

IUCN African rhino conservation 2025–2035: A contemporary strategic framework

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The rhino poaching crisis, which began in 2005, significantly challenged previous conservation strategies. The initial response often involved an isolated "fortress" approach, leading to fragmentation and a focus on simplistic, localized solutions for what is a complex, evolving international threat. The national and site-specific plans that had successfully recovered rhino populations by prioritizing breeding and security in a largely peaceful environment were no longer effective in this new era of intense poaching.

The African rhino conservation 2025–2035, a contemporary strategic framework (ACSF) aims to revitalize rhino conservation within Africa's intricate socio-economic-ecological landscape. It introduces four new themes: disrupting organized crime, understanding and influencing rhino horn markets, prioritizing the equity and rights of local stakeholders, and fostering diverse views on the value of rhinos in society. This approach seeks to break down barriers, encourage conservation managers and authorities to think beyond their borders, and recognize local communities as crucial partners. Furthermore, the CSF emphasizes maximizing ecological and social connectivity, regional and metapopulation thinking, and enhancing the broad value of rhinos, particularly to the people who coexist with these magnificent animals.

This Framework is ambitious, forward-thinking, and essential for developing future solutions for a species that has historically relied on intense law enforcement for protection. The recent surge in rhino poaching has highlighted significant socio-economic and political changes in Africa and globally. Conventional law enforcement has had major unintended consequences, often alienating local stakeholders

rather than engaging them as a frontline defence. The Framework intends to address these issues with idealistic goals that may still require testing.

Delving into the details of the beautifully illustrated Framework: Table 2 outlines the "principles of environmental management and social justice, with assumptions that are embedded in this framework", indirectly referencing overlapping Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The IUCN supports the SDGs by advocating for the essential role that nature plays in achieving these objectives. It provides scientific and policy advice, highlighting the interdependence of environmental health and human well-being.

Exploring the illustrated Framework in detail, Table 2 outlines key principles of environmental management and social justice, along with their underlying assumptions, and implicitly links them to overlapping Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The IUCN advances these goals by emphasizing nature's essential role in achieving them and by providing scientific and policy guidance that underscores the interdependence of ecosystem health and human well-being.

With estimates suggesting that Africa's population will grow by 800 million people over the next five decades, (ACSF preface), evolving conservation strategies must adapt to safeguard both wildlife and human communities. Keeping the balance between these priorities—the ideals articulated in Table 2—will be critical.

As a framework, the ACSF offers valuable direction and ideas. It is incumbent upon conservation managers and authorities to adapt it to their diverse local circumstances, which vary greatly across the rhino world and are impacted by global climate change. The ACSF encourages us to think more broadly, inclusively, fairly, and innovatively to address the

continuous challenge of saving Africa's rhinos.

The ACSF serves as a guidebook for the next decade. Future iterations could include practical "on-the-ground" solutions, particularly if current strategies prove unsuccessful. In such cases, it may be necessary to implement new approaches quickly, especially in response to a potential increase in poaching.

Finally, like any forward-looking strategy, the ACSF requires clear feedback loops to track intended outcomes against real-world implementation. Ultimately, the sustained recovery of rhino species depends on the active and constructive participation of all stakeholders; without this collaboration, rhinos will remain vulnerable to criminals seeking to profit from the illegal trade in rhino horn.