
Wildlife and Security

Lewa's white rhino – Past and present

In the last LWC news letter of April 2006, I outlined Lewa's black rhino, past and present. In this issue the focus is on white rhino.

Although not indigenous to Kenya, several white rhino have been introduced to various conservation areas over the years. They have all come from South Africa, apart from one male that came from California for a film shoot in Kenya. Some came by air and some by sea. The first to step foot on Kenyan soil was in 1966 where six animals were given to Meru National Park as a gift from Natal Parks Board in South Africa.

Today, Kenya's white rhino population stands at 235 animals, being located in both National Parks and on privately owned land.

White rhino have played a very important role in paving the way for the development of new rhino sanctuaries, be they State owned or private, in that the animals have been used as a measure and yard stick for security reasons. So if an area has secured white rhino for a given amount of time then this same area is generally deemed secure enough to hold the far more endangered black rhino. In comparison to black rhino, white rhino tend to be less shy making them easier to approach, track and follow movements, and this in turn makes them more vulnerable to poaching. They are a good indicator whether the area concerned is safe and could successfully hold black rhino without losses to poachers. In recent years, the re-introduction of initially white rhino and subsequently black rhino into Meru National Park is an excellent example of this tactic.

Lewa has played a key role in Kenya's white rhino conservation efforts over the last 22 years where it has helped to stock new rhino sanctuaries on land that is State, privately and community owned. The summary below shows Lewa's white rhino statistics – past and present.

Introductions: The first two in 1984 and three in 1988. A further ten (five from Natal Parks, South Africa) were brought in between 1993 and 1995. During this time territories and interaction between the white rhino were established and the population increased dramatically. A further six were introduced (from Solio Game Reserve, Kenya) to bring in new blood in late 2004 and finally one baby orphaned male was bought in to be hand reared in 2005, bringing the total introductions into Lewa to 22 animals.

Births: The first two births occurred in 1988 and since then Lewa has enjoyed a total of 41 births, with nearly 80% of them taking place in the last ten years.

Deaths: Since inception there have been twelve fatalities on Lewa through various causes, and although highly undesirable, the fact remains that accidents, fighting, falling over cliffs and still born calves do unfortunately occur.

Translocations out: 16 white rhino have been moved out of Lewa to help stock National Parks, community owned conservancies as well as rhino sanctuaries in their infancy. All these outbound translocations have occurred in the last six years. Lewa has been contracted to move white rhino on several occasions, such as moving four rhino from Solio to Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Uganda in 2005. Lewa regularly partners KWS in rhino capture operations across Kenya and a strong working relationship has evolved with KWS Veterinary and Capture Unit as a result.

Today's population: Lewa presently holds 34 white rhino, having just moved out five animals (on a custodianship basis) in the last month to Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Laikipia, to whom Lewa is a partner. Lewa's white rhino structure is shown in the table below:

Age class	Male	Female	unsexed	Total
Calves	4	3	2	9
Sub adults	5	5	-	10
Adults	7	8	-	15
Total	16	16	2	34

The sex ratio is now better balanced, since the removal of four males to Ol Pejeta, and is presently one male to one female. The average inter-calving interval is a healthy 2.5 years and the present biological growth rate is just over 5%.

Finally, although Lewa is very proud of the fact that no rhino have been poached within its boundary, we must continue, at all times, to assume a vigilant guard over our rhino. The threat to rhino in Kenya is very real, it is serious, it is present day and recent history has shown this.

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