



Annual Report 2015





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Botswana Rhino Reintroduction and Monitoring Project

FEATURED PROJECT Coordinators: **Map Ives and Kai Collins** (Rhino Conservation Botswana)



The successful reintroduction and monitoring of black and white rhino in northern Botswana thanks to collaborative conservation efforts between Wilderness Safaris, Wilderness Wildlife Trust, Botswana's Department of Wildlife and the Botswana Government



Black Rhino

History of the Project

By the 1990s in Botswana, the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) numbered just 19 and the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) had declined to the point of being classified as “locally extinct.” Then, in 2001, a collaboration between Wilderness Safaris, Wilderness Wildlife Trust, Botswana’s Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) and the South African and Botswana Governments succeeded in bringing founder populations of white and black rhino back to Botswana.

First, the Botswana Defence Force and the DWNP created Africa’s finest anti-poaching operation, laying the groundwork for the reintroduction of rhino into the country. Then the first four white rhino – two bulls and two cows – were released in November 2001, a historic occasion that saw the return of this magnificent species in Botswana, and a very emotional moment for everyone involved in the project. For the first time in a decade, rhino were able to wander freely through the Okavango Delta.

The next two years saw a large number of white rhino relocated to Botswana from South Africa to form part of the initial breeding population, and in late 2003, the second phase of the project took place – namely the reintroduction of a few Critically Endangered black rhino into the Okavango. Despite at least one birth, the number of animals involved in this release was too small to form a viable breeding population, and over the next few years, ways and means of bringing more were explored.

Since then, monitoring the rhino and ensuring the highest security possible for their protection and survival have been the primary objectives of the project.

2014 – A watershed year

Against the background of increasing rhino poaching in South Africa and, alarmingly, in Namibia during 2014, the Botswana Rhino Project took on even more importance. The combination of large areas of ideal habitat, a committed government, and security services that have been placed on notice to fight poaching of all kinds, meant that the continued establishment of wild populations of both southern white and south-central black rhinoceros in Botswana took on huge significance for the overall survival and increase of these species.

Thus, after years of negotiations, in mid-2014, a significant number* of black rhino was captured in South Africa and released into the wilds of Botswana. This extremely delicate operation involved the staff of South Africa’s North West Parks and Tourism and SANParks, the Botswana Defence Force, Department of Wildlife and National Parks Botswana and Wilderness Safaris. Less than a year later, in June 2015, a further series of translocations took place, this time from Zimbabwe as well as South Africa.**

* Exact numbers of rhino are withheld for security reasons.

** While this translocation lies outside the time frame of the 2014 Annual Report, it is the result of six years of raising funds by the Trust and thus is mentioned here.



With the completion of these eight translocations, the largest cross-border move of black rhino ever has been completed, successfully moving no less than 1% of the global population of the Critically Endangered black rhino to safety.

The current number in the wilds of Botswana is now that of a viable breeding population – and it is hoped that the success of white rhino over the last ten years (where their numbers have increased through breeding in the wild) will be repeated.

The black rhino have settled well into their new habitat. One large female, who was pregnant at the time of the 2014 release, gave birth to a calf in October 2014 and is of course particularly protective over this precious addition.

It is important to note that the Botswana Rhino Project is a partnership between the Botswana Government and the private sector, with the government showing an exceptionally high level of commitment to rhino conservation as part of its internationally recognised commitment to conservation in general and to the concept of integration between the private sector and government as a model for successful conservation on this continent. Combined with the high level of patrolling, intelligence gathering and aerial surveillance by the Botswana Defence Force, alongside the Botswana Anti-Poaching Unit, Botswana has become recognised as a relatively safe haven for rhino.

Besides further translocations of both black and white rhino to bolster the wild breeding populations, focus over the next five to ten years will be on expanding and developing monitoring capabilities in the form of equipment and manpower. For obvious reasons, knowing the whereabouts of the rhino and their biological performance is vital towards the future management and protection of these iconic animals.

Thanks to this project, a successful breeding population of black rhino has now been re-established in the Okavango Delta, adding substantial value to world rhino numbers and population distributions. Botswana therefore now stands proudly as a rhino range state which has increasing populations of both species and which is trusted with the difficult task of ensuring biological and security monitoring.



