

## RHINO CONSERVATION

# Kenya's Rhino Range Expansion

Why Kenya's Rhino Range Expansion is critical to securing the future of black and white rhinos—and the landscapes and communities they depend on.



STORY BY  
BY PAUL UDOTO

**W**ith just over 2,000 rhinos remaining in Kenya, the stakes for the species have never been higher. After decades of poaching pushed them to the brink, the nation is now embarking on an unprecedented mission: reclaiming vast stretches of ancestral rhino territory to create secure, productive habitats.

The Kenya Rhino Range Expansion (KRRE) initiative—led by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) alongside private and community partners—aims to establish five new sanctuaries across northern Kenya and the Mount Kenya region by 2030. By opening up 34,000 km<sup>2</sup> (nearly 6% of Kenya's landmass), the plan will double the species' protected range and alleviate overcrowding in existing strongholds like Ol Pejeta and Lewa.

This is conservation with a dual purpose: securing the future of black and white rhinos while fostering new livelihoods, tourism frontiers, and national pride. However, the path forward is complex, requiring a delicate balance between land use, climate resilience, and anti-poaching efforts.

Prof Erustus Kanga, Director General of KWS, sat down with Paul Udoto to discuss the ambition behind the KRRE, the challenges ahead, and what success would mean for Kenya's people and its wildlife.

**Q: Why is Kenya embarking on the Kenya Rhino Range Expansion initiative now, and what makes it so urgent?**

The urgency comes from both a conservation success and a looming risk. In the 1970s, Kenya had an estimated 20,000 black rhinos. Poaching reduced that population to just 381 individuals by 1990—a near-collapse of the species. Through relentless efforts by rangers, scientists, conservancies and



The KWS Director General, Prof. Erustus Kanga

communities, we have slowly brought the numbers back. Today, Kenya has surpassed 1,000 black rhinos and slightly more than 2,000 rhinos in total.

But this success has created a new challenge: overcrowding in some of our best-performing rhino areas. When rhinos are confined to a limited number of sites, we run into territorial conflict, competition for food and water, and risks to genetic diversity. In simple terms, several key sanctuaries are approaching capacity. KRRE is our answer to that challenge. By 2030, we aim to establish at least five new, secure rhino sanctuaries in northern Kenya and the Mount Kenya region. By 2037, our target is 2,000 black rhinos, growing to about 3,900 by 2050. Expanding their range is critical to their long-term survival. If we do not act now, we risk stalling or even reversing the hard-won gains of the last three decades.

**Q: What exactly will KRRE change on the ground—ecologically and socioeconomically?**

KRRE is much more than moving rhinos from one place to another. It is about transforming landscapes and livelihoods. Ecologically, we are restoring rhinos to their ancestral ranges and building ecological corridors that reconnect key habitats across Tsavo and central Kenya. This allows rhinos to disperse

naturally, reduces pressure on overcrowded sanctuaries, and improves genetic exchange between populations. When you secure landscapes for rhinos, you protect countless other species that share those habitats. It is a major boost for overall biodiversity and ecosystem health.

Socioeconomically, KRRE is designed as a catalyst for rural development. By 2030 we project that it will: Create over 18,000 jobs; generate about \$45 million in local conservancy revenues; increase local sourcing by about \$17 million; and contribute approximately \$15 million annually in tax income.

These figures translate into salaries for rangers and guides, market opportunities for farmers and suppliers, and investments in community infrastructure. Our vision is that communities are not just “living with” wildlife, but are co-owners of the conservation success story.

**Q: How will the rhino translocations work, and what tools will you use to keep the animals safe?**

Translocations are complex, highly technical operations that we plan and execute with great care. The process begins with detailed habitat assessments in potential recipient areas—looking at vegetation, water availability, security, and the potential for human-wildlife coexistence. We then carefully select founder animals, considering age, sex, genetics and behaviour to give each new population the best chance of establishing and growing.

On the security side, we are deploying a suite of modern monitoring and protection tools, including: Drone surveillance to cover large, remote landscapes; AI-powered systems that analyse data from patrols, sensors and cameras to flag suspicious activity; real-time tracking of individual rhinos using GPS and other devices; and strengthened rapid response capacity for field ranger teams.

Technology, however, does not replace people. It must be backed by well-trained rangers, good intelligence, strong collaboration with law enforcement, and committed local communities. Our goal is simple: once a rhino is translocated, it should be safer in its new home than anywhere else.

**Q: Securing vast landscapes is never easy. What are the main challenges you anticipate—from land, communities and climate?**

There are three main areas of challenge. First, land and connectivity. Viable rhino populations require large, well-managed landscapes. That means bringing together private landowners, communities, county governments and investors around a shared vision. Aligning these interests takes time, trust and clear benefit-sharing arrangements.

Second, community expectations and coexistence. People living in and around these landscapes must see clear benefits from rhino conservation. If they only experience costs—crop

damage, restricted access to resources, or insecurity—then the model fails. KRRE therefore integrates community conservancies, revenue-sharing, jobs, support for education, and investments in local infrastructure. Communities are at the table from the design stage.

Third, climate change. Changing rainfall patterns and more frequent droughts are already impacting water and forage. That is why KRRE is closely linked to wider landscape restoration—securing water sources, rehabilitating rangelands, and promoting climate-smart livelihoods. If we ignore climate risks, we risk future conflict between people and wildlife. These challenges are real, but they are also manageable with long-term commitment, adaptive management and continuous dialogue.

**Q: Who are the key partners in KRRE, and what does “success” look like in 20 or 30 years?**

KRRE is built on strong partnerships.

Kenya Wildlife Service leads the initiative alongside the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA), the Wildlife Research & Training Institute (WRTI), private and community conservancies, and international conservation organisations and experts.

We have a dedicated Core Team and a newly registered Kenyan entity, guided by a diverse Board of Directors, to ensure accountability, transparency and delivery. This structure allows us to align science, policy, finance, and community engagement around one coherent vision.

Looking 20 to 30 years ahead, success would mean a thriving, secure rhino populations in multiple landscapes across Tsavo, northern Kenya and the Mount Kenya region; functional ecological corridors that allow wildlife to move safely and naturally; communities that are visibly better off—through jobs, tourism, and improved services—because they chose to conserve rhinos and their habitats; a new generation of Kenyan youth working as rangers, scientists, guides, entrepreneurs and innovators in conservation and nature-based tourism; and Kenya recognised globally as a country that proved, once again, that conservation and development can advance together.

Ultimately, KRRE is about more than protecting black and white rhinos. It is about building a national legacy of protection, prosperity and pride. Years from now, when Kenyans reflect on our conservation journey, I hope they will point to this initiative as the moment we chose to think big, work together, and secure the future of a species that symbolizes our resilience as a nation. ●

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