

# Life after rhinos

It will be three years in October since I handed over the reins of Save the Rhino and began a new life in the relative obscurity of the French Alps. Rhinos don't feature too heavily here but, it has been said, in some extreme skiing circles, that the charging white rhino is the avalanche that you ride in front of when seeking your ultimate thrill! I'm getting too old for that sort of high and anyway I've had my fair share of charging rhinos, but of the snorting, crashing kind!

David Stirling, Founder Director and Project Advisor

People have asked me how I have re-adjusted into life after Save the Rhino, because it was the kind of job that never ended when you left the office at the end of each day. Friends assumed, quite fairly, that if you were doing a job like this, you were obviously single-minded about it and it was therefore permissible to discuss the merits of sustainable use versus animal welfare long into the night. And then you stand down as Director of the charity, move to France and build chalets (environmentally sound ones I might add...). Occasionally I feel left out, a little envious of old colleagues who have gone to work in the field. Mostly I am pleased in the knowledge that the charity is being taken forward by such a dedicated and enthusiastic team, which is as passionate about wildlife conservation as we all were when we set out. As Project Advisor to the charity, I am fortunate enough to visit rhino projects and the flame inside me burns as fiercely as ever before. Fundraising is at the coal-face of charity work but identifying effective projects, of which there might be many, and then prioritising scarce funds is fundamental to its success.

I view Kenya as my second home probably because, over the years, I have made so many friends there in and out of conservation. Scotland is my first and France, where I currently live, is only temporary. I love Kenya but at the same time I get so frustrated at how far behind it is becoming, particularly where conservation is concerned. You'd think with all the outside investment and tourism it has had over the years, it might be leading the way in environmental conservation. Bled dry, the country's natural resources are rapidly disappearing and whilst recently the tourist industry is enjoying a much-needed boost in visitors to the region, it will be short lived.

Without the animals in protected areas (where tourists view them), there will be little point visiting this once, vast wildlife rich area of East Africa. As the current Chairman of the East African Wildlife Society recently pointed out, in our future planning of conservation policy we must take into account the realities of demography. By 2020 there will be 45 million Kenyans, and altogether some 140 million East Africans. Non-protected areas will have little space for wildlife, while pressure on protected areas will increase unless we now look at ways in which to knit conservation with development. If people are as poor in 2020 as they are today, then environmental degradation will continue.

Organisations like Save the Rhino have a chance to help promote that change. I am glad to see influential NGOs hopping off the fence that they have sat on for so long, and supporting Swaziland's request to downlist white rhinos from appendix I to II at the CITES (Convention of International Trade In Endangered Species) conference this year, and Namibia's proposal to allow limited trophy hunting. This does not mean that the rhino is no longer endangered, just that certain countries have proved that their populations of rhinos are on the increase. They should be able to make some choices in how they manage their rhinos, to the benefit of those rhinos and the neighbouring communities.

Life after rhino is unthinkable because - let us face it - if we can't save an animal as large and as a charismatic as a rhino, then what can we save? As for life after rhino for me, well, it's not too bad. I keep a hand in, and with my new chalet business in the French Alps I hope to be able to help Save the Rhino financially by donating a percentage of the proceeds from bookings from rhino supporters. Life isn't in neat, separate compartments, and I see no reason why I shouldn't mix up rhinos, skiing, and whatever else turns up in the years to come!

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