

SURVEY: RHINOS ON PRIVATE



LAND

A RECENT SURVEY OF RHINO POPULATIONS ON PRIVATE LAND HAS SHOWN THAT PRIVATE RHINO OWNERS ARE CONTINUING TO MAKE A CONSIDERABLE CONTRIBUTION TO RHINO CONSERVATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The first survey of white rhinos outside official conservation areas was conducted by the Rhino & Elephant Foundation in 1987. It traced and recorded the histories of all translocations of white rhino from Natal provincial game reserves, Bop Parks and private sales and revealed that 790 animals occurred on private land in 1987.

A second survey carried out by Richard Emslie in 1994 as part of the WWF/World Conservation Society international cost-benefit study of different approaches to rhino conservation in Africa and Asia, revealed a substantial increase to 1 200 white rhinos on private land. It also showed that changes made by the Natal Parks Board in 1989, to let rhinos fetch their true value at auctions, has had many positive effects for rhino conservation. The incentive for the private sector to breed rhinos increased, and conservation departments have earned much-needed additional revenue to support their efforts. To date, the live sale of white and black rhinos since 1986 has generated a total turnover in excess of U.S. \$14 million. The placing of a high value on rhinos was also used to successfully lobby for increased penalties to be legislated for rhino crimes. It sent a message to magistrates and police that these crimes were very serious and deserved to be accorded top priority.

The 1996 survey, conducted by the African Rhino Owners Association (AROA) – an organisation affiliated to the Rhino & Elephant Foundation, revealed that rhino numbers on private land have increased from 1 200 to 1 475 over the last two years. The private sector now conserves one fifth of South Africa's white rhinos. Natural population growth on private land was the primary reason for this increase, with the buying of additional animals from state reserves accounting for a smaller percentage. In South Africa as a whole, white rhino numbers have increased from 4 137 in 1987 to 6 375 in 1994 and 7 375 in 1996. These increases represent an annual growth of 7.5 per cent per year since 1994, and 6.7 per cent since 1987. When one considers that some rhinos have been donated or sold to other countries, the actual rates are even higher. Numbers could top 15 000 in the next ten years.

Information gathered during the survey indicates that owners of white rhino have made large capital investments in the conservation of these animals. They are, therefore, important stakeholders both in conservation efforts directed at this species and in the country's overall conservation strategies.

Another result of the survey is that a comprehensive and up-to-date database has been established, which will provide a solid foundation from which to work in the future.

The survey was carried out by Daan Buijs and Theo Papenfus. The Mazda Wildlife Fund provided a vehicle for its duration, while the Rhino & Elephant Foundation co-ordinated fundraising through their office and provided administrative assistance. Computer facilities for data-capture and analysis were laid on by the ARC-Range and Forage Institute.

Funding was received from Thabo Tholo, the Natal Game Marketing Association, WWF International, the Japan Wildlife Research Centre and Shikar-Safari Club International. Richard Emslie of the African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) provided the data from his 1994 survey which facilitated the task. The assistance of provincial nature conservation agencies was also invaluable, as was the co-operation of rhino owners and their managers.

