

Equipping rangers to protect rhinos at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park



Photo 1 – Black rhino population within the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park is healthy and thriving. Credit: Steve & Ann Toon

Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP) is located in the KwaZulu Natal region of South Africa, a country home to more rhinos than anywhere else on the African continent. However, the region has also been the hardest hit by the current rhino poaching crisis, which began in 2008. Throughout 2020, a total of 394 rhinos were poached in South Africa, including 93 within KwaZulu Natal. Whilst the continued decline in the number of rhinos killed by poachers since 2014 is encouraging, poaching remains an unsustainable threat to the population growth that is so important for these endangered animals.

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.

Due to increasing intensity of poaching in the Park in recent years, field rangers have been stepping up their monitoring and patrolling efforts in the area. This has included regular foot and vehicle patrols, as well as horse and aerial assisted surveillance. Tracking dogs have also been helping to track and deter suspected poachers. It is clear that without the dedication and hard work of the staff in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park the numbers of rhinos being poached would be much higher.



Photo 2 – Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park helped to bring the Southern white rhino back from the brink of extinction. Credit: Dirk Swart

This update covers the activities that Save the Rhino International and our partners, including Parc de Lunaret – Zoo de Montpellier, supported during the 12-month reporting period April 2020 – March 2021. Your generous donation of €2,500, received in June 2020, has been used towards general maintenance, repairs and equipment for the Park to keep operations efficient while funding from the government is extremely limited. Your most recent donation of €4,000, which we received in April 2021, will be used in the next reporting period towards the same activities.

Continuing essential law enforcement work and ensuring its' effectiveness

Each of the five Sections within the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park has a dedicated team of approximately 20 field rangers tasked with maintaining the integrity of the Park by patrolling its strategic locations. The Park's utilization of smart technology has also helped ensure much better co-ordination within the Park and rapid sharing of information. These invaluable data, obtained both through rangers' patrols and smart technology, have helped to build a better picture of poachers' activities.

Prior to the global pandemic, rangers had already been working long and increasing hours, due to the recent, high levels of rhino poaching. The number of poaching incursions initially fell during the strictest weeks of lockdown but has since escalated with a further spike in incidents during the holiday season in December 2020. Rangers patrol day and night, staffing roadblocks and conducting random vehicle checks, as well patrolling hotspot areas. With extended overtime and nightshifts, rangers achieved c. 20,000 man-hours per month across the Park. This is the core, difficult work of rangers in the ongoing struggle against rhino poaching.



Photo 2 – Flight patrols have now resumed and enabled an orphaned white rhino calf to be spotted and taken to the Park’s bomas. Credit: Dirk Swart

In normal times, an aircraft is also flown over the Park, to monitor the fences, detect crime scenes, monitor black rhino, and assist with wildlife 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. However, from November 2020, flight patrols were able to resume. One orphaned white rhino calf was spotted from the air while the Park’s Section Ranger, Dirk Swart, was flying the plane; the calf was subsequently airlifted from the field and taken to the Park’s bomas. Without doubt, had the calf not been seen, it wouldn’t have survived!

As of March 2021, the Park employs just one dedicated Black Rhino Monitor, who focuses on tracking the animals to achieve sightings and on collecting and analysing rhino-sighting data. Ear-notching operations increase the accuracy of individual identification, and all field rangers are issued with forms to complete while out on patrol, on which they note the location, time and date, and the ear-notch pattern or other distinctive features. Camera traps and the fixed-wing aircraft are also used to increase the number of sightings. The aircraft is also used to conduct an annual estimate of the total number of white rhinos in the Park.

To assist with monitoring and protecting the Park’s rhino populations, five new quadbikes were ordered and arrived safely in January 2021. Quadbikes are primarily used for monitoring purposes and ensuring the integrity of the electric fence that surrounds the Park, enabling staff to carry out frequent checks of the entire 150km fence line to look for breaks or suspected entry points, without having to rely on large, fuel-heavy law-enforcement vehicles. This not only saves labour time, but also increases the chances of the successful apprehension of poaching suspects because of more rapid response times.



Photo 4 – The team were delighted to receive new quadbikes to assist with monitoring the Park’s rhinos. Credit: Dirk Swart

Another major improvement has been the installation of a new digital radio system in one section of the Park. Thanks to the support of Save the Rhino International’s donors, rangers can now communicate with each other securely, especially during reactions, which directly increased the chances of a successful apprehension of any illegal intruders into the Park.

Rhino poaching in decline in South Africa but so are the population numbers

Fewer than 400 rhinos were poached in South Africa last year, according to the latest figures reported by South Africa's Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries on 1 February 2021. While every poaching loss is heart-breaking, this total represents the sixth consecutive year of falling poaching numbers, and significantly, is a drop of one third as compared to 2019.

Whilst this is a very welcome decline, the full and devastating scale of the poaching crisis was revealed in a [recent report published by the South African National Parks](#). The report showed that the total population of rhinos in Kruger National Park, the stronghold for Southern white rhinos during the last couple of decades, has declined by a staggering 59% since 2013. Today, there are just 3,529 white rhinos and 268 black rhinos left in the Park. Kruger continues to be home to the world's largest rhino population, but these numbers are a stark reminder of the fragility of rhino populations. We cannot afford to let this downward trend continue.

Maintaining ranger morale and readiness to deal with poaching incursions



Photo 5 – The overhaul of solar panels ensures there is an adequate power supply to ranger camps. Credit: Dirk Swart

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.

To date, the solar panel installations at some of the field ranger camps have been completely overhauled to ensure adequate power supply to each room in the picket camps. This provides light and allows for the charging of batteries and small electrical appliances. The Park's Section Ranger, Dirk Swart, also bought assorted equipment items, such as batteries, brush-cutter components, cleaning chemicals and tractor parts, all of which are used to help to maintain facilities and infrastructure in the Park.

Section Rangers have also been able to maintain vehicles during the lockdown period, to purchase new tyres for vehicles and to assist with infrastructure repairs and management. Water reticulation connections were repaired in one 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 the five Sections to ensure the continued functioning and running of the ranger outposts.



A special thank you from Dirk Swart, the Section Ranger at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

“Firstly, it is very important to thank you greatly for your support and trusting Save the Rhino International. I have been a Section Ranger (Game ranger) in this Park since 2006, and during this entire period Save the Rhino and its donors have been supporting us, even before rhino poaching was ever an issue. We often go through difficult times and turmoil, but at the end of the day we get through them.

Presently, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, loss of jobs and revenue, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (the management organisation responsible for the Park) is struggling to find funding to pay for staff let alone operational costs. Save the Rhino and its supporting donors, including Parc de Lunaret – Zoo de Montpellier, have always assisted us with maintaining our Park and very often with mundane tasks and ‘unsexy’ activities such as fixing broken toilets, showers, pumps and generators. Your continued support on the ground enables staff to do their work effectively, increases morale and gets results.

The Key 1 population of black rhino in this Park is extremely important, and we need to maintain the pool that feeds into the expansion of black rhino into other parks and reserves. The white rhino are of significant importance to this Park as well, as all Southern white rhino alive in the world today have their origins from Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

Therefore, I would personally like to thank you very much for your very generous support.”

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



Photo 6 – Your commitment to conservation is more important than ever to ensure that vital rhino conservation work can continue. Credit: Steve and Ann Toon.

We would like to say a huge thank you to the Board, staff and visitors at Parc de Lunaret – Zoo de Montpellier for your incredibly generous support towards the work of the rangers of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

In this most difficult time, given the rhino poaching crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, your kind support is even more valued than ever. Thank you for helping us to protect rhinos and keep rangers safe.

To find out more about Save the Rhino International (UK registered charity

1035072) and Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, South Africa, please visit:

<https://www.savetherhino.org/>.