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The Rhino Files: Rhino conservation during a pandemic

News - Environment | 2020-06-25

by [Helge Denker](#)

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CONSTANT COMPANIONS ... the tracks of rhinos and rhino rangers overlap wherever rhinos roam in the Erongo-Kunene Community Conservation Area. Photos: Helge Denker



The Rhino Files are periodic articles exploring the complexity of rhino conservation in Namibia.

"IT'S AN absolute disaster!" That's the consensus among a government-NGO coalition seeking to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on community conservation in Namibia.

The pandemic has interrupted the intricate link between conservation and tourism. All leisure travel has been brought to a sudden, devastating standstill. The ripple effects go far beyond the travel industry, severely affecting rural livelihoods in communal areas.

In the north-west, it's a disaster drastically compounded by years of severe drought. Communities here have suffered devastating livestock losses. Wildlife populations have been decimated too.

Raymond Peters coordinates the annual Erongo-Kunene game count for conservancies and the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism via the Nacso Natural Resources Working Group. He feels that game sightings from the just-completed 2020 count may be similar to 2019 (the final results are still being compiled).

Yet numbers are much lower than anything else he has experienced in 20 years of the count. The loss of tourism income has harshly exacerbated a very dire situation.

The B2Gold Rhino Gold Bar initiative, announced in January, has also come at a very critical time, when normal conservation structures are in real trouble.

While the Rhino Gold initiative was designed as a sustainable financing mechanism for the long-term conservation of free-roaming black rhinos in north-western Namibia, it has the flexibility to make funds available immediately for short-term needs.

B2Gold managing director Mark Dawe has emphasised that the donation is about much more than rhino conservation; it's about supporting communities – “they will be the beneficiaries”.

Close to N\$3,5 million generated from the initiative was already distributed in May to Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), and the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF) to pay the salaries of rhino rangers in various rhino conservancies and help local communities.

The rhino rangers in conservancies normally supported by Ultimate Safaris are also receiving Rhino Gold funds via the tourism operator.

The B2Gold initiative can meet most of the funding needs for rhino protection in the north-west over the next 12 months. In short, this is how it works: A thousand ounces of gold from the Namibian operations of B2Gold were donated in the form of 100 gold bars, embossed with the image of a black rhino cow and calf. The bars are sold to collectors at the spot price of gold, with a 15% conservation premium added.

The 15% is channelled directly to rhino custodian communities and anti-poaching activities; the remainder goes into a capital fund where returns provide a continuous flow of finances. The initiative is coordinated by a committee made up of representatives from the Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE), SRT, IRDNC, MEFT and B2Gold.

The NCE exemplifies the partnerships that enable Namibian conservation successes. The chamber represents more than 50 member NGOs and liaises with the private sector and government to enable conservation action. Director Chris Brown played a central role in the B2Gold initiative. He understands the urgent needs of rhino conservancies and has facilitated the rapid dispersal of funds.

Simson Uri-Khob, CEO of SRT, is adamant that rhino conservation in communal areas is impossible without direct community involvement.

He quickly adds that a strong tourism presence is vital too. Beyond the direct funds that tourism brings, the active presence in the area is an important deterrent.

Field patrols are central to anti-poaching initiatives. Facilitated by USAID support, rhino patrol effort in the north-west was increased to 1 200% of pre-poaching levels – with the result that no incidents were recorded here during 2018-19, and only one event was registered this year. Patrol teams are made up of community rhino rangers and police officers. B2Gold funding is able to bridge current funding gaps to ensure that patrols can operate without interruption.

I travelled to the north-west a few days after the national lockdown was lifted in early May. The dual effects of drought and Covid-19 were striking – very little livestock, very little wildlife, no tourists. Yet in all the rhino areas I visited, the fresh tracks of rhino rangers were right there alongside the tracks of the rhinos.

While driving through some of the back country of rugged hills and barren rocky terrain with police officers, they wondered out loud how people can live here – what they could possibly make a living from. Rhinos and tourism are a big part of the answer. One that is currently on shaky ground.

To address some of the wider issues around the indefinite tourism stop and the loss of revenue for conservancies, Nacso partners and the MEFT are working with both local and international funding partners to secure emergency funding.

The aim is to be able to support not only the conservancies, but also the tourism and conservation hunting operators who have joint-venture and concession agreements. If conservancy tourism is left to collapse, it will be extremely difficult to rebuild.

