

Flying high for the rhinos

With 333 rhinos killed in South Africa in 2010 (compared with only 13 in 2007), one of the most important strongholds for both black and white rhinos, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), has recently taken a hard look at how it could step up its rhino security. The poaching gangs have become highly organised and sophisticated with the use of helicopters and darting equipment. The Park has, therefore, prepared itself to fight fire with fire.

Dirk Swart | Section Ranger, Manzibomvu, Hluhluwe Game Reserve

Both black and white rhino species are abundant in HiP and the Park is synonymous with rhino conservation. Unfortunately, despite the incredible dedication of all those involved in the protection of the Park's rhinos, KwaZulu Natal (KZN) has lost more than 33 rhino since the current poaching crisis started in January 2008, many of which have been from HiP.

Within iMfolozi side of the Park is the large Wilderness Area, which has no roads and is very inaccessible, making it hard to patrol by vehicle. On numerous occasions, illegal operations taking place in the Reserve have been unchecked as a result of the restrictions imposed by the terrain and inability to access the area using vehicles. Although suspected poachers have been pursued hard and fast on foot, a shortage of observation posts and manpower has rendered the efforts fruitless in many instances.

Today's poachers are known to be highly organised, have sophisticated communication equipment, use Parks' uniforms to prevent identification, and often receive warnings of patrols in the area from people living near the Park boundaries. However, poachers in other areas in South Africa have also started to use helicopters and darting equipment. There is a very real threat that these methods will start to be used within HiP. The Park therefore needs to prepare itself for such methods. It is crucial to stay ahead of the poachers in terms of physical presence, technology, equipment, expertise, morale, motivation, discipline and intelligence. KZN park staff need to gain the upper hand and to maintain an edge over these illegal operators and thereby maintain their well-established reputation for skilled, proactive operations and quick effective responses to emergency situations.

After careful consideration of anti-poaching measures, in consultation with colleagues in other South African Parks and Reserves, HiP has decided to proceed with developing an aerial patrol project to enhance its rhino security. WWF has very kindly provided the funds required to purchase a Bantam light aircraft, whilst the fundraising efforts of Save the Rhino International will pay for two of the Section Rangers to train for their Private Pilot Licences, (myself and Lawrence Munro, Section Ranger at iMfolozi).

The establishment of light aircraft operations at HiP, and the wider Zululand Region, will significantly improve law enforcement by increasing the likelihood of successful arrests (getting to the scene of the crime quickly, controlling the situation on the ground by keeping the suspects in visual contact and directing ground forces in, and maintaining a holding pattern over them to keep them 'holed up'). In addition, the plane will act as a highly visible deterrent. Finally, the plane will support general conservation management activities.

The Bantam is a tool not replacing other traditional methods, but fortifying them and attempting to place law enforcement staff deployed on the ground ahead of potential poachers. USFWS RTCF has also provided incredible support towards the first-year running costs of the plane, as well as funds towards beefing up security on the ground with communications and law-enforcement equipment.

Once up and running, there will be at least 25 hours of aerial patrols per month to provide support to at least 7,000 hours of foot and vehicle patrols per month. We hope that this will send out a very strong signal to the poachers that HiP will not be backing down.



Dirk and Lawrence are put through their paces as they work towards obtaining their Private Pilot Licences



Thank you

Thanks to all those funders who are making the above project possible and providing much needed equipment to enhance the security at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park; USFWS RTCF, the Comrades Team, Rhino Trek South Africa team, Daniel and Anna Mulholland, and Colchester Zoo. Thanks also to all those who donated to the *Animal Planet* text campaign in South Africa, a fantastic £4,000 was raised for HiP.