

Giving Kenyan rhinos **room to grow**

I've lived and worked in the Chyulu Hills, just to the north of Tsavo West National Park, for 33 years, and I've seen many changes, some for better, some for worse. One of the brightest spots was the confirmation, back in 2003, that somehow a remnant population of black rhinos had survived the poaching wars of the 1970s and 80s. The extra-thick-and-thorny acacia scrub that thrives on these lava hills has its uses!

Richard Bonham | Director of Operations and Board member, Big Life Foundation

Our rhinos have had their ups and downs since 'rediscovery'. In 2007, MSc student Anthony Wandera (now working for the Northern Rangelands Trust in Kenya) conducted DNA analysis of rhino dung samples and established that there were 14 individual rhinos. Excitingly, two of these – a cow and calf – had 'escaped' from Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary, some 70 km to the south, and found their way to the Chyulus' population. We've had births, but we've also had deaths: snares have accounted for most of these, as the bush is just too thick to be able to do comprehensive sweeps. The black rhino population now stands at just seven animals.

Some might ask whether it's worth persevering with the Chyulu rhinos when there are so few left. But look at the geography of Kenya and it's clear that the hills form a vital refuge for rhinos and other wildlife, especially considering that the lava field habitat here is conducive to little else than rhino, so in many ways competition will be negligible in the foreseeable future.

The new *Kenya Black Rhino Action Plan (2017–21)* sets out the long-term vision, "To have a meta-population of at least 2,000 black rhinos of the Eastern African subspecies (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) in suitable habitats as a national heritage in Kenya." 2,000 is a lot of rhinos to find room for!

The African Rhino Specialist Group prioritises Key 1 (100+ animals), Key 2 (50+ animals) and Important 1 (20–50 animals) in which the populations are stable or increasing: these are genetically diverse and will produce the highest rates of growth unless poaching in that area becomes a significant factor. As at the end of 2016, Kenya's meta-population included one AfRSG rated Key 1, five Key 2, and four Important populations that are of continental significance.

But to get to 2,000 rhinos, it's not realistic – given urban growth, desertification, agricultural, water distribution etc. – to think of 20x populations of 100 rhinos.

There just aren't enough suitable spaces. Rather, we need to think at broader landscape level, and aim for two or three populations of 500+ rhinos, plus the smaller ones.



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In this context, the Chyulus' importance stands out: a broad sweep from Amboseli through the Chyulus to the Tsavos West and East, and across the border into Mkomazi in Tanzania.

Although it often feels as if we're fire-fighting, we do need to look to the longer-term. We often criticise politicians for operating in terms of four- or five-year election cycles, but conservationists equally need to be thinking 20, even 50 years ahead. Where do we want to get to in 2037, and how can we break down the intervening years into manageable chunks?

Big Life Foundation's hope for the 5-year phase 2017–21 is that we can continue to build up manpower and patrol effectiveness in the Chyulus, so that we can – with confidence and a bit of luck – translocate more rhino into the Hills, to bring numbers up to the Important 1 level, and keep these animals breeding. With other initiatives in Tsavo West and Laikipia, that'd be a great platform for our rhinos' future.

Above: Black rhinos Cathy (left) and Dixon (right) taken by camera trap

Main: Richard Bonham and his plane

