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Black Rhino return to Samburu-Land

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In the shadow of Mount Kenya lie the hot lowlands of Samburu-land. This vast, beautiful region of rocky ridges, acacia grasslands and doum palm forest is the traditional homeland of the Samburu people, the rare Grevy's zebra and the Gerenuk antelope. For thousands of years, it was also home to the black rhino, until the last one was poached 25 years ago.

But as from May 2015, black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) have once again roamed the plains of Samburu.

Thanks to a relocation programme spearheaded by the Northern Rangelands Trust, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), 10 black rhino from the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Nakuru and Nairobi National Parks have been relocated to a 21,460-acre sanctuary within Samburu's Sera Community Conservancy, with a plan to move more rhino to the area later in the year. The rhino are now thriving in the habitat they once roamed in thousands.

The black rhino has inhabited the earth for five million years, yet today is a Critically Endangered species.

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, populations of the eastern black rhino dropped by 98 percent between 1960 and 1995, mainly as a result of poaching. Today, rhino horn fetches

approximately \$65,000–\$70,000 per kg, which is more than the price of gold on the black market. It is an ugly business; poaching is an international environmental crime that has links to international drug, arms, and human trafficking syndicates. Interpol has referred to it as, “one that can affect a nation’s economy, security and even its existence”.

Over the past two decades, however, inspiring conservation projects in Kenya have ensured that the country’s population of black rhino has risen from 381 in 1987 to approximately 640 today. Wildlife conservancies such as Lewa have been instrumental in establishing viable breeding populations; Lewa’s conservation efforts have been so successful that by 2013 the conservancy reached its maximum black rhino carrying capacity (when this happens, the birth rate drops off and an increased likelihood of fighting among the resident rhino population develops). To counteract this problem, Lewa moved 11 rhino to neighbouring Borana Conservancy in August 2013; 10 were also received from Nakuru National Park. This translocation meant that for the first time since the 1970s there were black rhino on Borana.

It is not only poaching that threatens black rhino, but lack of habitat. “Whilst Africa’s rhino population is under threat from poaching, ironically its ability to grow its population is restricted by the lack of habitat that is both suitable and safe. Finding new space is critical,” says Charlie Mayhew, Chief Executive of Tusk Trust, the conservation organisation which is one of a small consortium of funders financing the translocation to Samburu. “The Sera area is perfect rhino habitat,” says Geoffrey Chege, Chief Conservation Officer for the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. “It is large, which helps to diversify the gene pool, and remote, which helps in protecting the rhino as it is difficult for instigators of wildlife crimes to access the sanctuary.”

Importantly, this is also the first time in Kenya that a local indigenous community will be responsible for the protection and management of black rhino. Until now, rhino conservation, and other endangered species protection, has been the preserve of private wildlife conservancies and government-run national parks.

It is hoped that, in time, the rhino in Samburu will also bring tourism to the region. “This is the best way forward for our pastoralist community,” says Pauline Longojine, the Sera Conservancy chairlady. “To have wildlife and livestock side by side, we are so happy. We look forward to welcoming tourists to our Sanctuary – this will provide valuable income for the Conservancy, and for individuals. It will also raise awareness of the black rhino.” Alex Edwards, owner of travel company Natural High Safaris, adds, “Our clients increasingly understand that a safari not only provides a great holiday, but also an insight into the link between tourism, conservation and the local economy. Once they see conservation and tourism in action, it is likely to be something that cements their love affair with Africa.”

The Samburu rhino are guarded by the community’s Sera Rhino Sanctuary rangers, who have been trained in data-gathering, anti-poaching operations, bush craft and effective patrolling. “The Sera Rangers are based on the highly successful and effective armed ranger teams employed by the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Northern Rangelands Trust. They have controlled poaching far more effectively than in many parts of Africa,” says Charlie Mayhew. The rangers will also be supported by a mobile anti-poaching squad known as 9-1, which has been trained by an ex-British Army officer in conflict and combat management.

The translocation of the rhino to Samburu began the week HRH The Duke of Cambridge made an impassioned speech about the illegal wildlife trade, at an event to mark Tusk Trust’s 25th anniversary. “The plunder and destruction of Africa’s natural endowment remains one of the greatest challenges facing the

world," he said. "The time for words has long gone – we must see action."



MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including *Portrait of England* (Think Publishing, 2006) and *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.



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