

K W S wild

M A G A Z I N E



A CONSERVATION RENAISSANCE: KENYA'S BOLD PATH

CONTENTS

III FOREWORD

01 KENYA RHINO RANGE EXPANSION AS CATALYSTS OF A WILDLIFE ECONOMY

05 THE IVF QUEST TO SAVE THE NORTHERN WHITE RHINO

07 KENYA WELCOMES HOME 10 MOUNTAIN BONGOS FROM FLORIDA

09 KENYA LAUNCHES 2025- 2035 PANCAKE TORTOISE NATIONAL RECOVERY AND CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN

11 RESTOCKING SHIMBA HILLS NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

13 BIO-PIRACY UNDER WATCH: KENYA'S BOLD STAND AGAINST EXOTIC ANTS TRADE

15 INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: KENYA'S LANDMARK CONSERVATION FEE REVIEW

18 SCALING UP COMPENSATION FOR HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT

21 COASTAL TOUR GUIDES TRAINED TO ELEVATE EXPERIENCE AND CONSERVATION

23 INSPIRING KENYA'S NEXT GENERATION OF CONSERVATIONISTS

25 HELL'S GATE TAKES THE WORLD STAGE: SAFARI RALLY 2025 ROARS THROUGH KENYA'S WILD HEART

27 MAGICAL KENYA TRAIL SERIES SHOWCASES UNTAMED BEAUTY OF KAKAMEGA RESERVE AND RUMA NATIONAL PARK

29 EMPOWERING THE YOUTH THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE WILD

31 KWS STRENGTHENS HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT INTERVENTIONS IN GANZE SUBCOUNTY, KILIFI COUNTY

33 HOW KWS VETERINARIANS KEEP KENYA'S LIONS ROARING

35 INVESTING IN THE WILD: NEW PATHS TO SUSTAINABLE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

39 KWS WINS BIG AT 2025 ASK SHOWS

41 TECH-DRIVEN CORAL REEF PROTECTION

43 COMMUNITIES AT THE HEART OF KENYA'S CELEBRATION OF WORLD WILDLIFE DAY 2025

45 FY 2024/25 CONSERVATION ACHIEVEMENTS IN NUMBERS

54 VALLEY OF RARITY: THE UNTOLD STORY OF RUMA NATIONAL PARK



KENYA RHINO RANGE EXPANSION AS CATALYSTS OF A WILDLIFE ECONOMY

In the heart of East Africa, a quiet yet determined revolution is transforming the fate of one of the world's most iconic and endangered species – the rhinoceros. As of the end of 2024, Kenya's rhino population stands at 2,102, a remarkable increase from just 384 individuals in 1987.

This resurgence is no accident. It is the result of decades of unwavering commitment, rigorous protection and a bold, forward-looking vision by KWS and its partners. Today, this success is no longer measured by survival alone, but by how rhinos and their habitats can anchor a broader wildlife economy that benefits local communities.

At the centre of this progress is the Kenya Rhino Range Expansion (KRRE) initiative – a groundbreaking, coordinated effort to restore, connect and safeguard rhino habitats across the country. Registered as a Company Limited by Guarantee, KRRE unites private, community and government sanctuaries in a strategic partnership model to address a central challenge

of conservation success: where to place the growing number of rhinos in Kenya. This model exemplifies how conservation can double as economic development — creating jobs, tourism ventures and value chains that flow back to surrounding communities.

KRRE's strength lies in its collaborative governance structure, involving:

- A Board of Directors composed of KWS, the Wildlife Research and Training Institute (WRTI) and members of the Association of Private and Community Land Rhino Sanctuaries (APLRS)
- An Advisory Board of donors, diplomats and technical experts
- A dedicated core operational team and landscape-based teams

Key implementation partners include 51 Degrees, The Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, Safari Collection, and Footprint Foundation, among others. These actors provide technical expertise, logistical support and sustainable financing for KRRE's high-impact projects. This governance model not only secures rhinos but also builds a strong institutional base for Kenya's wildlife economy — aligning conservation finance, private investment, and community benefit-sharing into one system.

Kenya is home to three rhino species:

1,059

Eastern black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*)

1,041

Southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*)

2

Northern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) – now functionally extinct.

While the numbers reflect great progress, they also point to an emerging issue: existing sanctuaries, particularly for black rhinos, are nearing or have exceeded their ecological carrying capacity. Overcrowding increases

the risk of territorial conflicts, limits breeding success and heightens the potential for disease outbreaks. This is where the KRRE plays a pivotal role.

Guided by the National Black Rhino Recovery and Action Plan (2022–2026) and the broader KWS Strategic Plan (2024–2028), the KRRE aims to expand the available rhino range in a way that is ecologically viable, community-inclusive and strategically aligned with Kenya's Vision 2030 national development blueprint. It also directly links to Kenya's emerging wildlife economy agenda — ensuring that every new rhino range not only conserves biodiversity but catalyzes green jobs, revenue-sharing schemes and inclusive development.

A recent milestone in this expansion agenda is the successful translocation of 21 black rhinos to Segera Conservancy in Laikipia. This marks a key step in creating a large, interconnected sanctuary system in the Laikipia landscape – one of KRRE's flagship projects. Segera's inclusion increases protected space for rhinos while unlocking socio-economic benefits for local communities through conservation tourism, conservation-linked enterprises and support services.

The Segera translocation was executed with military precision under the stewardship of KWS, supported by veterinary, capture, surveillance and tracking teams. As part of the operation, the rhinos were:

- Carefully immobilized by trained KWS veterinary personnel
- Ear-notched using unique coded patterns for identification
- Fitted with solar-powered transmitters for real-time, non-invasive monitoring.

This effort not only adds to Kenya's rhino range but also exemplifies best practice in wildlife management – prioritizing safety, discipline and teamwork. Equally, it demonstrates how conservation science and technology can underpin a thriving wildlife economy, with data driving both ecological resilience and economic opportunity.

The Kenya Rhino Range Expansion initiative is currently operationalizing several transformative projects, including:

1. Tsavo West Ngulia Sanctuary Expansion

This ambitious project aims to expand the rhino sanctuary in Tsavo West National Park from 92 km² to a massive 3,000 km². The goal is to create a secure space for black rhino population growth, easing pressure on other overcrowded sanctuaries while anchoring conservation-led economic development in the region — from eco-lodges to nature-based enterprises.

2. Laikipia Central Project

The Laikipia region already hosts several high-performing rhino conservancies. The KRRE aims to merge and connect these through a collaborative management framework involving government, private and community actors. This approach will facilitate genetic diversity, reduce territorial pressure and deliver a cohesive conservation strategy that also unlocks inclusive revenue streams through joint ventures, guiding services and conservation-linked supply chains.

Managing rhinos in shared ecosystems like the Maasai Mara–Serengeti transboundary landscape demands coordinated policy alignment, intelligence sharing and cross-jurisdictional species management. KRRE

complements these regional efforts by consolidating conservation gains within Kenya's national landscape while helping to prevent the displacement of threats across borders. Such alignment ensures that the benefits of the wildlife economy are not constrained by political boundaries but flow across landscapes and communities.

KWS continues to pioneer the use of ear-notching and telemetry to support real-time monitoring, enhance anti-poaching efforts and strengthen individual-based rhino management. In 2024 alone:

46

Rhinos were notched across Lewa and Borana conservancies, with 4 fitted with transmitters.

13

Black rhinos were successfully notched in the Maasai Mara despite the difficult terrain.

This data-rich approach supports health management, movement tracking, behavioural studies and informed translocations, forming the backbone of Kenya's adaptive conservation strategy. As this science is embedded into Kenya's wildlife economy vision, it ensures that thriving rhino populations also translate into thriving communities.

Kenya's rhino recovery journey stands as a beacon of hope. From near collapse in the late 20th century to a steadily growing population today, the progress is both tangible and symbolic. Yet the work is far from complete. Guided by a bold vision – Thriving wildlife and healthy habitats for all, forever – KWS and its partners, through KRRE, are reshaping the future of conservation. By expanding rhino habitats, empowering local communities and integrating science and innovation, Kenya is proving that extinction is not inevitable.

Every rhino counts. Every partner matters. Together, we are expanding not just rhino ranges – but the possibilities for a better, biodiverse future. And in doing so, Kenya is also expanding the frontiers of a wildlife economy that places prosperity and biodiversity on the same path.

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