

A Day in the life of the Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary

by Semu Pallyangyo, Sanctuary Manager, Mkomazi Game Reserve - as told to Tony Fitzjohn.

Night. Steven is shaking me awake. Three rhinos have just walked right into our camp, in search of water. Which they found in our 4,000 litre storage tank. The tank is now on its side, with a big hole. Tony is going to be cross, but first of all we have to get the rhinos out of camp. Jonah, Rose and James are blundering around, denting our Uniport Housing, flattening bushes and saucepans and scattering washing from the clothes line. We quickly collect our reserve water and head to the water hole, calling and leaving a small trail of water on the road.

We know these rhino well; better still, they know us. They soon follow to their usual trough and drink peacefully before moving off into the thick bush. Jonah is usually quite hostile to the younger male, James,

especially if there are females around. But when water is scarce, they seem to call a truce - as long as the junior male makes the right polite whining and snuffling sounds. We breathe a sigh of relief and grab a couple of hours' sleep. The water has dried up at Kisima, after a total rains failure in April and May. Our new Scania Water Tanker has only been in use for two days, carting water from the Headquarters borehole that the Trust put in a few years ago. We have all been on short rations.

Up again at dawn. Tony seems more amused than anything else about the camp invasion, but he's concerned that we follow up on the giraffe that got caught in the fence a couple of hours earlier. It wasn't serious, and as soon as the alarms went off

we cut the wires and he extricated himself quite easily. I send the tracker team to confirm that all is well and start my daily rounds, checking on the activity of the other rhinos during the night.

It is an easy morning, with fresh tracks everywhere, and after only a brief time on foot we get visual sightings of all the rhinos. None of us is armed: firearms would be a hindrance, and there are plenty of trees to climb. Anyway, rhino eyesight is very bad at close range, and we have become quite skilled at jumping out of their way at the last minute! I go to the top of the mountain to service the radio repeater...which is about to be colonised by an army of ants. Just in time!



The fence gang is completing the new internal fence line, ready for fresh arrivals. They need more materials, and the vehicle is due to be serviced, so I set off to the main camp at Kisima. I also collect meat for Jipe, the lioness who is in a camp with Zacharia and Ombeni a few miles outside the sanctuary. She is expecting cubs and needs a top-up every now and then, as game is fairly scarce at this time of year. The camp is an important outpost for us - with a very alert guard.

By 3pm I've finished at Kisima, and I head off for an afternoon break. But as I reach the main gate, Outpost Kilo Tango calls to say that a big fire - started by poachers or optimistic herdsman - is approaching the sanctuary fence. We have firebreaks both inside and outside the fence, but the wind is howling down the gorge. The others wait inside while I go out to back-burn to the firebreak. With the fierce wind, the fire jumps a small section, but it is soon put out by the men inside. The main firebreak holds and we can relax - until the next one. We have to stop the fires from reaching the sanctuary until we've done some controlled burning inside, as they are a real hazard to the rhinos. Instead of fleeing a fire like most animals, rhinos often try to stamp it out if it comes into their territory.

Back into the sanctuary, as the water tanker has arrived. Initially responding to the fire, it will now supply the three outposts and the four water holes for the rhinos. At the Oscar Moja waterhole, Jonah has arrived with Charley (an adult female)



and Rose (a sub-adult female). They drink as the tanker is offloading. They look relaxed and very fit. Hard to tell if the females are pregnant. Evans and Gabriel will wait until they have moved off into the bush for the night before walking the mile back to their small camp.

At the Main Gate water hole, James comes along with his new friend, Marina, and at Oscar Tatoo we put the water out but Elvis and Lee don't arrive until after 8pm. Penielli and Eliudi wait on a tree platform until they have gone and then call me on the radio to pick them up.

Zacharia has seen torches near his camp, and soon after dark four of us are in position, creeping along slowly and quietly with light intensifiers. We catch and arrest two very surprised men. Steven takes them off to the Reserve Headquarters at first light. They had been hamstringing lesser

kudu, attracting them with a small horn from a Japanese motorcycle. A horrible death for these animals. On questioning them, we were pleased to learn that they were avoiding the Rhino Sanctuary as they had heard the guards were army trained, had seen service and took their jobs very seriously. Quite right, but good to have it verified by "the enemy".

Back in camp, everyone is tired from another long day, but we still talk for an hour before turning in. We are privileged to act as guardians for these rhinos, many of whom we get to know very well (which stops them chasing us whenever we are on foot!). And it is good to fall asleep knowing that we have done the very best we can for them on what, after all, has just been another normal day.

