



SCOTT RAMSAY

A black rhino is shown from the side, standing in a dry, rocky landscape. The rhino's thick, wrinkled skin is a dark grey color. The ground is covered in reddish-brown rocks and sparse, dry vegetation. The background is a hazy, arid plain.

THIS MAGIC MOMENT

IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE
NOTHING LIVES HERE,
BUT THE HARSH, ARID
KUNENE REGION OF
NAMIBIA HOLDS A
SURPRISING SECRET:
IT'S THE BEST PLACE
ON EARTH TO SEE
ONE OF THE LAST
UNFENCED, FREE-
ROAMING BLACK
RHINO POPULATIONS
IN AFRICA.

SCOTT RAMSAY
SPENDS A DAY
TRACKING THEM
IN THE DESERT



PLUS, WE PROVIDE A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT RHINO POACHING CRISIS





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LACK RHINOS AREN'T CONSIDERED THE MOST INTELLIGENT OF ANIMALS, BUT IN NAMIBIA THEY POSSESS A SENSE OF HUMOUR AS DRY AS THE DESERT THEY LIVE IN.

We've been searching for them since 4.30 this morning. But Africa's fourth-largest land mammal is infuriatingly invisible, even if there is little to hide it except a few euphorbia bushes dotted across an endless ocean of stone and sand.

'This is not a good day,' grunts Denzyl Tjiraso, one of our three Himba trackers. 'Usually we can find them within a few hours in the morning. They are playing a joke with us today.' The sun burns down, scorching the stony ground like it does every other day of the year. We're all wilting, even the trackers; the Namibian desert in mid-afternoon is no place for any sane *Homo sapiens*.

To the uninitiated, Damaraland in the north-west Kunene region of the country is an intimidating place. The high basalt ridges, innumerable valleys and vast gravel plains are stunning in their harshness. Just a few thousand people live in an area twice the size of Belgium, most of them in small villages along the main gravel road that runs north to south for 300km. The rest? True wilderness.

At first sight there is no life, but this desert is full of surprises. It hosts more species of mammals than any other arid region on Earth. This morning alone, we'd spotted an African wild cat, its ears illuminated in the early sunrise. Later, under a bush in a dry riverbed, a lioness lay content before retreating into the thick undergrowth where her cubs squealed for milk. The previous evening we'd seen a heavily pregnant spotted hyena after a leopard kill, herds of Hartmann's zebra, giraffe, gemsbok (the indisputable king of the desert, it hardly ever has to drink water and can let its body temperature rise to as high as 45°C without a worry) and even elephants – a wonderful, incongruous sight in the desert.

But we are here for the black rhinos. Guests at Desert Rhino Camp in the 5,800km² Palmwag conservancy are taken out every day by trackers from Save the Rhino Trust, an organisation that's been instrumental in monitoring and protecting one of the world's rarest animals. According to the Trust's field operations director, Simson Uri-Khob, just over 4,500 black rhinos survive in the wild in Africa.

'Namibia's black rhino population is considered one of seven key populations on the continent, because it's one of the largest and fastest growing,' he says.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Driver Nestor Nguunduka and tracker Denzyl Tjiraso on dawn patrol; Save the Rhino Trust guide Epton Rukuma; the desert-adapted giraffe has extremely efficient kidneys; rhino tracking starts at dawn; Hartmann's mountain zebra are seen in sizeable herds in Damaraland; a luxury tent at Desert Rhino Camp

PREVIOUS PAGE Africa's largest free-roaming black rhino population, in north-west Namibia, is fiercely protected by the local communities



**NOTHING ELSE IN THE WORLD SEEMS TO EXIST,
EXCEPT THIS ANCIENT CREATURE AND US –
TWO SPECIES OF MAMMALS, THE RHINO
AT THE END OF ITS EVOLUTIONARY JOURNEY,
WE NEAR THE BEGINNING OF OURS**

It wasn't always like that. In the 1980s hardly any wildlife, including black rhino, remained in the Kunene region. A decade of ivory and rhino horn poaching by South African army forces had taken its toll, while locals hunted antelope species after an incessant drought decimated their livestock. Then, shortly after Namibia's independence in 1991, a revolutionary conservation programme was instituted: local communities were given legal rights to their land and the wildlife on it. Today, almost 20 per cent of Namibia is protected by 79 conservancies – together with the country's national parks, that means almost half of Namibia is now protected, one of the highest figures in the world. From no income in the early 1990s, today more than N\$340 million (about \$40 million) of tourism money flows into conservancies, which use it to support about 250,000 people living in rural areas.

For all wildlife species, there's been a remarkable turnaround, but especially for the black rhino. 'Thirty years ago there were only a handful left in north-west Namibia,' says Simson. 'Today, that number has grown substantially, and continues to rise at about 4,5 per cent a year.'

In the context of the current rhino poaching crisis in Africa (see page 44), Namibia's black rhinos are an astounding anomaly. According to Simson, only four have been killed by poachers in the past ten years – a fact made even more remarkable because there are few fences and gates and a relatively low investment in anti-poaching operations in the conservancies. 'The communities are fiercely protective of all their wildlife,' he says. 'They know that these rhinos bring millions of dollars of tourism to their region, and because most of the locals rely on tourism for their livelihood, they have a vested interest in the survival of their wildlife.'

In December last year a poacher killed a rhino, the first for several years, but within a day the community had revealed his whereabouts to Simson and his team. He's now in prison. 'In Damaraland, rhinos are worth more alive than dead.'

Of course, the terrain and the climate aren't conducive to humans wandering around, whether they be poachers or tourists. 'If you have no water, you will die,' says Simson, 'unless you know where the springs are. This is a huge, dangerous area for any human, and it's very easy to get lost.'

Water's exactly what I'm thinking of at this moment. It's now 4.30 in the afternoon, 12 hours after leaving camp, and still no rhino. 'I'm sorry,' Denzyl mutters apologetically, 'but we've got to head back to camp.' No one seems to mind. A swim, cold Tafel lager, gourmet meal and comfortable bed await – perhaps reward enough for a day of desert exploring.

Half an hour into our spine-rattling journey back to the camp, it happens. A grey spot moves on a rocky hillside in the distance. '*Ongava!*' Denzyl shouts, scrambling for his





DESERT DISCOVERIES

(From top) Damaraland in the Kunene region of Namibia has as little as 50ml of rainfall a year, resulting in a landscape that's spectacular in its harshness; watching the black rhino with bated breath – the species is known for its distinct dislike of human smell and charges readily if threatened



binoculars. 'Rhino!' It's about two kilometres from us, trotting away. We hurtle towards the ridge in the Land Rover. 'They have excellent smell and hearing but terrible eyesight,' says Denzyl. 'If we get downwind of it maybe we can get closer. Come, let's walk quickly!' We hop from the car and follow.

The trackers walk quietly but determinedly, scanning the surrounds. Then Denzyl stops, his hand up in the air. We freeze. He points. There it is, an ear sticking out from behind a euphorbia bush about 50 metres from us. Fortunately the hot breeze carries our scent away. We move back and wait. The rhino emerges tentatively, then it stands in full view, staring directly at us, unsure what to make of the human specks on the land.

It's an exhilarating, unsettling sensation: being eyeballed by a double-horned creature the size and weight of a car, which can run across the stony ground faster than Usain Bolt on a race track. My heart's pounding. We gaze upon it like some ancient god, a resurrected beast that holds us in thrall. Right now nothing else in the world seems to exist, except this ancient creature and us – two species of mammals; the rhino at the end of its evolutionary journey, we near the beginning of ours.

It comes closer, sniffing the air intently, its ears pricked and alert. No one breathes.

Then the breeze changes. The rhino snorts, usually a sign of an imminent charge, but instead it turns around and runs – fast – down the valley, up onto the opposite ridge, running, running until it disappears into the ageless land.

'Maybe they felt sorry for us, those rhinos,' chuckles Denzyl. 'They know how to play a good joke on us sometimes. But we saw one! Today was a good day in the desert, after all.'



GET GOING DESTINATION: NAMIBIA

Operated by Wilderness Safaris, the unfenced Desert Rhino Camp has eight luxury tents on raised wooden decks. Guests staying here contribute directly to Save the Rhino Trust, whose trackers and operations are partly funded by Wilderness Safaris. It's 600km from Windhoek. wilderness-safaris.com
British Airways flies to Windhoek from Johannesburg. Visit ba.com.



HOW MUCH LONGER WILL WE SEE THIS IN THE WILD?

It's no secret: Africa's rhinos are in crisis. If poaching continues as it is, it will outpace natural population growth by 2016.

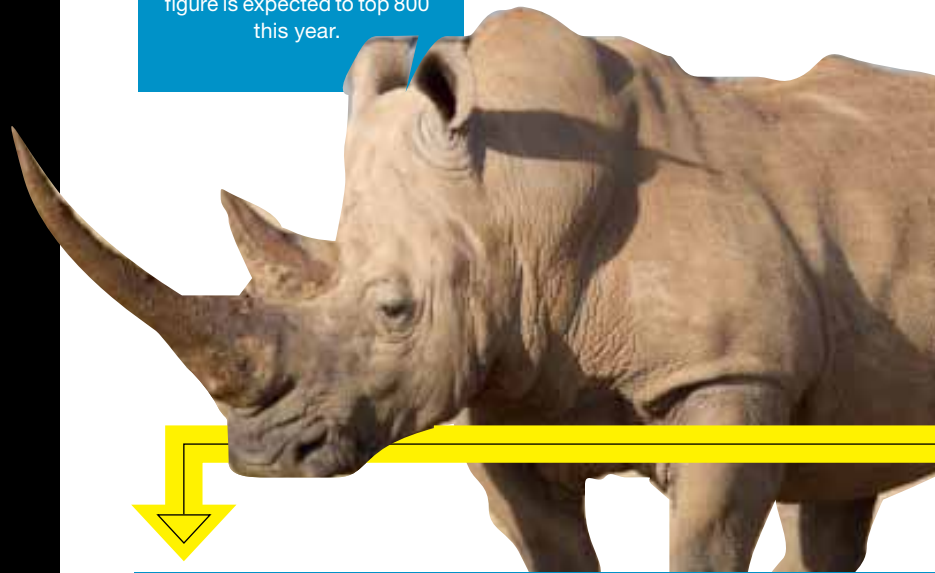
Worst-case scenario: rhinos could be extinct in the wild within 13 years.

BYE-BYE BIG FIVE, HELLO BIG FOUR?

Wildlife journalists Ann and Steve Toon take a look at some of the radical solutions being proposed to curb the killing

THE FACTS

Last year a record 668 rhinos were killed in South Africa alone. With demand for horn in countries such as China and Vietnam showing no sign of slackening, that figure is expected to top 800 this year.



PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

1 LEGALISATION

As anti-poaching measures have failed to staunch the loss of animals, support for legalising the trade in horn, from animals that have died naturally or harvested from live animals (it grows back after cutting), has grown. The SA government has signalled support for legalisation, and a proposal to lift the trade ban could well be tabled at the next meeting of CITES, the international convention on trade in endangered species, in 2016.

identified by DNA and micro chip.'

'You need to think at a global level how you're going to control supply and demand,' says Jabulani Ngubane, rhino security co-ordinator for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. 'We're confident that if we have a single, central selling organisation to control it, we can make rhinos a resource.'



⚡ AGAINST

Opponents argue too little is known about the demand or the amount of stockpiled horn.

Mary Rice, executive director of the Environmental Investigation

Agency, points out that a one-off legal sale of ivory in 2008 merely provided 'a massive smokescreen' for the illegal trade, as China failed to abide by assurances that no illegal ivory would be allowed to enter the market. 'A legal trade can only work where there are stringent controls in place,' she says. 'How can China be considered a suitable candidate for introducing a similar system for rhino horn?'

⚡ FOR

'The CITES ban has been ineffective, and as a desperate measure we believe sustainable utilisation is the only solution left,' argues Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners Association. 'Only horns from accredited private reserves and provincial or state reserves would be traded. Each horn would be



A LOSING BATTLE

State and private rhino owners have supplemented armed patrols and tracker dogs with hi-tech equipment, including thermal-imaging night vision optics, military radar and even surveillance drones. But with horn fetching more than \$60,000 (about R550,000) on the black market, poaching is big business, run by sophisticated international crime syndicates. Kruger National Park, which holds 40 per cent of Africa's total rhino population, has been particularly hard hit, losing 425 in 2012. Private owners, who account for more than a quarter of SA's rhinos, have resorted to poisoning the horn of living animals or dehorning them in a bid to deter poachers. And as the value of live animals drops and the cost of security escalates, a growing number are bailing out, with the result that vital rhino habitat is being lost.



2 FARMING

Legalising the trade raises the prospect of rhinos being 'farmed' for their horn. SA's largest private rhino breeder, John Hume, owns more than 800 rhinos, which are dehorned every 18 months and the horn stored in secure bank vaults. He's sitting on a stockpile worth potentially more than \$30 million (about R270 million) if trade is legalised.

"If you put even three or four tons a year into the market, I honestly believe it will reduce poaching," he argues. "Those people who have their horn confiscated, it's a big loss for them. We'd be giving them a legal option. We'd be saying to the buyer: "You don't have to kill my rhino to get the horn, I'm growing it for you anyway."



3 DEHORNING

In a park the size of Kruger, where up to 10,000 rhinos are widely dispersed in dense bush, it's unlikely widespread dehorning would be logistically practical even if the idea was accepted by the wildlife-watching public. 'I think we need to view the preservation of rhinos in our national parks and reserves as the sacred cow: we must not intervene there, we must not dehorn them,' argues Markus Hofmeyr, head of Kruger's veterinary services. 'But we need a buffer to do that. That's where the private guys could come in if they had added value in keeping rhinos.'

Some private reserves outside Kruger are already dehorning their rhinos. If the horn trade is legalised, an increasing number of safari goers could be viewing rhinos without their characteristic asset. For some conservationists, it seems this is a price worth paying. ■

RHINO HORN: THE USES...

Rhinos rub horns when greeting, males use them to fight over territory (sometimes to the death) and females use them to protect their calves from predators. Black rhinos also use their horns when feeding, to snap or push down branches and to uproot shrubs. Some scientists believe rhinos' horns are a vestige of times past, when they needed to protect themselves against larger predators than today. Certainly, animals that lose their horns in accidents, fights or through deliberate dehorning seem to survive without obvious problems.

...AND THE ABUSES

Rhino horn has been used for centuries to make ceremonial daggers, cups and other ornaments, and as a traditional Chinese medicine. It's a myth that rhino horn is used as an aphrodisiac: its main traditional use is to reduce fever and inflammation. Rhino horn is largely made up of keratin, similar to the protein in human nails and hair. Western clinical trials have shown that it may have a mild fever-reducing effect, though no more than aspirin, and there are traditional substitutes such as water buffalo horn and various herbs.

More recently, rhino horn has been touted as a cure for cancer – almost certainly a rumour put out by illegal traders – and more and more being used by wealthy Vietnamese as a hangover cure and to 'detox' after overindulging. In the increasingly affluent societies of Vietnam and China, the two largest markets for horn, it is seen as a status symbol, sometimes given as a gift to employers and business contacts.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- ☛ Support Namibia's desert rhinos (savetherhinotrust.org).
- ☛ Save the Rhino International (savetherhino.org) is a highly respected global fund-raiser that supports many worthwhile initiatives.
- ☛ To help Kruger's rhinos, SanParks' honorary rangers (sanparksvolunteers.org) channel precious funds into anti-poaching.



WHERE TO SEE RHINOS

South Africa is one of the best places on the planet to watch rhinos up close. Despite the high level of poaching, **Kruger National Park** (sanparks.co.za) remains one of the best places to see wild rhinos. In KwaZulu-Natal, **Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park** (kznwildlife.com) is hard to beat, and nearby **Mkhuze** also offers great sightings from its hides in the dry season. **Pilanesberg** (parksnorthwest.co.za) near Sun City is reliable for close encounters with white rhinos and is easily accessible from Gauteng. Plenty of private reserves offer a more upmarket experience, including **Phinda** (andbeyondafrica.com) in Kwazulu-Natal, where both black and white rhinos are all but guaranteed. Tracking Namibia's desert rhino is an unforgettable experience, but try to add a few days in **Etosha** (nwr.com.na) – nocturnal sightings of black rhino at Okaukuejo and Halali rest camp waterholes are a highlight.