

Mule Patrol: Conserving Namibia's Black Rhinos

Monitoring the world's largest free roaming population of black rhino is no easy task. For over 40 years, Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) has been doing exactly that. However, the challenges of this harsh and remote environment mean that new ideas are always needed for the team to be most effective.

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One such idea, launched in 2021, is the Mule Patrol Unit (MPU). Offering previously mistreated mules a safe home and an important job, this Unit enables SRT's rangers to access more of the vast Kunene region, increasing the number of rhinos they can monitor.

Black rhinos in the vast Kunene landscape move across huge ranges in search of food and water and away from human disturbances, venturing much further than rangers on foot patrols can travel in a day. The idea of the MPU is simple: allow rangers to reach remote areas otherwise inaccessible by vehicle, much more safely and efficiently than on foot.

The MPU team have been doing a fantastic job with their monthly patrols and SRT are excited to continue investing into improving the Unit. Their main priority being happy, healthy mules and rangers that can monitor rhinos safely and comfortably. Some of the MPU team have worked with horses or mules before and are able to share their extensive equine knowledge, while others are keenly learning for the first time. Regardless of experience, the rangers show true dedication in caring for their four-legged companions.

treatment, both mules recovered, and the team has rebuilt the mules' trust on patrols. Thanks to our generous supporters, a new lion-proof stable block was built to keep the mules safe from predators, however, there is still work to be done to prevent some of the smaller mammals causing trouble! Local mice are causing problems in the mule's feed room. To prevent these little critters from stealing food for the mules, the room requires mice-proof flooring and extra shelving units.

Although more cost-effective than vehicle running and maintenance, there are still expenses to keeping the Patrol Unit up and running, from ranger salaries to veterinary care to food (for mules and for rangers!). For example, the area surrounding the SRT basecamp and MPU satellite camp is very dry, making it difficult to source grass for the mules. Purchasing and transporting large quantities of grass into the area is crucial, but expensive. Additionally, in the hot, arid desert environment — the average temperature here ranges from 25°C to 35°C — the leather tack used easily becomes dry, damaged and uncomfortable. Good quality products are needed to keep the tack clean, supple, and fit for purpose.

Main image and below:

Able to travel longer distances and across rugged terrain, the MPU is crucial to finding rhinos that could otherwise be missed, monitoring their health, behaviour and safety.



But like any new project, success hasn't been without its challenges...

One night in April 2023, an unwelcome visit to the mule camp base by a desert lion caused two mules to be injured. Thanks to prompt

In December 2024, Save the Rhino raised an incredible £84,332 through the Big Give Appeal, towards the costs of the Mule Patrol Unit for 2025. Our support will include building an accommodation block for rangers at the mule camp. Currently, staff are living in tents, so proper facilities and a kitchen are an important next step to support the team in their critical work with the mules.

