Mules on a MISSION

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Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) has been monitoring the world's largest population of black rhino living outside of a protected area in the northwest of Namibia for nearly 40 years. During this time, SRT has always strived to be at the cutting-edge of rhino conservation, constantly experimenting with new ideas and innovations to advance local-level rhino protection.

However, certain challenges in the Kunene Region make conventional rhino monitoring very difficult or inefficient. Firstly, a substantial number of black rhinos in northwest Namibia live in remote and very difficult to reach areas that aren't accessible by vehicle. Secondly, due to the arid environment and sparse browse, these desert-dwelling rhinos range across huge distances, sometimes covering more than 70 km a day: prohibitively far to follow on foot. What might be done to overcome these problems?

Mules! Mules possess the swiftness inherited by the horse, while also inheriting the sure-footedness and toughness from the donkey. They live longer than both horses and donkeys, and have the natural endurance to perform extended patrols in the harsh rugged terrains. Though it takes longer to train a mule than a horse, once they understand what is expected of them, they are simply, amazing.

We therefore purchased mules that had been already trained but were badly treated and needed a new home. Hard work was put in by one of our team, who had great knowledge in working with mules. Rhino trackers had to be taught to ride and care for the animals, making sure that they could properly saddle the mules so as not to cause saddle sores or other injuries. Each tracker had to be equipped with helmets and short-chaps leggings. And everyone had to learn to do all this while carrying their rhino-monitoring equipment including binoculars, GPS, notebooks and cameras.

Once the mules and trackers were able to work well together, the next step was to familiarise the mules with the terrain.

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