

# Custodians in Rhino Conservation



## Namibia's vision for black rhino conservation

Another Namibian conservation success story is that of the Black Rhino Custodianship Program. This initiative has achieved unparalleled success, resulting in significant population growth and allowing for regulated trophy hunting of older bulls. *Kirsty Watermeyer*

Namibia's vision for its black rhinoceros is to re-establish viable, healthy breeding populations of *Diceros bicornis bicornis* throughout its former range by 2030. The Black Rhino Custodianship Program Manager at the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, Birgit Kötting, has witnessed firsthand the incredible transformation that is being seen in Namibia's black rhino population. It is a journey that began in the aftermath of a near-total decline due to poaching in the late 20th century.

"Namibia lost almost all of its black rhinos during the late 60s and early 70s," Birgit says. "At that time, only a few remained on farmland and in small pockets in the Kunene Region." To save this iconic species, the government intervened, relocating surviving rhinos to Etosha National Park, where they began to flourish. "Etosha became a haven for black rhinos, and from there, we reintroduced them to other parks," Birgit adds.

However, simply placing rhinos in parks wasn't enough for long-term success. Recognising the need for a more sustainable approach, the ministry developed the Black Rhino Custodianship Program in 1993, allowing farmers to care for these magnificent creatures on their land while they remained the property of the government. This innovative model has since expanded to include 30 freehold properties and 13 communal custodians, facilitating a significant increase in the black rhino population.

The Black Rhino Custodianship Program is designed to relocate breeding populations of these animals to suitable habitats on farmland and communal conservancies. This is contingent upon the willingness and ability of landholders to provide basic care and security for the rhinos. Custodians are responsible for monitoring and overseeing their populations, ensuring they have access to food and water, and safeguarding them to the best of their ability. "We don't dictate how they should do

it, but we support them where we can. From just 11 translocated rhinos in 1993, we now have around 750,” Birgit says proudly. This impressive growth rate has made Namibia a global leader in black rhino conservation. “We aim to have over 2,000 black rhinos. While poaching has reversed some gains, our community-based approach is proving effective.”



” This impressive growth rate has made Namibia a global leader in black rhino conservation.”

Birgit emphasises that poaching remains a widespread threat, with no area completely safe. “Etosha National Park is still the biggest target due to its large population, but poachers are mobile, making it a constant challenge to protect these animals,” she explains.

One of the program’s remarkable achievements includes the regulated trophy hunting of older bulls. As younger bulls displace older breeding bulls, the latter often sustain serious injuries in battles for dominance. Consequently, post-reproductive older bulls are considered for conservation hunting to generate income. Recently, the first conservation hunts for custodianship rhinos were arranged. “Namibia has set a quota of five trophy bulls a year, but typically, we hunt fewer than that,” Birgit explains. This practice not only aids in managing the rhino population but also provides financial benefits to the custodians, effectively integrating conservation with economic incentives.

“Currently, we face a challenge: there are more rhinos than we can accommodate in the program, necessitating the relocation of some of them back to national parks. The difficulty lies in determining safe locations for these transfers. Given the current poaching crisis, we must carefully evaluate where these animals can be placed to ensure their safety. Once you have a significant number of breeding females, the population can grow exponentially. That’s exactly what we’re experiencing now – there are so many breeding females that the number of calves born each year is astounding. To manage these increasing numbers, expanding the size of the property is one option. However, this presents a challenge for the custodian program. It has been so successful that many properties are now facing an overpopulation of rhinos. As a result, we need to explore options for relocating some rhinos to maintain a healthy balance.”

As the program continues to evolve, Birgit is optimistic about the future. “We have a new strategy in place that will reward custodians for their efforts, and we’re exploring ways to support

financially weaker custodians”, she says. This collaboration aims to strengthen the entire community of custodians, ensuring that everyone can contribute to the program’s success.

This program is an example of how innovative solutions can offer hope for the future, not only for black rhinos but for the preservation of our planet’s rich biodiversity. “Exciting changes are on the horizon for the Black Rhino Custodianship Program, and I believe we’re just getting started,” Birgit maintains.

**From the 2025 issue of *Huntinamibia***