

NEAR EXTINCT RHINO MAKE COMEBACK IN BOTSWANA

With rhinos having been declared extinct or near extinct twice in Botswana, there is real concern that this does not happen to its now growing population. Bordered by South Africa and Zimbabwe, where rhino poaching is currently at a high, Botswana's rhino professionals know that their monitoring and security must be at its most effective. This article examines the future for Botswana's rhinos.

In January 2005, the 'Conservation and Management Strategy for the White Rhinoceros and the Black Rhinoceros in Botswana' was published with all key government and private rhino organisations signatories to it. It gave a Vision for Botswana - "there will be a healthy population of black and white rhinoceros in Botswana, in both unfenced rhino conservation areas and in fenced rhino sanctuaries that are well protected, managed and monitored". The strategy set a Goal of "500 southern white rhinos in 20 years" (2025) and committed the Department of Wildlife and National Parks to re-introducing black rhino.

Compare the goal with the results: Following a re-introduction programme initiated in 2001 augmenting the indigenous remnant population, there are now a little over 100 white rhinos and 7 black



rhinos in Botswana (*see box below*).

Poaching remains the biggest threat in the rhino conservation areas of Botswana. It has been on the increase in South Africa and Zimbabwe and Botswana does not expect to be immune. The country hosts many Chinese organisations

and their staff working on large infrastructure projects and, as in many African countries, they offer a conduit for rhino horn to the large Asian market for traditional Chinese medicines.

Government resources are, not unexpectedly, limited and rhinos

The Mombo Rhino Project, a joint initiative of Wilderness Safaris, Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust, the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks and the Botswana government is monitoring 44 white and 4 black rhinos in the 4871 km² unfenced Moremi Game Reserve. Of these, 34 of the whites are on Chief's Island and 6 are located to the south west of Moremi. Two females walked over 200 kms into Makgadikgadi National Park, settling near Kumaga. A male was moved to join them in June 2008 and met up with the females in September. A second male from Khama was due to be released to join them.

Khama Rhino Sanctuary is a 43 km² area of Kalahari sandveldt enclosed by a 28 km electric fence and located

25 km from Serowe. It has a population of 33 white and 3 black rhinos. An additional 50 km² has been allocated to expand the sanctuary and is being assessed for black rhino suitability.

Mokolodi Nature Reserve is a 50 km² fenced rhino sanctuary close to Gaborone. It breeds white rhinos for introduction to other areas. Three rhinos have been sent to Mombo and five to the Tuli Block in the east leaving 8 whites for further breeding. (End Box)

In the Ghanzi District, north west Botswana, two private sanctuaries have white rhinos – Tholo Farm (Edo's Camp) Kwalata each have six. Jwana Game Park, part of an area in the south owned by the government mining organisation Debswana, has three. There are five white rhinos in the Tuli Block.



roam huge, difficult to monitor areas especially in Moremi Game Reserve. Many of the staff employed are not rhino specialists and may be needed for other duties. In addition, a Trans-Frontier Conservation Area has been proposed for Shashe-Limpopo with 53% in South Africa, 19% in Zimbabwe and 28% in Botswana represented by the Northern Tuli Game Reserve. The 700 km² Reserve was formed in the 1960's by thirty six adjacent farms which removed their fences to allow free movement of wildlife and there is no fence between it and Zimbabwe. With Mopane veld being the dominant vegetation, it offers ideal habitat for both black and white rhinos. There are rhinos already in the South Africa section with four whites released in the Mapungubwe National Park and black rhinos in the Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve. Free movement of rhinos across country borders will challenge both protection and monitoring systems.

****Figure** The Shashe-Limpopo Trans Frontier Conservation Area

There is the potential to see between 10 and 20 black rhinos in Zimbabwe, either in regions where small isolated populations are under serious threat from poaching or private rhino conservancies that are presently over-crowded, and to

eventually translocate these animals to the Mashatu Game Reserve, part of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve, and southern Africa's largest private game reserve and the protected areas in the Okavango Delta. Houston Zoo, USA has joined with the International Rhino Foundation, working in conjunction with Wilderness Safaris, to support the return of black rhinos to Botswana, with a pledge of 100,000 USD.

In order to face the challenges ahead, the private rhino sanctuaries formed a co-ordinating body – the Botswana Private Rhino Ranchers Association – in October 2008. In addition, the creation of a body to co-ordinate all rhino monitoring and research activity has been mooted with the dedicated full time staff and facilities necessary to create an annual plan of monitoring and to establish fully equipped Rapid Response Units in conjunction with current anti-poaching units. Rhino research projects on habitat, diet, range and so on would be co-ordinated and prioritised. It would maintain a national rhino data bank and facilitate the education of the people of Botswana in the need for rhino conservation. However, discussions are at an early stage.

National Parks and wildlife conservation areas cover 17% of Botswana and tourism, at 16%, is a

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major contributor to Gross Domestic Product, second only to the 45% of mining. Wildlife and particularly megafauna like rhino and elephants are essential for maintaining wildlife tourism in Botswana. The government remains committed to using the military power of the Botswana Defence Force for environmental security while the private sector remains committed to aiding the development of the rhino population. With such a strong relationship between the public and private sector, the future looks bright for the rhino in Botswana. ●

