

Balancing rhinos, elephants, predators and other animals in Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary

When establishing a fenced rhino sanctuary, how do you maintain the right balance of other species in the ecosystem?

Lucy Fitzjohn | George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust

When the Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary was originally constructed, it was imperative that the elephant and lion were fenced out. For elephant, this was because the water resources within the Sanctuary would not have been sufficient for an expanding population. Also once in, elephants would have been unable to move outside the fence to their traditional range areas through Tsavo and Mkomazi National Parks.

For the lion, this was because of the very real threat of predation of rhino calves. Actually, we have tragically lost a rhino calf to a pack of hyenas and another to a leopard (an unusual event and a devastating loss).

It took a long time, many flying hours and months of foot and vehicle patrols to achieve

Our colleagues in TANAPA tell us they have heard rhinos described as 'mobile banks'

this and finally close off the fence. Most of the wildlife that was fenced in can move through the fence; the ex-Director of Wildlife, Costa Mlai, once saw an eland jumping through! Smaller gazelles also come and go with relative ease, as do cheetah and wild dogs. The Sanctuary's giraffe population has expanded and their population is concentrated in the centre, close to the Environmental Education Centre. Lesser kudu are abundant, as are smaller cats such as genets and civets. We meet often with the Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) ecologists and vets, who have extensive knowledge of this ecosystem and on the management of this area.

The Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary is intensively managed by the George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust and this works well within the partnership we have with TANAPA and their excellent close management of the overall Park. The Sanctuary covers an area of 55 km² within the Mkomazi National Park, which itself covers 3,270 km².

The overall habitat of Mkomazi National Park has improved enormously since TANAPA took over the close management,

security and administration of the Park in 2008. Herds of oryx are now back on the plains. Herds of eland, Peter's gazelle, buffalo and zebra are seen in healthy numbers close to the border with Tsavo National Park. The lion populations are slowly returning, having been devastated over a sustained period of time by trophy hunters and poisoned by pastoralists.

Elephant herds have also returned over the years (mainly from Tsavo National Park) as Mkomazi is a wet season sanctuary for them. However, over the past year we have noticed much smaller numbers of elephant in Mkomazi. This could either be due to the recent good rains in the Tsavo National Parks, or more ominously and more likely, it is probably due to increased elephant

poaching. As we are all so well aware, elephant and rhino have been poached in such numbers that

Brave rangers are on the frontline of protecting Mkomazi's rhinos and other endangered species such as wild dogs (centre)



both are now threatened with extinction. In the wake of the slaughter

of rhinos and elephants across Africa comes the deaths of dozens of brave rangers and trackers, innocent civilians and desperate poachers. Our colleagues in TANAPA tell us they have heard rhinos described as 'mobile banks'. In the field, we have to react to this ongoing slaughter and continuously increase and adapt the security measures in place, along with upholding the integrity of the personnel and the fence.

Conservation projects are the front-line and the demands on our resources are immense. We are very grateful to Save the Rhino for supporting Mkomazi Rhino Sanctuary over many years, from the early days of clearing the original fence line by hand, to the upgrading of security systems, maintaining the fence itself and with the environmental education programme 'Rafiki wa Faru'.