there was a large crashing of branches just ahead of us, a loud snort and, before I knew it, our once-chivalrous hosts fled past us and in a few deft moves, were neatly huddled in the nearest tree! (Verb, intransitive: "to be treed"). With nowhere to go, Tom and I crouched down and hoped the rhino was not coming our way. Of course it had fled in the other direction and, because of the dense vegetation, neither of us actually saw each other. But what an adrenaline rush; it was hard to believe we had virtually



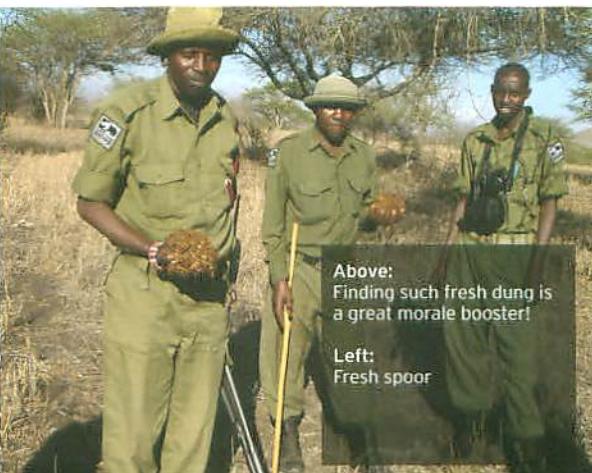
bumped into one of these shy creatures! The next visit, in January 2006, was with Mark Pilgrim and Roger Wilkinson from Chester Zoo, which has become such an important funding partner in our East African programme. This time the KWS rhino unit was our host. Richard Kech, who is employed by SRI as Field Research Officer in Tsavo East National Park, was on secondment to the Chyulus for six weeks to do the same here, during which they had identified seven individual animals. I was staggered to hear this and even more pleased to learn that there are probably between 10-12 rhinos in the Park that they know about, which implies there are more here than that figure. There is talk of biological management of this

population starting with DNA analysis of the dung, which would be used to look at individual identity (and from that population size) and sex ratio. In the meantime, increased protection and enhanced monitoring skills is the priority to conserve this newly found population. It is crucial that the team keeps on top of this work, as the threat of poaching is ever present.

Priorities for 2006

As ever, visiting the Chyulus wasn't just about going out to search for rhinos, but also about prioritising the project's needs for 2006 and working out how we might raise the money to pay for these. In addition to previously identified needs, we want to help with the following:

- A cook for the KWS ranger camp: At the moment, the rangers are dipping into their own pockets to pay him. We would like to pay the cook's salary of £40 per month, as this would make a significant difference to the rangers' income and morale.
- Fuel for the Toyota Landcruiser owned by the Maasailand Preservation Trust. MPT, the charity run by Richard Bonham, has a rather clapped-out Toyota Landcruiser used by the Mbirikani game scout team. This car supports all the game scout operations, i.e. re-supplying the rhino scouts, doing shift changes etc. It has to cover the 300,000-acre Mbirikani Ranch on anti-poaching and day-to-day jobs. Over a three-day period, while Dave Stirling was in the Chyulus, a man was gored by a buffalo and had to be collected and taken to hospital; a kongoni was reported butchered by poachers and a patrol had to be dispatched; in came a report of a baby elephant found abandoned, so off it went again... This car is doing about 2,500 kms per
- month, which brings in a bill of about £260 per month in fuel alone.
- Repairing Toyota Landcruiser at KWS Park HQ: If we can agree terms with the KWS, we would like to repair a currently unusable Landcruiser sitting at Park headquarters. Reconditioning the engine and doing essential repairs will cost £2,400; we will only go ahead with this if we can have the KWS's assurance that it will be used for rhino monitoring in the north of the Park.
- Airstrip at Kitia Rhino HQ: Richard Bonham has cleared an area for an airstrip by the HQ; unfortunately there are now quite a few rocks that have to be moved. A bulldozer is not needed, as this can be done by hand at a cost of around £290. Having this airstrip would be very useful for emergencies, i.e. moving men in or out quickly. From an administrative aspect, it would mean Richard can get there in 10 minutes as opposed to a two-and-a-half-hour hour drive each way.
- GIS mapping: Getting this up and running would be a huge help in establishing rhino home ranges, and it would inform future decisions on rhino management. On top of this it would be very useful for other game scout work, covering poaching, wildlife monitoring etc. Richard is trying to launch a water users' association going on the southern boundary of the Mbirikani Ranch. The off-take from the two streams there is so bad that they have dried out two swamps and a river. This has created huge wildlife-human conflict issues, as wildlife is being forced onto the irrigation to find water. GIS would be key to mapping furrows and establishing water take-off regulations. We need funding for a laptop, software, and training / proportion of salary for Fred, who would run the project.



Above:
Finding such fresh dung is a great morale booster!

Left:
Fresh spoor

Help

If you'd like to help, please send a donation to Save the Rhino with a note saying it is intended for the Chyulu Hills.