

Monitoring and protecting uMkhuze Game Reserve's black and white rhinos



Photo 1: The uMkhuze Game Reserve is part of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park; a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Credit: Save the Rhino International

The uMkhuze Game Reserve is part of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park; a UNESCO World Heritage Site in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It is renowned for an astonishing diversity of natural habitats, from the foothills of the Ubombo Mountains along its north western boundary, to broad stretches of acacia savannah, swamps, a variety of woodlands and riverine forests as well as a rare type of sand-forest. The mix of habitat supports over 420 species of bird, including Pel's fishing owl and the rare Rudd's apalis and many waterfowl as well as both black and white rhinos.

The uMkhuze Game Reserve is home to white rhinos, as well as one of two original South-central black rhino *Diceros bicornis minor* populations in KwaZulu-Natal. Their protection is an absolute priority as they have played a vital role in the re-establishment of important black rhino populations in Kruger National Park and in reserves in KwaZulu-Natal where rhinos had become locally extinct. Unfortunately, these populations have not escaped the rhino poaching crisis that has spread across Africa.

In the past decade, nearly 10,000 African rhinos have been lost to poaching. South Africa holds c. 80% of the world's rhinos and has been the country hit hardest by poachers, with more than 1,000 rhinos killed each year between 2013 and 2017. Despite the recent decline in poaching numbers, the decade-long poaching crisis has had a devastating impact on rhino populations. In Kruger National Park, rhinos have declined by a staggering 59% since 2013. According to a recent report by South Africa National Parks, 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.



Photo 2: South Africa is prime target for rhino poachers. Credit: Save the Rhino International

The most recent statistics show that Kwa-Zulu Natal, where uMkhuze Game Reserve is located, also continues to see significant poaching, even with a slight decline in recent years. With the ongoing threat of poaching in the Reserve, field rangers and Anti-Poaching Unit have been stepping up their monitoring and patrolling efforts in the area. This has included regular foot and vehicle patrols, as well as an aerial assisted surveillance. Data has also been collected to monitor the black and white rhino populations. From our work with state parks and reserves in the Province, we know that rangers are extremely hard-pressed. We can only imagine what could happen if they weren't on duty.



Photo 3: White rhinos at uMkhuze Game Reserve in South Africa. Credit: Steve and Ann Toon.



Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the state agency responsible for uMkhuze Game Reserve, covers basic operating expenses, but, as the poaching crisis deepens, the costs of conservation have spiralled and budget cuts have put rangers under pressure. Despite the outbreak of Covid-19, rangers have continued their essential work to protect wildlife across the park. However, the loss of tourism income has had a devastating impact on the resources of many parks and reserves across the region, making it harder than ever to purchase essential equipment and pay rangers' salary wages.



Photo 4: Rangers patrolling in Mkhuze Game Reserve. Credit: Dave Robertson.

Save the Rhino International and our partners and donors have been supporting rangers at uMkhuze Game Reserve to keep monitoring and protecting rhinos in the Reserve during this difficult time. This enables those operating under extremely difficult conditions to perform their duties effectively and with greater support.

uMkhuze's rangers have been involved in a number of armed contact incidents with poaching gangs and currently deal with around two incursions into the Reserve each day, sometimes up to four or five. The rangers are often away from their families for weeks at a time, moving from one patrol station to the next and carrying everything they need in their rucksacks, which can weigh approximately 20kg.

A lot of focus has been put on enhancing the staff morale. Recent funding from Save the Rhino International has been used to improve ranger camps by funding solar panel installations, water tanks, and power sockets for charging radios. uMkhuze's rangers dedicate their lives to the protection of the animals in the Reserve and it is important that we reward these efforts by making their work easier in any way that we can.



Photo 5: AFdPZ's donation will help boost anti-poaching efforts at uMkhuze Game Reserve. Credit: Save the Rhino International

There has also been emphasis on ensuring rangers are provided with adequate training to perform their duties. Despite the risks of coming face to face with dangerous poaching gangs, many field rangers were not able to deal with medical trauma in the field. In 2017, we funded first aid training for 40 field rangers, uMkhuze's rhino monitor and two cadets. Now, each individual has the skills and equipment to provide first aid confidently, which will not only help with minor injuries but could also save lives.

Supporting ranger training at uMkhuze Game Reserve

Now, thanks to the generous donation from the Association Française des Parcs Zoologiques (AFdPZ) and our other partners, rangers at uMkhuze Game Reserve will be supported even further through a dedicated ranger training programme. uMkhuze's Conservation Manager, Eduard Goosen, has started to implement an annual ranger training programme across the Reserve to ensure that rangers are well-trained in field skills, tactics, armed contacts, as well as first aid and other essential skills.

Rangers risk their lives every day to protect the world's rhino populations and their job is becoming increasingly challenging due to the ever-present threat of poaching. It has never been more important for the rangers to be properly trained and equipped to deal with these potentially dangerous and life-threatening situations. With these additional layers of support, uMkhuze's black and white rhinos will be much better protected against the ever-present threat of poaching.

In the last project period, the basic field ranger training course took place in February 2021, funded by Save the Rhino International's partner organisation US Fish & Wildlife Service. (Please note that AFdPZ's donation will be used to fund the upcoming training course later in 2021). This training course saw 14 field rangers receiving critical retraining over a period of 15 days. The course covered a range of topics aimed to improve rangers' skills and knowledge, motivation and enthusiasm, discipline and teamwork, overall morale, fieldcraft and leadership skills. Specific aspects of the training focused on a variety of theoretical and practical topics including: the role of the ranger, legal framework, physical training, ground drills, firearm handling, tactical patrols, night operations, as well as first aid.



Photo 6 & 7: Rangers were trained in a range of topics from field tactics to first aid. Credit: uMkhuze Game Reserve.

Training or capacitating field rangers is probably one of the most motivating factors to ensure that staff morale is maintained at a high level. Where field rangers are facing increasing levels of threats, receiving additional training that capacitates them to do their job more effectively is a critical requirement that does not receive enough recognition or resources. Field rangers want to know and believe that they are better equipped and trained than the poaching gangs they face in the field.

With AFdPZ's generous support, another basic field ranger training course is scheduled to take place later in the year, in addition to a patrol leaders' course. This will help increase rangers' skills and morale to keep protecting and monitoring uMkhuze's black and white rhinos.

"At the moment, our team deals with around two incursions into the Reserve each day, sometimes up to four or five. On patrol, rangers come across snares, people hunting with dogs, vulture poisoning, rhino poaching and illegal logging. Other parks like Kruger are much bigger than uMkhuze, but I think that we're all facing the same challenges. It's tough doing this work, so our main priority is ensuring we have enough capacity and resource to respond to every incident, so that wildlife and this habitat remain protected."

"I'm passionate about wildlife and I wanted to do something to help endangered species. Each day I get to do something to achieve this. I love seeing the population of endangered species increase, and know that if that species lives at uMkhuze, we're doing our part to help."

Lawrence Nkosikhona Nene, Section Ranger at uMkhuze Game Reserve, South Africa



Thank you, Association Française des Parcs Zoologiques!

On behalf of Eduard Goosen, Conservation Manager at uMkhuze Game Reserve, their team of



Photo 8: White rhino with a calf at uMkhuze Game Reserve. Credit: Steve and Ann Toon

Rangers, and everyone at Save the Rhino International, we would like to say a massive thank you to Association Française des Parcs Zoologiques for your incredibly generous donation towards this project. Your funds are vital to help towards building law-enforcement capacity and ranger morale to protect uMkhuze Game Reserve's black and white rhino populations. Thank you!

To find out more about Save the Rhino International (UK registered charity 1035072) and uMkhuze Game Reserve, please visit www.savetherhino.org.