
RHINO PROTECTION IN COMMUNAL AREAS, NAMIBIA

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Namibia's black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) population which inhabits communal land in the Kunene Province (previously Kaokoland and Damaraland), was heavily poached in the 1970s and early 1980s. Kaokoland's rhino numbers were reduced to only 10 animals, while Damaraland had between 50 and 60 left. The entire population would certainly have been exterminated if it were not for the timely intervention of locally-based conservationists in 1981 and 1982, to which the Damara, Herero and Himba people gave their full support. Since then, patrols and monitoring of the rhino population have been part of a joint venture between NGOs, Namibia's wildlife authorities and the local community game guards, who give advice about wildlife problems in their communal areas and report to their headmen.

Botanists and geologists who worked in these arid areas in the 1950s and 1960s describe how rhino and elephant used to frequent every waterhole, especially in Kaokoland, the area hardest hit by illegal hunting parties.

The habitats in which rhinos have survived are the arid to extremely arid areas east of the dune desert of the Namib and west of the escarpment. Rainfall is minimal and seldom goes above 100mm per year. There are virtually no people living in the main rhino-inhabited area of Damaraland, it being too dry and the vegetation too sparse for any but the toughest human to endure. In addition, the headmen and councilors have entered into a gentleman's agreement with the local wildlife management officers to discourage subsistence goat herders from encroaching on the remaining rhino habitat.

A small number of rhino (about 15 in all) inhabit the peripheral areas where they come into contact with herders and stock owners. Although conservation in communal areas involves the community directly in decision making, and provides revenue from hunting and tourism, these benefits do not overcome the herders' inherent fear of "dangerous" animals such as the rhino. Many of the traditional stock owners hire outsiders to herd their animals, who have not always grown up with wildlife around them and are

therefore less willing to endure living with predators and dangerous large game. However, the herders are justified in complaining about the potential dangers when their women and children collect water from springs shared by rhino. Some herders have requested that the rhinos which stray into their area be removed for the safety of both the people and the rhinos. The herders otherwise protect their scarce water sources with branches, and try to frighten away the wildlife by burning the highly inflammable *Euphorbia damarana* bushes and *Colophospermum mopane* trees. They also make "scarecrows" by tying plastic bags to trees and bushes.

It is well known that *Diceros bicornis bicornis* is normally a shy animal which shuns areas where there is a lot of human activity, instead seeking secluded areas which are less inhabited by humans and their livestock. However, those that do stray into the eastern, more populated areas, which have higher rainfall and more vegetation, are young, sub-adults looking for new home ranges in which to settle. These animals are known to be inquisitive and they even walk into human settlements where they are sometimes shot. One young rhino bull that was being tracked by members of the Anti Poaching Unit covered a distance of about 250km before being caught and moved to a small game park. This individual often visited homesteads where cattle were in kraals at night and even lay down to sleep in the manure of a disused kraal. Due to their unpredictable behaviour, such animals may easily charge and cause havoc in their confusion.

Because of local involvement and support from the herders and farmers for extension work by the government and NGOs, the presence of a stray rhino is often reported to the authorities and then followed by trackers. The movement of these sub-adults usually takes place during the rainy season, when early rains attract the unsettled rhinos to the east. However, it is extremely difficult to keep constant contact with such animals. Their tracks are obliterated by showers of rain, and a wandering animal can cover huge distances in search of other rhino. Attempts by the Directorate of Wildlife Management to capture these animals have only been successful on one occasion. Inevitably the

cost, time and manpower needed to follow and ensure the safety of stray rhinos become too great, and the eventual fate of most of them is unknown.

Rhinos are still occasionally poached for their horn by villagers who are paid by wealthy outsiders. The poachers, whose fire arms are often borrowed, mingle with the herders on the periphery of rhino habitat and help to herd goats until they find an opportunity to shoot a rhino.

Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that rhinos will successfully recolonise the communal areas to the east. Therefore, the safety and security of the rhinos that inhabit the western area, which is virtually uninhabited by humans, remains the priority for the rhino conservation programme.

Rhino protection in Kunene Province will depend upon the continuation of combined efforts of government and NGO patrols, individual photographic identification studies of rhinos, monitoring of population trends, local involvement by, and benefits to, the communities, safari concessions and tourism. Safari concession holders are keen supporters of the rhino protection programme. Specialist safari tours have been introduced which include an outing with the trackers for tourists to "bag" a rhino through the lens of a camera. The fees charged for these safaris are returned directly to the trackers, their families and the rhino protection programme. NGOs, in conjunction with the local Khorixas office of Wildlife and Tourism Management, and members from the community have also built popular rustic

tourism camps to cater for campers visiting the area to view its spectacular scenery and its desert rhinos and elephants.

The rhino monitoring staff of the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) earn a bonus for every rhino properly photographed and identified. This ensures that the monitoring staff take a personal interest in the welfare of the rhinos with which they work. The SRT also pays a reward of N\$5,000 for information which leads to the arrest and conviction of a person or persons who shoot rhinos or deal in rhino horn.

The nearest town, Khorixas, is 170km away from Kunene and has about 6,000 inhabitants. Unemployment is high and is matched by a heavy illegal trade in drugs and liquor - an ideal setting for poachers to plan their strategies. In an effort to attract the unemployed to more useful, income-generating occupations, the SRT has, with financial help from CIDA, built a craft market and developed a craft making industry. The increase of tourism to the area attracts about 40,000 tourists per annum. Craft making was non-existent in the past and the potential for an increased income for the craft makers is enormous.

The involvement of local communities in the rhino conservation programme in Kunene Province has undoubtedly been of vital importance in helping to eliminate rhino poaching almost entirely. The local people are proud of their achievement and they regard poaching as a crime which can no longer be tolerated, so that when poachers do infiltrate the system, the locals inform the law enforcement officers.

Photo credit: Tim Oloo



Black rhinos in Kenya.