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black rhino
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ENVIRONMENT (/ENVIRONMENT)

SRT CHALLENGES MILITARY-STYLE APPROACH TO POACHING

Simple but effective approach

SRT's outreach efforts have resulted in an increased demand from conservancies to restore rhino populations on their land.

Ellanie Smit

1 MONTH AGO - 2024-01-15 00:20:00

The Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) Namibia approach to rhino poaching has challenged the conventional military-style rhino protection tactics that, in many cases, exacerbate the divide between local people and rhinos.

"These conventional anti-poaching regimes perceive and target local people as part of the problem," said SRT Namibia in its new strategic plan for 2023 to 2028.

SRT said it has therefore taken on a highly simple but effective approach by employing local residents to harness their unrivalled skills.

The skills include traditional foot tracking techniques honed over generations and knowledge of the landscape and animal behaviour to monitor and protect rhinos rather than poaching them.

"This approach fostered a newfound, locally-grown pro-rhino attitude and, alongside efforts to build a local 'community game guard' system with traditional leaders, helped reduce poaching in the area."

Value driven

It has also created a new sense of the value of rhinos among the local people.

According to SRT, the positive value of keeping rhinos alive has primarily resided with rangers that track and monitor rhinos and local people who play an active role in the rhino custodian conservancies.

"They have realised the positive value of keeping rhinos alive, not only because of the monetary value this brings but also as a result of a sense of ownership and pride they have placed in having rhinos on their land."

Responding to a need

SRT was established in 1982 after a severe drought, combined with uncontrolled hunting, left the Kunene Region with hardly any wildlife.

SRT mobilised teams of men, most of whom had grown up in the area, to monitor the remaining black rhinos.

During the late 1990s, numerous communal conservancies were set up, which strengthened local people's control over and responsibility for wildlife.

"The communal conservancies allowed for local people to make decisions over the management of their wildlife."

This approach fostered a newfound, locally-grown pro-rhino attitude and, alongside efforts to build a local 'community game guard' system with traditional leaders, helped reduce poaching in the area.

Numbers down

SRT said between 2005 and 2010, through the rhino custodianship programme, over 40 rhinos were released across 13 communal conservancies, expanding the range by roughly 20%, which helped further increase population growth.

"Today, the number of black rhinos in the landscape has tripled since SRT started its efforts."

SRT says its success can be attributed to local communities' sense of ownership and pride for their rhino, a strong level of trust and partnership with the Namibian government, partnerships with various civil society organisations, and most importantly, their grassroots approach.

"We employ 45 staff. The majority of these (40 people) are trackers, drivers and camp support staff, and all are from local communities."

According to SRT, their trackers cover an area of 25 000 km², enduring extreme conditions during long patrols.

"These patrols are mainly done on foot in rough terrain, in an area with no national park status, no fences, and no controls over who enters and exits."

Return to the wild

It said that along with the realisation of and interest in new opportunities embedded within the conservancy legislation for improved local livelihood options, SRT's outreach efforts resulted in an increased demand from conservancies to receive rhino back on their land.

The conservancy programme had a great impact on the return and increase of wildlife populations that were almost decimated in the Kunene Region.

It said that poaching has decreased by 78% over a period of five years.

Between 2012 and 2016, a total of 38 rhinos were reported poached in west Kunene, whereas between 2017 and 2022, a total of eight rhinos were reported poached in west Kunene.

"Overall, SRT has maintained patrol efforts over the landscape, resulting in the single biggest achievement – the absence of reported poaching since August 2020, marking 26 months without poaching at the end of October 2022."

It noted that there has been an increase in conservancies' investment in rhino protection, illustrated by an increase in conservancy contributions towards overall programme expenses. This has also helped fuel an increase in patrol efforts and rhino sightings.



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