

New blood to improve technical input

Thought to be extinct but rediscovered in the mid-90s, the Chyulu Hills rhinos are one of the world's last remaining unfenced, totally wild populations of black rhino. On top of that, they are Eastern black rhino, of which there are only about 740 left on Earth. They live in a habitat that is one of the richest rhino environments in Africa, about 75% of which is inside Chyulu Hills National Park, the remainder on Mbirikani Group Ranch, a large segment of community land belonging to the Maasai people. Managing this population is extremely exciting but also very challenging.

Fiachra Kearney | Director of Conservation Programmes, Maasailand Preservation Trust

The technical and scientific aspects of the programme require a joint effort between the Maasailand Preservation Trust (MPT) and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). I am the Director of Conservation Programmes here at MPT. I am a conservation biologist by training, with many years of field and research experience managing small populations and captive-breeding programmes of highly threatened species, from Gouldian finches to endangered wallabies to black rhino.

KWS has a huge bank of knowledge and expertise to draw on for rhino conservation

always at high risk of unpredictable, rapid decline in response to various stochastic factors, no matter how much security surrounds them. These factors include any slight elevation in mortality rate, particularly one that negatively skews sex ratios (e.g. disease, drought, conflict leading to mortality etc). This slide towards extinction is known as an 'extinction vortex', so-called because the slide speeds up as numbers drop. Keeping the population in positive growth with a female-biased sex ratio is one way to pull the animal out of an extinction vortex, and this is now a major focus of the Chyulu rhino programme. If the initial population estimate was correct, the population has been growing at an average of 7.5% per annum since 1995, and we are looking to increase that to 12% per annum.



The Chyulu game scouts showing off their fleet of vehicles, thanks to donor grants

A former scientist for the Australian Government and the Wildlife Conservation Society, I have a formal background in applied conservation science, population ecology and evolutionary biology. I work closely with KWS scientists to predict the potential population growth rate and management costs. At the moment, the team is developing a robust means of monitoring individual animals within the population.

The initial years of the Chyulu programme were primarily focused on securing the rhinos and increasing the risk to poachers. Of course these security aspects must continue, and in fact will intensify in response to the escalation of poaching across Africa, but it is also now essential to increase the technical input being put into the programme.

Small populations of animals, especially those referred to as 'K-selected' species (i.e. those with a slow breeding rate), are

Achieving sound technical input for the Chyulu rhino programme is difficult. For a start, finding individual rhinos in 750km² of dense lava woodland is no easy task, although we do have a good handle on the general locations of the animals. Only by fully utilising the appropriate technology and by pooling the resources of MPT and KWS, will we be able to realise our aims. KWS has a huge bank of knowledge and expertise to draw on for rhino conservation. Next door (ecologically speaking) is the Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary in Tsavo West National Park, where rhino-scientist Cedric Khayale is based. Cedric is also the lead KWS scientist in the Chyulu programme and brings in-depth experience of the animals, habitat and translocation methods. An added bonus is that the Ngulia and Chyulu populations are close enough for the odd individual rhino to self-translocate, the best possible method for adding genetic material to the pool.

A huge thank you to SRI, and all its supporters, for being such a stanchion for the Chyulu rhinos.

Grants

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