

Ralph
Johnstone
reports on
how a
Kenyan
cattle ranch
helped save
the black
rhinoceros
from
extinction.



The Products of Peace

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THIS IS HOW, NOT ONE GENERATION ago, much of East Africa must have looked. We are parked on a sweeping plain, a tinkling river beneath us, the slopes of Mount Kenya cloaked in cloud above. All around are herds of wild game—buffalo, eland, zebra, waterbuck, a white rhino and her calf—all contentedly grazing, all completely unmoved by this latest arrival with its mechanical growl. One cannot help marveling at the perfect harmony of it all—and wondering if we will be the last generation to see it.

If there is a sense of natural nostalgia at Solio Ranch, it is not accidental. As well as being one of Kenya's most productive cattle ranches, Solio has also cultivated one of the most successful private game reserves on the continent. To most conservationists the reserve is best known for its pioneering work in protecting Kenya's endangered black rhinos—to some, it has been responsible for saving the entire population.

One can instantly see why the rhinos feel at home here, why they have happily procreated and brought their

species back from the brink of extinction. What Solio has that most other reserves—and certainly all national parks—lack is an abundance of unadulterated peace. For much of the time, the only noise that rents the wind here is the ghoulsh shriek of the whistling

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thorn, the prickly acacia that rhinos so love to devour. Apart from the odd carload of tourists, the only people they see are the security guards patrolling their borders. There is no danger in their genetic memory—no poachers, no gunshots, no murdered parents. All there is is an abundance of food and a surfeit of shapely ladies inviting them to plunge into Solio's famous gene pool.

Today, watching these magnificent creatures contentedly browsing the

carpet of acacias stretching between Mount Kenya and the Aberdares, it is hard to imagine the slaughter that so recently befell their species. When Court Parfet, Solio's owner, bought the property in 1966, there were more than 20,000 black rhinos in Kenya; by the early 1980s, there were fewer than 350. In the years between, the parks once reputed to offer the best wildlife viewing on earth—Tsavo, Amboseli, Mount Meru—were turned into virtual graveyards. The black rhino, once a symbol of nature's bounty, became a symbol of man's greed.

It did not take Court Parfet long to realise that Solio was perfectly placed to fight the slaughter. Not only did it have permanent water sources and an abundance of acacia browse, but he had to build a fence anyway.

"We had to separate the cattle from the wildlife, especially the buffalo, so we built a strong fence between them. It was just at the time that the elephants and rhinos were beginning to disappear, and we wanted to do something to help. There was no way we



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could do anything for the elephants, but we could for the rhino. The only problem was that I was new to the country, and some people accused me of building a private zoo.”

Soon after the fence was completed in 1970, Parfet’s ‘zoo’ rescued its first two black rhinos from Kiboko, about 140 kilometres southwest of Nairobi. Over the next ten years, it brought in twenty-one others, some isolated by poaching in Tsavo, others displaced by settlement in the Nyeri forest and surrounding ranchlands. Their widespread

anywhere in the world. The rate has since dropped as more rhinos have been moved out of the reserve, although the climbing birthrates in Tsavo and Nakuru pay testament to the virility of the Solio genes.

“It’s been a very successful story,” says Tim Oloo, Rhino Programme Coordinator at the Kenya Wildlife Service. “I remember when they did the first census at Solio, and a lot of people didn’t believe them! We’ve been constantly surprised at the birthrate there. Solio proves that when you have a high

origins helped ensure a broad gene pool, and put up sufficient biological hurdles to inbreeding.

Today, Solio’s statistics say it all. In the past twenty-seven years, the 17,500 acre reserve has had an incredible 217 rhino residents. From initial populations of twenty-three blacks and sixteen whites, Solio has bred ninety-one blacks and eighty-seven whites—and translocated sixty-four and thirty-two respectively to other reserves and parks. At the last count—in June 1997—there were fifty blacks and seventy-one whites on the property.

More incredible still is the annual birth rate, which between 1980 and 1986 stood at a spectacular 12 percent—unequalled

density there is frequent contact between the animals and breeding is accelerated. We’re now seeing the same thing at Nakuru—which has forty black rhinos from an initial stock of twenty-one, fifteen from Solio—where the animals are now settled and there are up to three births a year. Animals thrive where there is less human presence and disturbance.”

Masterly inactivity—according to ranch manager Des Bristow these two words sum up the secret of Solio’s success. “Mr. Parfet has maintained a policy of non-interference,” says Bristow, who today oversees the reserve as well as the commercial cattle operation. “He hasn’t had experts or researchers coming in and out; there’s been no disruptive close-up monitoring.”

Parfet’s policy of limiting human traffic on the reserve was not just the educated guesswork of an energetic hobbyist; it had its roots in the highest authority. “Bernhard Grzimek—head of Frankfurt Zoo and renowned rhino author—had told me how difficult it was to breed rhinos in captivity, because they’re such shy, solitary creatures,” he says. “So my wife and I decided it was best to just leave them alone. We just managed the fence, and put in some stray rhinos from time to time, and left them there in peace.”

Parfet’s policy invariably led to criticisms from those involved in more conventional conservation strategies. He was accused of building a personal zoo, of tampering with nature and playing God with the reserve’s gene pools. But he was not one to give up easily. “We never paid any attention,” he laughs. “We just got on with the job.”

That job involved sacrificing nearly a third of his prime ranchland and spending several million dollars building fifty-two kilometres of eight-foot-high electric fencing. On top of that, there were the poaching patrols and the expenses invariably accrued by the cattle ranch in extra fence repairs and tick controls. Anyone who accuses Parfet of being guided by greed has clearly not done his maths.

Parfet was helped by his professional relationship with the late President Kenyatta, who had initially invited him out to Kenya to advise on government investments in commercial ranching, and who signed a special gazette exempting part of his ranch from agricultural use. It was that piece of paper

which enabled Parfet to call the policy shots that have effectively saved his rhinos. Yet all along, he was up against a barrage of criticism from his neighbours.

It is an age-old argument, one of the many conservation issues without a single straightforward solution—fencing at the expense of genetic diversity. Fencing is clearly fine for rhinos, which are territorial and generally stay in one place, but it can prove a fatal hurdle to migrating animals. But in Solio's case there was an extra dimension—poaching.

"If there was no fence, our rhinos would have wandered off and been poached," insists Parfet. "Maybe in the north of Kenya or in Tsavo you can protect species without fences, but certain areas cannot work without it."

The records of unfenced neighbouring properties appear to bear him out. On Laikipia's Ol Ari Nyiro Ranch, the apparent disappearance of several black rhinos continues to provide an enigma for local 'rhino people'. Although most conservationists agree that former KWS coordinator Rob Brett's count of forty-three black rhinos in 1989 was probably an overestimate, several privately concede it likely that several rhinos have since wandered off the property and been poached. The absence of any mechanism for identifying such incidences—such as the old practice of offering rewards for body parts—makes this very difficult to confirm. What is clear is that only half a dozen rhinos remain.

In the Aberdares, a monumental effort is underway to fence off over five hundred square kilometres of forested parkland for the park's fifty-plus black rhinos. Despite worries about the maintenance costs of the 280 kilometres of fencing, and claims that it will turn the park into an ecological island, the need for a fence was graphically illustrated last year, when a resident rhino (and Solio import) endured a horrifically prolonged death after catching a foot in a snare.

While KWS maintains there has been no poaching in Kenya since 1991, there is a weight of evidence to suggest otherwise. Rumours that a rhino corpse was found in the Aberdares last year with its horn torn out or that a group of South Koreans in Tanzania are offering

good money for rhino horn have proved impossible to verify. However, it has now been confirmed that in the past two years at least two rhinos have been poached in Mount Kenya National Park and, more recently, two rhinos were killed in the Maasai Mara.

Concern for free-ranging rhinos grazing outside fenced areas, particularly in the Maasai Mara and Tsavo East, remains high. Although several of the rhinos translocated to Tsavo have been fitted with radio transmitters, some re-

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ports suggest this has merely focused rangers' attention on those individuals at the expense of 'unmarked' rhinos and bandit camps. No one will deny that those rhinos crossing the Galana River are still very vulnerable.

In such tense times—made tenser for many by the recent CITES ivory ruling—the record of Solio stands like a beacon in the darkness. In twenty-seven years of operation, the reserve has only lost one rhino to poachers—in 1989, the year before a security patrol was stationed permanently at the reserve, and, ironically, the same day a KWS team was there to release a translocated bush pig.

But despite its unrivalled record, there are other pressures on Solio that threaten its long-term future. The ranch sits on the vital watershed of the Tana and Ewaso Nyiro rivers, and the Moyo River which bisects the property has long enjoyed permanent run-off from the Aberdares and Mount Kenya. But in recent years, the river has shown signs of dwindling due to growing settlement and irrigation upstream. Says Bristow: "There is a growing need to educate people upstream about proper watershed management."

For the rhinos themselves, the

main concern remains the high cost and commitment required for their continuing protection. While the KWS Rhino Capture Unit has an admirable record, the organisation's position means it is still prone to the winds and whims of political change. The organisation has in the past been criticised for moving rhinos to insecure areas, and for its propensity to place 'expert opinion' over that of people on the ground. Recent requests for rhinos from newly established sanctuaries have only served to heighten tensions.

"There are so many unanswered questions about what breeding patterns you're breaking up and the psychological effects of removing individuals from the herd," says Bristow. "You cannot just take them like nails out of a box. You've got to ask yourself, have you taken some that won't breed—or will only breed with others you've left behind?" For now, all one can be sure of is that translocation planners must continue to place breeding above the insidious lure of the tourist dollar.

While Solio may have broken international rhino procreation records, its greatest and most lasting achievement lies in the national propagation of that procreation. In 1984, the reserve became the first to translocate black rhinos within Kenya, moving three pregnant females to the Lewa Downs sanctuary—and launching another great conservation success story in the process. Three years later, it undertook the largest and most successful translocation in Kenya's history, moving a breeding herd of fifteen black rhinos to Lake Nakuru National Park.

Over the last decade, Solio has become the model for sanctuaries countrywide, providing the breeding nucleus for Ol Pejeta's sanctuary, fueling the rhino rebirth in Tsavo East, and inspiring improved security in Nairobi and the Aberdares. Since 1987, it has moved sixteen black rhinos each to Ol Pejeta and Tsavo East, six to Ol Jogi, two to the Aberdares, and a further five to Lewa Downs, as well as thirty-two white rhinos countrywide.

Solio's influence has also stretched to southern Africa, where its success has been instrumental in establishing the



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Between 1980 and 1986 Solio's rhino birth rate stood at a spectacular 12 percent—unequalled anywhere in the world.

Over the past 27 years Solio has had 217 residents. From initial populations of twenty-three black rhinos and sixteen whites, Solio has bred ninety-one blacks and eighty-seven whites—and translocated sixty-four and thirty-two respectively to other reserves and parks.

Solio's secret? "The more they're left alone, the better they breed," says ranch owner Court Parfet.

importance of private land in rhino conservation. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, where rhinos were until recently restricted to parks, authorities are now actively encouraging private landowners to buy and breed black rhinos.

"I remember the Zimbabwe representative calling Solio a 'glorified zoo' at a meeting we held here in the '80s," recalls Esmond Bradley Martin, the world-renowned campaigner against the rhino horn trade (see pages 13 to 16). "Now they've completely changed their mind. Today, 60 percent of Zimbabwe's

rhinos are on private land. South Africa has also started moving black rhinos onto private land. Ideally it would be nice to have all our rhinos on public land, but it hasn't worked out that way."

Bradley Martin says Solio's contribution to rhino conservation cannot be overestimated. "Solio has become a model throughout Africa for rhino conservation. If these private ranches had not existed, I think our rhino situation now would be really desperate. In these days of negative conservation stories, the story of Solio is one of the most posi-

tive in Africa."

Mark Stanley-Price, director of the African Wildlife Foundation and head of the IUCN/SSC African Rhino Specialist Group, says: "What Solio shows is the value of having set up a sanctuary for rhinos twenty-five years ago. Together with Nairobi National Park, it has been key in producing the founder stock for other sanctuaries. It shows what you can achieve in a quiet place with controlled tourist numbers."

Today, Solio's seeds are being sown progressively farther afield. In addition to the steadily climbing black rhino populations on private land, KWS reports a steady recovery in the parks. Even Tsavo is regaining a vestige of its former glory, the thirty free-ranging rhino released since 1993 in Tsavo East witnessing two confirmed births in the past two years, while the thirty-four in Ngulia sanctuary have seen three newcomers. In Mount Kenya National Park, once another teeming capital of rhino country, the surviving four-strong herd saw the arrival of a fifth last year.

Although there remain fears for the more dispersed herds in Tsavo, the Mara and the Aberdares, KWS is confident that the black rhino recovery is now secure. "Around the country, populations are stabilising," says Tim Oloo. "The overall picture is very promising." Oloo reports a nationwide black rhino population of 441—although this includes all 'probables' and 'possibles'. The 'definites' number 390. If you consider that 114 of these have been at Solio, its importance is underlined. Current breeding statistics may suggest the increasing importance of Lewa Downs, Nakuru and Tsavo, but they obscure the reality that all these reserves were stocked from Solio—and are now benefitting from its resilient genes.

It remains something of a travesty that this little ranch that has given the natural world so much, that is the indisputable father of Kenya's black rhino gene pool, remains shrouded in anonymity—a property rarely featured on any tourist maps. But then again, Court Parfet would not want it any other way. The 'nearly 70' American is an unlikely conservationist. When he first came to Kenya in 1957, Court Parfet was a keen hunter, a headstrong young man looking to add to his growing collection of elephant and buffalo trophies. But after he bought Solio, an unusual transformation occurred.

"Seeing the massacre that took place here in the mid-70s changed my outlook for life. I became quite a conservationist after that. In my day, everyone liked the idea of stalking game... but times changed. I haven't pulled a trigger for over twenty years."

Court Parfet is himself a rare breed of animal. Despite his reputation as a ruthless, reclusive businessman, he comes across more as a sensitive and self-effacing individual, a man with a deep love for Africa and its wildlife—and an undying commitment to the legacy of his late wife, Claude, whose love of animals was initially responsible for the reserve at Solio. Over the past four years, the Parfets have been gradually, cautiously, opening their doors to an increasing number of tourists. About eight hundred visitors currently pass through Solio each year; two years ago, the reserve finally started paying for itself.

If you add to the numbers of rhino being bred from Solio stock the tourism revenue being brought in by, for example, the rhinos at Nakuru, you begin to realise the huge contribution that Solio has made not just to the protection of the black rhino, but to the conservation of the entire Kenyan economy.

While the target of six hundred black rhinos by the year 2000 that Rob Brett set in his definitive 1993 Management Plan is now unrealistic, there is every chance of attaining the magical five hundred figure. As Parfet points out: "When Ken Kuhle completes the fence around the Aberdares, it will have the capacity to hold several hundred rhinos. Tsavo East could also hold several hundred, if they can implement stricter means of protecting them."

For Court Parfet, the key to the continuing growth of Kenya's black rhino population is peace and solitude. "I've seen people on game reserves taking their friends up close to rhinos to try to make them charge," he says. "We haven't paid any attention to our rhinos; we haven't let anyone go in there, which unfortunately made us unpopular. But they're solitary creatures, especially the blacks. The more they're left alone, the better they breed—I'm convinced of that. Solio doesn't have any better soil or minerals or browse. We just haven't let anyone in there."

If there is one thing more important to Parfet than safeguarding black rhinos, it is safeguarding their habitat. "With the population explosion we're seeing today, human beings are taking over entire ecosystems. Of course, no one is going to put an animal life over a human life, but there must be a balance. Kenya and Tanzania must hang on to the Maasai Mara and the Serengeti. We've been credited for saving the black rhino, which was just something we wanted to do. But whoever saves the Mara and the Greater Serengeti, they'll be the real heroes."

Ralph Johnstone is a Nairobi-based journalist. He wrote about Lake Victoria's water hyacinth crisis in Swara 20:4. Ralph's report on Kenya's sport hunting debate will appear in the next issue of Swara.

A Balancing Act

Solio's success in the breeding of black rhinos owes much to the parallel success of Court Parfet's cattle ranch. Not only have the profits from the ranch bankrolled the reserve, but the conservation operation has undoubtedly benefitted from the pragmatic influence of its commercial neighbour.

The need to find a profitable balance between species—cattle and wildlife, grazers and browsers—and between land uses—ranching, game breeding, tourism—are the fundamental issues behind the current debate on wildlife utilisation. Many local conservationists support the example of South Africa, which by giving ranchers ownership of the animals on their land has turned conservation into a thriving business, complete with wildlife auctions and vast marketing networks.

Although wildlife utilisation raises a host of thorny issues—official regulation, hunting rights, the 'ownership' of migratory animals—there is an obvious case for 'localising' wildlife management. While no one would actually advocate branding our elephants and rhinos, few would deny the need to give local people more of a stake in looking after their wildlife.

Rodney Elliott, who managed Solio's reserve for a total of twelve years during the 1970s and 80s, says the key to successful wildlife management lies in pragmatic calculations, in treating your wildlife like commercial stock and calculating what numbers the land can hold. "The key to the management of any reserve is finding the right balance between species," he says. "Accurate counts have to be done regularly so you can work out the carrying capacity of each species and then cull—by shooting or trapping—where necessary. The stocking rate must always take heed of the worst droughts possible; there's a great danger of over-stocking."

His words are borne out by the history of Solio, which during the mid-80s saw drastic over-browsing of the whistling thorn favoured by the black rhino. Salvation only came with the fencing of Lake Nakuru National Park, orchestrated by Peter Jenkins and the Kenya Rhino Project, which enabled the Parfets to move fifteen black rhinos out of Solio in 1987.

Today, the over-browsing has led to a thinning of the denser vegetation and an opening out of the plains—ironically creating a more conducive environment for the blacks' grazing white cousins. The blacks have not entirely eaten themselves out of home, however, as a continuing birth rate of between 3 and 6 percent shows.

However, the reserve has learned its lesson and the black rhinos—which before the Nakuru translocation numbered ninety-one in just sixty-eight square kilometres—will never again be allowed to get up to such untenable levels.

Ralph Johnstone