

The Rhino Files: The Three Pillars of Rhino Management

News - Environment | 2020-07-23

Page no: 1

by [Helge Denker](#)



WE ARE ONE ... Sound conservation systems that ensure healthy populations are the basis of successful rhino management. Photo: Helge Denker

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

“WE AIM to detect criminal activity and arrest poachers before a rhino is killed.” This might sound overly-ambitious, but Barry de Klerk knows it's possible.

Operation Blue Rhino has made over 100 pre-emptive arrests in around 30 cases since its inception in mid-2018. Would-be poachers are being caught before they can kill a rhino. Pro-active law enforcement has saved dozens of animals.

Deputy-commissioner De Klerk is head of the Nampol Protected Resources Division and jointly manages the Blue Rhino Task Team. The team knows that fighting wildlife crime is a relentless, 24/7 task. They also know that dedication produces results.

It's not just the poachers being caught. Numerous kingpins, dealers, aiders and abettors are being arrested too. They include foreigners attempting to purchase rhino horns in Namibia, police officers, defence force personnel and even a popular self-proclaimed prophet. No-one is above the law.

Innovation and perseverance have been key. Ongoing investigations, using cutting edge technology and information networks, keep bringing up new evidence. The result is more arrests – sometimes months or even years after a case was opened. When the culprits of the April Puros rhino poaching incident were recently caught, Theunis Petersen commented “It is amazing when law enforcement networks work together.”

Petersen heads the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism's intelligence and investigation unit and the other joint head of the Blue Rhino Task Team.

Operation Blue Rhino is a Nampol-ministry initiative that pools resources in a collaborative multi-agency approach. Significant field support is also provided by the Namibian Defence Force.

Since the inception of Blue Rhino, around 700 suspects have been arrested in cases linked to rhinos, elephant and pangolin. The final measure of success is the conviction and appropriate sentencing of perpetrators.

Effective law enforcement and prosecution are obviously vital, but they should be seen as the last resort in overall natural resources management. The foundations are laid by sound conservation systems that ensure healthy wildlife populations which can withstand a variety of pressures, including drought, disease, legal off-takes – and some degree of poaching.

Namibia's policy of sustainable use of natural resources for the benefit of all provides the premise for conservation measures that reach across state-protected areas, communal and freehold farmland.

Tourism, conservation hunting and other sustainable resource uses transform conservation returns into tangible livelihood benefits. In the case of rhinos, this equates to significant income from rhino tourism for conservancies and their member communities.

Anti-poaching initiatives are another vital component of rhino management. They seek to minimise the need for law enforcement by safeguarding conservation gains. Patrols form the central activity. Since the onset of the current poaching wave, anti-poaching patrols have been drastically increased everywhere.

Hans !Hauseb has been a game guard since 2002, and a rhino ranger since black rhinos were reintroduced into his conservancy in 2007. He has spent more than a decade sleeping in tents or under the stars in rugged rhino habitat. His dedication is clear.

It is also clear that patrol units have the most physically demanding task in rhino conservation. They walk for many hours and kilometres each day, in heat and cold and wind and dust. They face all the dangers that the Namibian environment poses, including snakes, lions and elephants.

They don't complain. They get the job done. They deserve regular recognition – and the best equipment available.

Funding from numerous Namibian partners over the past five years has enabled a broad basis for rhino protection that supports not only anti-poaching patrols, but also community awareness programmes. Other initiatives include the de-horning of rhinos as an effective deterrent that vastly reduces the profit-risk ratio for poachers.

Rapid response capabilities have been boosted, including funds to ensure the immediate deployment of government

helicopters when needed. The funding has also enabled the development of the canine unit of the environment ministry.

All of these activities create a broad lattice of deterrence. While anti-poaching efforts can never ensure the safety of every animal, effective law enforcement and prosecution close the gaps by pre-empting criminal activity and catching poachers that manage to get through.

Vast improvements in anti-poaching and law enforcement have countered recent poaching impacts and have created three interconnected pillars that enable effective rhino management – conservation systems, anti-poaching activities and law enforcement/prosecution. If one pillar fails, rhinos are in trouble. This highlights the importance of connectivity and partnerships.

**Helge denker is a Namibian freelance writer-naturalist based in Windhoek. He also compiles information on conservation issues and the environment for various applications. He currently works with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism's intelligence and investigation unit and the Police Protected Resources Division on wildlife crime cases.*