

Equipping rangers to protect rhinos at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP) is located in the KwaZulu Natal region of South Africa, a region home to more rhinos than anywhere else on the African continent. This area has also been



Photo 1 – Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park helped to bring the Southern white rhino back from the brink of extinction. Credit: Steve and Ann Toon

the hardest hit by the current rhino poaching crisis, which began in 2008. The illegal trade in rhino horn primarily supplies markets in countries such as China and Vietnam, where it is purchased as a traditional medicine and increasingly for its status as a high-value object. Whilst the number of rhinos killed in South Africa has been falling every year since 2014 - a truly welcome decline - poaching remains a real threat to rhino populations. More than one rhino is killed every day for its horns. During 2019, a total of 594 rhinos were poached in South Africa, including 133 in KwaZulu Natal.

The growth of rhino populations remains threatened by this unsustainable rate of poaching, yet population growth is so desperately required to lift these animals out of danger. Black rhinos are listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List, and white rhinos as near threatened; this means that both species face a high risk of extinction in the wild. Only once rhino poaching is under control can more focus and funding shift to other, important priorities that will secure the long-term future of the species, such as habitat management and range expansion.

HiP itself is home to important populations of both black and white rhinos. The Park is renowned for being the historical home of the Southern white rhino, following the successful 'Operation Rhino' efforts in the 1950s to bring them back from the brink of extinction. It is thought that every Southern white rhino alive today can trace their heritage back to HiP.

In response to the threat from poaching in recent years, HiP has focused on improving rhino monitoring and anti-poaching efforts whilst rangers increased the time they spend in the field to detect and deter poaching attempts. Activities have included improvements for anti-poaching units, ensuring they are equipped effectively to do their job, making sure the park's perimeter fence is in good repair and upgrading parts to a Smart Fence, and completing maintenance to facilities to boost ranger morale.

This update covers the activities that Save the Rhino International and our partners, including Parc de Lunaret – Zoo de Montpellier, supported during the 6-month reporting period April-September 2020. Your generous donation of €2,500, received in June 2020, has been used to support the vital rhino monitoring and law enforcement work at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.



Photo 2 – HiP is helping to grow the black rhino population in South Africa. Credit: Steve and Ann Toon

A closer look at the decline in rhino poaching in South Africa

In February 2020, the South African government reported the welcome news that 'only' 594 rhinos were poached in the country during 2019, the fifth year in a row that poaching had been in decline. Does this mean that anti-poaching tactics are working effectively to bring down the rates? Or are there other reasons that explain the decline, maybe fewer rhinos are left in the reserves, making it more difficult to find them?

It is difficult to make an exact assessment of the long-term trends in poaching attempts themselves because incidents are not always reported. However, in Kruger National Park, the South African reserve hardest hit by poaching, 2019 saw a 22% decline in the number of recorded incidents compared to the previous year. Of the 2,014 poaching attempts in 2019 only 16% were 'successful' (i.e. 327 rhinos were sadly poached).

So could this show that rhinos are getting harder to find? This is a possibility, but without up-to-date population figures (the last being published in 2017) it's not easy to say for certain. What we can see from this data is the vital importance of rangers and the necessity of their work in the face of ongoing attempts by poachers. We can only imagine how many more rhinos would be killed each year if they were not on duty.

Continuing essential law enforcement work and ensuring its' effectiveness

Prior to the global pandemic, rangers had already been working long and increasing hours, due to the recent, high levels of rhino poaching (working particularly long hours during full moon periods when poaching incidents are most likely). The restrictions caused by Covid-19 certainly caused an even higher workload temporarily (see box explaining more about the effect of the pandemic, below). With the lifting of restrictions towards the end of this reporting period, staff have now been able to rotate and get some well-deserved rest.

The number of poaching incursions initially fell during the strictest weeks of lockdown but has since escalated once more. Rangers patrol day and night, staffing roadblocks and conducting random vehicle checks, as well as manning observation and listening posts in poaching hotspot areas. This is the core, difficult work of rangers in the ongoing struggle against rhino poaching.

There are two dedicated Anti-Poaching Units (APUs) at HiP, one each for Hluhluwe and iMfolozi Game Reserves, the two areas of the Park. Each APU consists of five field rangers and one officer. There are five horses too, for horseback patrols, which enable the team to travel in more remote areas as well as get closer to wildlife. Horseback patrols are a useful deterrent to poachers, who may consider that the most remote areas of the reserves would be out of reach for normal patrolling units.

In order to maximise HiP's anti-poaching effectiveness, it has been essential for rangers to spend longer periods of time on extended patrols in hotspots. Providing light weight, compact camping kit has been essential to enable their deployment at short notice,



Photo 3 – Rangers have been working harder than ever to ensure rhinos are protected throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Credit: Save the Rhino International

by helicopter or on foot. As described in our last report, 130 self-sufficient camping equipment kits were purchased last year thanks to Save the Rhino International and other donors. During this period, cleaning kits and Personal Protection Equipment have also been purchased for rangers due to Covid-19.



Photo 4 – Your generous donation will help ensure rangers are well-equipped to tackle the poaching threat within the Park. Credit: Save the Rhino International

Since the commencement of lockdown, field rangers have had to assist in monitoring and maintaining the fence around HiP as it is a critical defence against illegal incursions (as well as animal break outs). Across the Park, construction of a Smart Fence is in progress, with alarms that activate if wires are cut or if there is voltage drop due to attempts to go under or over the fence. Further stretches of Smart Fence will be rolled out strategically to areas most under threat from poaching.

In normal times, an aircraft is also flown over HiP, to monitor the fences, detect crime scenes, monitor black rhino, and assist with game counts. During the Covid-19 lockdown, flying was severely restricted, and during the

months of August and September, the plane was not able to fly at all. As things have begun to change, however, the aircraft is once again up in the air. The Research department also managed to raise funds for a helicopter to assist with transect counts as part of rhino monitoring.

Maintaining ranger morale and readiness to deal with poaching incursions

The poaching crisis and Covid-19 pandemic have caused a burden of additional hours for the rangers out protecting rhinos in the field. General maintenance can sometimes become secondary to the pressure on budgets for high-profile law enforcement equipment and activities. Yet this maintenance is crucial to provide an environment fit to work in; maintaining comfortable accommodation for rangers is critical to keeping morale amongst the team.



Photos 5 & 6 – Two kitchen units have been upgraded to improve facilities for rangers. Credit: Dirk Swart.

Some activities have managed to be completed during the reporting period despite the pressures of the pandemic. Kitchen cabinets and cupboards were repaired or replaced in staff accommodation at two sections; previously, they were not rodent-proof and therefore not safe for storing food or equipment. Vehicle maintenance, including the purchase of new tyres and infrastructure repairs, have also been completed. Water reticulation connections were repaired in another area, where human-wildlife conflict staff are based. Generators, boreholes and piping were repaired at a number of outposts to ensure staff could continue



with their work. This period also saw the purchase of building materials and maintenance equipment for future projects.

What has been the impact of Covid-19 at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi, as 2020 progressed?

At the time of our last report the measures employed by the South African government to control the Covid-19 pandemic had already begun to have an impact at HiP. The lockdown in South Africa went through certain stages beginning at Level 5 from the end of March, a full lockdown, to Level 3 by the start of June, which meant that most activities could resume. By the end of September, the country was at Level 1, meaning that most services began functioning normally, although transmission-prevention measures such as face masks and physical distancing remained in force.

At HiP, despite these restrictions, anti-poaching efforts continued throughout to make sure that poaching syndicates were not given an opportunity to strike. Most hospitality staff were sent home and all camps closed for a time, although some of the security staff were classified as essential workers and allowed in and out of the Park for specific, business reasons. In lockdown it was impossible to order any equipment, affecting items already purchased as well as new orders.

Commerce and tourism (domestic rather than international) have resumed now but, as might be expected, this has had a massive impact on HiP's finances. Extra costs have also been incurred too as a result of the restrictions. For example, staff shortages meant that external service providers had to be called in to assist with problems normally undertaken in house, such as mending broken boreholes and electrical issues. It was also necessary to divert some funding to the purchase of PPE equipment, i.e. facemasks and hand sanitizer.

Regarding the effect on poaching, there was initially an upsurge in rhino poaching that decreased again during lockdown. This is thought to be because syndicates were not able to move around as freely as usual, as well as there being more opportunity for activity around the prohibition of alcohol and tobacco by the same syndicates. As restrictions lifted in June-July, poaching once again surged in the Park, with field rangers having to work even harder given staff shortages due to Covid-19. Thankfully, with the lockdown measures easing towards the end of the reporting period, the staff was able to rotate in and out of the Park to ensure ranger morale and readiness stay high.

Thank you, Parc de Lunaret – Zoo de Montpellier for equipping rangers to protect rhinos at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park!



Photo 7 – Your commitment to conservation is more important than ever to ensure that vital rhino conservation work can continue. Credit: Steve and Ann Toon.

On behalf of the team at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and Save the Rhino International, we would like to say a heartfelt thank you to the Board, staff and visitors at Parc de Lunaret – Zoo de Montpellier. Your support in raising funds and awareness for the conservation efforts for black and white rhinos at HiP has helped ensure they are protected and thriving for future generations.

To find out more about Save the Rhino International (UK registered charity 1035072) and Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, South Africa, please visit www.savetherhino.org.