



SOLIO

THE HEARTBEAT OF RHINO CONSERVATION FOR 40 YEARS

BY FELIX PATTON



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Over 200 white rhinos have been born in Solio.

Solio Game Reserve is the premier rhino breeding sanctuary in Kenya. Over the 40 years it has been in existence, Solio has provided 93 black and 52 white rhinos to other reserves while maintaining a healthy population itself. It all started from small beginnings. Courtland Parfet bought Solio Ranch in the Laikipia area of central Kenya in 1966. It was mostly grassland used for beef cattle but with a range of indigenous wildlife including many buffalo, zebra, gazelles and leopards. Mr Parfet’s wife, Claude, a committed conservationist, persuaded her husband to fence an area of the ranch to protect the wildlife and

allow the animals to live their natural life without interference or threat from humans. The 55 km² area was surrounded by a 2-metre fence to create the first fully enclosed private game reserve in Kenya, a model that was later to be replicated many times.

At the outset, there were no rhinos in the reserve. Sport hunting and poaching of the once abundant black rhino in Kenya had left many small remnant populations, sometimes just a single individual, spread around the country with no hope of longterm survival. The animals often endangered nearby human settlements and were still under threat

from poaching. Courtland Parfet was approached by Kenya’s Wildlife and Conservation Management Department (WCMD) - the forerunner of the Kenya Wildlife Service - and asked if he would look after a few of these black rhinos while WCMD found them a permanent home.

So when the first five individuals were moved in from Kiboko in the southeast in 1970, Kenya’s first rhino sanctuary was established. With no other secure areas to call on, the WCMD came back several times over the next 10 years asking to move in more rhinos. By 1980, Solio Game Reserve was home to 27 individuals from 9 different areas.

Table 1. Source of Black Rhinos

Location	Number	Year
Kiboko*	5	1970
Embu	2	1971, 1980
Tsavo East*	3	1971, 1977
Isiolo	1	1972
Solio Ranch	2	1972, 1975
Nyeri Forest	1	1974
Darajani*	1	1974
Lamuria Ranch**	9	1975, 1979
Nyeri Forest	2	1980
Rumeruti	1	1980

* located in southeast Kenya, others in reasonable proximity to Solio

** ranch being subdivided



Between 1970 and 1980, the number of black rhinos in Kenya crashed by over 90%, from 20,000 to 1,500. By 1990, only 400 were left, just 2% of the 1970 population. For the most part, these deaths were caused by poachers seeking a lucrative income from the sale of the horns. While the largest market for rhino horn was, and is, as an ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine, Kenyan horn was mostly smuggled through to North Yemen where the horns were fashioned into handles for 'Djambia' daggers.

While the black rhino lives mostly by grazing on bushes and trees, the reserve had abundant grassland, which is the food source of the other species of African rhino, the white rhino. In 1980, Solio established a founder herd of 16 individuals imported from South Africa.

Over the years, Courtland and Claude Parfet developed a vision for Solio as the prime rhino breeding sanctuary in Kenya, allowing them to provide rhinos to others. In the excellent habitat and securely hidden from view, Solio rhinos bred and prospered so well that the reserve had to be extended to 68 km² in 1991. In the meantime other areas in Kenya, in both National Parks and private ranches, were made sufficiently secure to house rhinos and Solio became the prime source of many founder populations. Some 30 individuals were moved out of Solio to help form nucleus populations in other new reserves including Nakuru National Park, Sweetwaters Game Reserve, Lewa Downs Conservancy and Ol Jogi. The remaining rhinos continued to thrive and so did the translocations.

Table 2. Black Rhino Translocation History

	Total	Male	Female
Nakuru NP	15	7	8
Ol Pejeta	39	24	15
Lewa Downs	8	4	4
Ol Jogi	9	5	4
Tsavo East	16	8	8
Aberdares	2	1	1
Mugie Ranch	4	2	2
Total Dec 2009	93	51	42

To date, some 93 black and 52 white rhinos have left Solio for new homes with six whites even leaving the country to

20,000

NO. OF BLACK RHINOS IN KENYA IN 1970

help Uganda reintroduce rhinos. Truly, Solio represents the heartbeat of rhino conservation in Kenya.

Table 3. White Rhino Translocation History

	Total
Ol Jogi	5
Mt Kenya GR	3
Chem Chem	3
Nakuru NP	8
Lewa	5
Kongoni Ranch	6
Ziwa(Uganda)	6
Meru NP	12
Kitale	2
Maasai Mara	2
Total Dec 2009	52

However success brings with it problems and with black rhino numbers in Kenya dropping to 400 in 1990, and Solio having the largest single population, the reserve became a major target for professional poachers. Both white and black rhinos were murdered - either shot or caught in snares. By now Courtland Parfet's son Edward had joined the company as general manager and was determined to stop the slaughter. A security and monitoring system had to be established.

To monitor and manage the rhinos, it was essential to know how many there were and how to recognise each individual. In September 2005, Solio staff set about photographing and cataloguing the 85 black rhinos in the reserve. Using the photographs, a team of rhino monitoring rangers was trained to recognise each individual and each patrol group was given a book of photos that it could use in the field.

Patrol teams were in place and the first monitoring record was entered into the computer on November 13, 2005. Fittingly, this was for Karanja, a male believed to be one of Solio's founding population and aged well over 35 years. Karanja is also one of the only rhinos in the world to have grown a third horn.

The amazing breeding performance of Solio's black rhinos had dealt a blow

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Darting a rhino in Solio as part of East Africa's largest ever rhino translocation.



DENVER BRYAN



Top: Solio monitoring rangers learning how to identify each of Solio's black rhinos.
Bottom: Solio born black rhino Kolio with her first calf Gachembe.

to their habitat. A survey of the rhinos' food sources showed that the mainstay *Acacia drepanolobium* was almost eaten out and all other appropriate species were severely depleted. Solio had a black rhino density of 1.2 per km² where 0.5 would normally be considered high. Unless the population

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was drastically reduced, the rhinos would eat themselves out of food. A plan was developed to move up to 30 of the Solio

rhinos to nearby Ol Pejeta Conservancy, where they would colonise an area that was free of rhinos and had abundant *Acacia*. In February 2007, East Africa's largest ever rhino translocation took place with 24 Solio rhinos going to Ol Pejeta Conservancy and three to the Ol Jogi reserve.

As Solio's black rhino population was being reduced, so the white rhino population was continuing to grow. Poachers do not care if the horns are from the black or the white rhino so the white rhino population had also to be catalogued and monitored. By the end of 2009, Solio recorded 155 white alongside 73 black rhinos.

The poaching pressure is ever present with professional gangs operating throughout Laikipia. While the initial investment in the security system was funded by establishing a fledgling dairy unit, there was a need to bring in further income to ensure the rhinos' security

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Some 150 black rhinos have been bred in Solio.

SOLIO'S CONTINUED BREEDING SUCCESS WILL ENABLE COURTLAND AND CLAUDE PARFET'S VISION TO BE MAINTAINED WITH MORE RHINOS BEING MADE AVAILABLE TO MOVE TO NEW AREAS IN FUTURE YEARS.

and protect their habitat. Among other projects, the dairy unit will be expanded during 2010 and a newly built exclusive tourist lodge will be opened. Occupancy and tourist vehicles will be limited while revenues will be secured and increased.

Solio's managers/owners believe that conservation enterprises based on donor funding are not sustainable as finance may end at any time with dire consequences. That most wildlife conservation efforts are moving in this very dangerous direction is a trend that should be reversed. Wildlife conservation at Solio is run wholly on a commercial

basis with no donor funding. With a range of sources of income available, if one area struggles for a time, there are others to compensate. But the rhinos and other wildlife will be put first and only those changes that will not have an adverse effect on their behaviour and environment will be considered.

Solio's continued breeding success will enable Courtland and Claude Parfet's vision to be maintained with more rhinos being made available to move to new areas in future years. A plan is already under discussion regarding the translocation of a group

400

NO. OF BLACK RHINOS LEFT IN KENYA IN 1990

of Solio black rhinos into Aberdare National Park to develop, along with the few remaining individuals, a renewed founder population in this unique forest environment. ●

FELIX PATTON is a rhino ecologist writing and broadcasting about the species from Africa and Europe