

So-o... how many rhinos have you saved today? A look at the wider picture of rhino conservation

When you work for Save the Rhino you often get asked how many rhinos you have actually saved. Well, what does one say?

Petra Fleischer Fundraising Manager

Although Save the Rhino is all about increasing rhino numbers in the wild, it's hard to estimate exactly how many animals are saved through our fundraising initiatives per year. And do bear in mind that we ourselves don't work in the field, but instead partner up with organisations doing extraordinary work in the front line and always work alongside national governments and / or other charities such as the International Rhino Foundation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, EAZA, Chester Zoo, Tusk Trust and the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation. The African Rhino Specialist Group recorded a rise of just over 3% in African black rhino numbers over the last two years, helped by these strategic partnerships aiming to save the species from extinction.

Looking at the overall grants made by Save the Rhino in 2006, which was one of the most eventful years since the start of the charity, our role within rhino conservation becomes apparent (sorry for blowing our own horn here): we work with a range of field organisations, supporting a range of activities, in an expanding range of countries, saving a rhino or two or more along the way.

Perhaps because of historical reasons, people tend to link conservation with the protection of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, which doesn't really paint the whole picture. Conservation is just as much about the wellbeing of people living in these areas and the economic opportunities linked with preserving them.

The term "conservation value" refers to the assessing the value of an area taking in consideration the ecological, economic and social benefits and opportunities associated with the area. So what are these ecological, economic and social values when one talks about rhino conservation?

Ecological value

Rhinos tend to live in areas of high biodiversity, which are often categorised as priority conservation areas. In other words, their ecological value is recognised and they are therefore protected. So while working towards saving the species from extinction, Save the Rhino simultaneously contributes towards conserving biodiversity through saving rhino habitat, so that other lesser-known, less charismatic species that share their habitat are conserved too.

Economic value

Photographic tourism springs to mind first. The Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (www.wildcru.org) estimates that elephant viewing, for example, is valued at US\$3.5-4.5 per ha. Other opportunities for inward investment rise too by keeping areas protected. The Laikipia Wildlife Forum, has taken its forest conservation one step further by getting involved in carbon trading. Hunting and cropping also have a place in conservation.

Social value

Alongside the employment opportunities that are involved in keeping a green area protected, one must also look at the implications that these areas have on human health. Fresh air and clean water add to the well-being of local communities and prevent disease. In addition approximately 25% of all prescription drugs in the United States are derived from plants. The rosy periwinkle from Madagascar, for example, is the source of a drug used in the treatment of Hodgkin's disease and leukaemia.

So what about saving rhinos?

To come back to the original question about saving rhinos: yes, Save the Rhino has certainly saved rhinos through the rhino- and community-based conservation projects we support, but perhaps it makes sense to look at the issue on a wider scale too: by recognising and investing in the conservation value (i.e. ecological, economic and social values) of the areas we work in, Save the Rhino also contributes to ensuring that the global value of these areas is retained and more importantly enhanced.

The fact is that the world around us is developing, and more and more green areas are in jeopardy, so we must help recognise and promote the value of areas rich in wildlife and ensure they remain protected, for the sake of rhinos, other wildlife and local communities. You can now see why rhinos are termed 'flagship species' - and that it might not simply be about the number of rhino saved.

DAVE ROBERTSON

Many species benefit from Save the Rhino's ecosystem-based approach, including elephants in Africa and Asia and the endangered African Wild Dog

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3%
BLACK RHINO