

# Partnerships and Progress: Working Together to Make Room for Rhinos

Plummeting from tens of thousands to near extinction, Kenya's black rhino population has faced huge challenges over the past 50 years. Today, thanks to a combination of government intervention, strategic partnerships and innovative conservation efforts, Kenya has not only halted the decline but shown successful recovery of its black rhino population.

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This article traces the path of Kenya's black rhino conservation to date and exciting plans for the future, shining a light on the milestones, challenges and collaborative efforts that have shaped this remarkable turnaround. From the early days of crisis to the establishment of rhino sanctuaries and the new Kenya Rhino Range Expansion vision, it is a testament to what can be achieved through innovation, dedication and partnerships.

Poaching caused the decline of Kenya's black rhinos from an estimated 20,000 individuals in 1970 to fewer than 400 individuals by 1985. The Government took drastic measures to prevent local extinction of the species, marking the beginning of a long and slow recovery process. Remaining individuals were rescued and moved to sanctuaries and Intensive Protection Zones. At this juncture, the private and community sectors could apply to become a rhino sanctuary, provided they fulfilled certain criteria.

In 1989, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) was established, with the overall mandate to conserve and manage wildlife in Kenya. Around this time, in 1990, the Association of Private Land Rhino Sanctuaries (APLRS) was formed, offering a mechanism for private rhino sanctuaries to meet and discuss the management of rhinos on their land. Most importantly, however, the APLRS also provided an interface between the private sector and the government on matters relating to rhinos.

From 2008, a new rhino poaching pandemic swept through Africa, arguably driven



by a change in the motivation to buy rhino horn. The black market price of illicit rhino horn spiralled and Kenya was heavily impacted from 2011. Through the implementation of National Rhino Strategies, significant investment in security and intelligence, and by adopting a close partnership approach between the government, the private and the community sectors, Kenya worked to successfully mitigate this threat. In 2014, this powerful collaboration helped to bring about a milestone moment: Sera Conservancy received rhinos and became the first community-run black rhino sanctuary in the country and the APLRS changed its constitution to include the community sector.

Kenya has managed to reduce poaching to less than 1% of the national population for the last eight consecutive years. At the end of 2023, Kenya hosted a national population of 1,004 Eastern black rhinos, another incredible milestone in the recovery of a species from the brink of local extinction some four decades earlier.

Kenya's rhino conservation vision aims to achieve a population of 2,000 Eastern black rhinos living in their natural habitat by 2037. Unfortunately, since reducing poaching losses there has been an increase in other mortalities including fighting,





*Above: Rhino translocations taking place in Kenya during 2024. In total, 21 Eastern black rhinos were moved from Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Ol Pejeta Conservancy and Nairobi National Park into Loisaba Conservancy.*

predation and other factors. In most existing rhino sites, we have reached or exceeded population densities, amplifying the other causes of mortality. Ironically, by mitigating the poaching threat, we had run out of space for our rhino populations to perform optimally.

We urgently require a mechanism through which we can secure more land with the capacity to conserve rhinos, reducing densities in other sanctuaries and offering more room for growth. This was captured in Kenya's National Rhino Strategy 2022 – 2026.

The APLRS approached the KWS, requesting a strategic partnership to collaborate and support the implementation of rhino management projects. This partnership was officially endorsed in August 2023, coinciding with the conclusion of a Laikipia Rhino Range Expansion management plan.

Subsequently, through dialogue with multiple partners and with the endorsement of both the APLRS and the KWS, it was decided that a dedicated 'vehicle' was required to drive range expansion and that the project should include Tsavo West National Park. Simultaneously, the APLRS had the privilege to present this concept to His Excellency, the President of Kenya, Dr. William Ruto C. G. H. The president endorsed and supported the proposed project, leading to meetings with the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife as well as the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Forestry.

In August 2024, the 'Kenya Rhino Range Expansion' Company Limited by Guarantee was formally registered. The Board of Directors includes individuals from KWS, the Wildlife Research and Training Institute, private and community rhino sanctuaries, an independent impartial Chair and the Chair of the Advisory Board. A dedicated core team will be recruited and through the establishment of key partnerships, we intend to drive a coordinated plan to secure more space for rhinos in Kenya. To ensure its sustainability, it is paramount that this plan includes objectives beyond just rhinos. We contribute to the 30x30 targets of the Global Biodiversity Framework, Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and, ultimately, seek to address a multitude of environmental and social threats to benefit both the wildlife and the people of Kenya.

Significant progress in developing a strong foundation for this project has been largely based on partnerships. The Boston Consulting Group has been instrumental in developing robust metrics, dashboards, risk assessments, fundraising strategies, terms of engagement, constitutions, budgets, and other materials. The Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association and its subsidiary, the Laikipia Conservancies Association, have both offered support.

Additionally, the leadership of the KWS, particularly from the Director General, has been crucial in allowing this incredible conservation opportunity to grow. Numerous other partners have facilitated international collaborations, provided strategic advice, and contributed to the project's financial and technical aspects. While we cannot name everyone here, we deeply appreciate the efforts of all involved and are excited to see our hard work bearing fruit in 2025 and beyond.

