

LETTER OF APPRECIATION TO THE CORRESPONDENCE COMMITTEE

Written by Sheelagh Antrobus, Skydive for Rhinos 2012 R10million campaign , Project Rhino KZN Secretariat

Dear Alisa and all involved at the IRKA.

Thank you for this message and for recognizing the Skydive for Rhinos campaign in South Africa; to know that our efforts – and those of hundreds of extra-ordinary South Africans who have enthusiastically carried the message of the rhino poaching crisis to tens of thousands of people around the world and helped us raise just over R6million for sustainable, national rhino anti-poaching needs – is comfort to my unhappy heart. World Rhino Day this year in South Africa turned out to be a time of massacre: it was as if the poaching syndicates deliberately timed their incursions to coincide with this international day of awareness – an inflammatory move with the message: 'you can't stop us'.

22 September saw us in South Africa's beautiful Cape Province, for the 4th event of this national campaign that is based on 'ordinary South Africans doing something extraordinary for SA's rhinos'. We started just before dawn with the TV cameras of South Africa's most popular early-morning news show on site and were given 1.5 hours of free national TV coverage to highlight the rhino poaching crisis and the lengths ordinary South African citizens are prepared to go to, to voice their concern about what is happening to this iconic species. This media coverage was in addition to the free national radio and press coverage that Skydive for Rhinos had already attracted. It was a beautiful spring day and the participants, media and spectators alike used the event to acknowledge our role in the international World Rhino Day efforts.

The Monday after World Rhino Day was a public holiday in South Africa - Heritage Day (24 September): another symbolic day as rhinos are part of our national heritage and it was my turn to take to the skies. (I wasn't able to previously, as I broke my coccyx the day before we launched this national campaign on 27 July – putting paid to my plan to tandem skydive at every event alongside the good people who had put so much faith in us and this campaign.) That day was supposed to be the culmination of this year-long, national campaign that has been organized and managed by a core team of just 4 people, with the help of a handful of volunteers and SA's professional skydiving community - who have now



In South Africa, Skydive for Rhinos was joined by Rhino Africa and others for a once-in-a-lifetime World Rhino Day jump. Photo courtesy of Rhino Africa.

become the rhinos' newest supporters. I woke up that morning looking forward to being on the very last plane load of people symbolically taking the rhinos' message to the skies above South Africa. But two hours before we jumped from 10,000ft, the joy turned to pain with a message from my friend and colleague Elise Daffue, founder of StopRhinoPoaching.com, telling me of the discovery of 9 rhinos brutally killed in KwaZulu-Natal over the previous 48 hours, a further 4 in the Eastern Cape (tranquillized before the horns were removed whilst they were still alive) and others around the country. She was in tears; she said she hated having to give me the news, knowing I was about to do something for rhinos that I'd waited 10 months to do – but realized I would rather hear the bad news immediately, than be kept in the dark – especially because I am also the coordinator of Project Rhino KZN and the worst killings had happened in my home province, whilst I was far away from home.

I did skydive for rhinos with the campaign's core team and the pilot and skydiving professionals who have given their hearts to this crisis, but it was a bittersweet experience. What right did I have to be experiencing the joys of flying free, when fresh carcasses of the very species I and my colleagues were doing all of this for, were bleeding into the soil of this beautiful country? What right did I have to ask so many people to support this campaign – yet not be able to deliver on stopping the slaughter on World Rhino Day? I felt utterly defeated, powerless and desolate.

That feeling is with me still but it is now a provocation – and I’m not alone: our tired team has found fresh legs and we are going to keep going until we’ve hit our target of raising R10million. We are organizing an additional Skydive for Rhinos event that will take place on 10-11 November and are looking at taking this campaign to the UK and other countries where ordinary people want to show their support to what is happening in South Africa in an extra-ordinary way.

At the same time, we’re turning our attention to the distribution of the funds raised. Already, we’ve increased aerial surveillance capability by the purchase and ongoing operational funding for two light aircraft that will provide support to more than 500 rhinos in KZN, and a large Black rhino population in the Eastern Cape. We are going to be funding the training of reserve managers and rangers who have proved their worth, in advanced anti-poaching strategies at a national level. We will be providing funding support for desperately needed APU equipment in hot-spot regions, and we will be working with reserves who are committed to building good relations with their neighboring communities, to gain their trust and support for rhinos and conservation in general.

But that is not enough. We were aware when we started planning this national campaign a year ago, that R10million was a drop in the ocean and that all we would be doing, was buying time - we wouldn’t stop the poaching. We’ve been honest with our ‘Rhino Skydivers’ about this... and sometimes (many times), we’ve wondered if this campaign will really make a difference? What has kept us going however, is the realization that if we don’t - who will? Plus, the ordinary citizen deserves to be heard and given an opportunity to play their role, no matter how small it may be: we planned this campaign to give them a voice and the chance for personal involvement - I think we’ve done that to some degree of success. We’ve made mistakes but at the same time, we’ve learned so much this year. One of the biggest realizations is that if South Africa – and the world – is going to stop this extinction taking place, it is going to take a lot more than what is currently being done. And we are going to have to stop re-inventing the wheel and come up with new ways of counteracting the problem. We need sustainable solutions. We need fresh, daring and innovative partnerships that combine skills from a variety of sectors. Raising funds is one thing – making a sustainable difference is another: the Skydive for Rhinos team is now exploring some interesting, sustainable, new ideas with remarkable people who have come forward, thanks to this campaign.

We need action that is not tied to long, drawn-out debates that leave a trail of bloody carcasses before action is taken. We need to stop thinking in terms of polarity ('them' and 'us') and realize that polarity exacerbates the problem. We need to find the strength to fight back proactively, instead of responding reactively. Importantly, we need to learn how to embrace the passion of the public and the goodwill of individuals – because it is there, waiting to be accepted. We need 21st century solutions. And we need to learn to listen to people outside of the conservation sector because they have ideas to share that can make a difference.

I am not a rhino expert: I’m just an ordinary person who couldn’t stand back any longer and do nothing. My amazing Skydive for Rhinos colleagues - 21-year old Micah van Schalkwyk, skydiving professional/logistics expert Mike Rumble and 19-year old volunteer John Gilbert - are also not experts. But we have gained incredible knowledge - knowledge that I hope will be embraced and used for many years to come. Regardless of age or background, what they are - are extraordinary people who stepped out of their comfort zones, were not inhibited by their lack of conservation qualifications, were prepared to act on their deep-rooted



Sheelagh Antrobus and Micah van Schalkwyk of the African Conservation Trust on behalf of Project Rhino KZN with Rolston, the Project Rhino KZN mascot.
Photo courtesy of Durban North News

passion for Africa’s wilderness and offer their skills – however disparate they may be. They are perfect examples of the hundreds of thousands of new-thinking people around the world who do not want to be part of an uncaring human race that destroys everything in its path. They were prepared to make enormous personal sacrifices to make this campaign the success it is already – and will continue to be.

Conservation – rhino conservation in particular - is no longer domain of just a few good men and women battling alone, against all odds: the world wants to embrace the rhino crisis as urgent and necessary. We just need to learn how to say ‘Yes’.

Regards

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