

# Strengthening local-level collaboration and commitment for Rhino Conservation in Kunene

Summary report on Conservancy leadership workshops facilitated by the Conservancy Rhino Ranger Support Group

*Save the Rhino Trust (SRT)*

*Integrated Rural Development & Nature Conservation (IRDNC)*

*Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF)*



*Photo 1: A group of Conservancy leaders following awareness-raising field trips to experience firsthand the work and working conditions of their Rhino Rangers*

**October – November 2020**

August 2019 marked two major milestones for Namibia's Conservancy Rhino Ranger (CRR) Incentive Programme operating in the north-west Kunene Region. The programme surpassed a full 7 years of operations and also celebrated a full 2 years of zero poaching in the region alongside unprecedented levels of patrol effort and verified rhino sightings. While these achievements were certainly worthy of celebration, a series of focus group meetings subsequently held with present Conservancy leadership in late 2019 revealed some festering issues that urgently needed attention. While the programme was busy focusing on the provision of incentives that improve in the quality and quantity of ranger patrols, the engagement and empowerment of Conservancy leadership in the process had been somewhat left behind. This became exacerbated in some cases where new Conservancy committee members took office and did not receive any proper briefing about the programme. The result was a slow but steady dis-enfranchisement and departure from one of the programme's key goals – to shift the ownership and onus of rhino protection in Kunene from government/NGO-led to a truly community-led agenda. This would only be achieved if the Conservancy leadership felt ownership of both the rangers and the decision-making process within which they operate including related income-generating opportunities such as the widely popular rhino viewing tourism.

Thus our efforts in 2020 were to address, first and foremost, that communication between the ranger rhino monitoring operation (largely led by the CRR Support Group staff) and the Conservancy leadership needed to be much more regular and routine. Specifically, it should be conducted on a level which promotes inclusivity and teamwork while reducing confusion and mis-understandings. A new terms of reference was developed and both IRDNC and NNF allocated some additional facilitator staff time towards this objective. Chief Lucky Kasaona (IRDNC) was named to lead this work in the northern Conservancies with Boas Hambo (SRT) and Clemens Naomab (NNF) would assume the role in the south with support from Martin Nawaseb (SRT). While the COVID-19 measures implemented between March – August this year restricted our initial ability to address the issue directly, we managed to successfully facilitate a series of exposure trips and workshops with the current Conservancy leadership across the region to begin rectifying the issue. These workshops were organized and facilitated by the newly established CRR Conservancy Liaison Managers – whose role was defined specifically to ensure the communication between the CRR Support Group and the participating Conservancies was improved and maintained at an effective level. We had four main objectives for the engagement workshops which focused on the overall goal of strengthening Conservancy ownership and support for their Rhino Ranger programme:

1. Ensure current Conservancy leadership understood the importance, origin, structure and logistical requirements of the programme;
2. Clarify and formalize Conservancy expectations for their Rangers and the Support Group;
3. Establish a platform for full inclusion of Conservancy leadership in problem solving and decision-making and a simple procedure for pledging annual commitments;
4. Review and agree on emerging Rhino Tourism guidelines

We began each workshop with an overview of the importance of rhino monitoring and how the programme was established by Conservancy demands to be more directly engaged and empowered in rhino protection. We then explained in great detail how the programme's structure evolved and what logistical requirements are needed to ensure the programme runs smoothly on the ground while achieving impact (see Photo 2). The northern Conservancies particularly expressed a large gap in understanding how the programme actually operates on the ground and were keen to experience the conditions their rangers faced while on patrol. Thus, as a precursor to the workshops, we facilitated a 5-day exposure



*Photo 3: Clemens Naomab (NNF) presents the CRR structure to Conservancy leadership*

trip in October which included over 50 individuals from 5 northern Conservancies as well Traditional Authorities from the area. A number of ranger camps were visited by the group where they were able to meet with the ranger team on duty and see them in action on a patrol. Following each patrol



*Photo 2: A Conservancy Rhino Ranger demonstrates to their Conservancy leadership how to approach a rhino safely on foot - simulating a rhino tourism experience*

experience, where the rangers eagerly demonstrated their intimate knowledge of the area, tracking skills (see Photo 3), and ability to endure the tough terrain and working conditions, Chief Lucky Kasaona (IRDNC) with support from Boas Hambo (SRT) and Jeff Muntifering (SRT) led a campfire Q & A discussion. This open arena provided a unique opportunity for the Conservancy leaders to ask deeper questions to both their rangers and support group staff to learn more about the programme. The southern Conservancies were more aware of the programme and thus were happy to just meet with the CRR Support Group leadership

at their respective offices for some additional background information. These meetings were also held in October, facilitated by Clemens Naob (NNF) with support from Martin Nawaseb (SRT), Andrew Malherbe (SRT) and Jeff Muntifering (SRT). Overall, over 110 Conservancy leaders and Traditional Authorities attended at least one of the workshops including roughly 25% female representation.

Following the awareness-raising activities, the discussion shifted towards clarifying and formalizing Conservancy expectations for the Rangers and the Support Group. In practice, following lengthy discussions with the group, this objective was met by the co-creation of a new Conservancy Rhino Ranger job description template for each Conservancy. These new job description templates would be used by Conservancy Managers to create associated contracts for each ranger strengthening the cooperation and clarifying expectations between Conservancy management and their rangers. It should also help clarify that the Rangers are appointed by and accountable to their respective Conservancy.

In addition to clarifying the Ranger's role and relationship to the various partners within the programme, it was also important to review and renew the previously designed and signed 'Agreement Letters' between the consortium of support NGOs (namely SRT, IRDNC and NNF – referred to as the Communal Rhino Custodian Support Group – or CRR Support Group for short), and the Conservancy partners. Here, the discussion focused heavily upon building a terms of reference for a new Conservancy Rhino Ranger Steering Committee (CRRSC). It was agreed that each Conservancy would appoint two representatives (either Committee or Staff) to serve on the committee for a 1 year period during which time the CRRSC would be tasked with:

- a) Receiving feedback from the CRCSG for the previous year including successes and challenges
- b) Reviewing and renewing the Agreement Letters between each Conservancy and CRR Support Group
- c) Developing an annual budget
- d) Discussing and proposing cost-sharing pledges towards the budget
- e) Co-developing an annual work plan including key targets for the year



*Photo 4: Chief Lucky Kasaona (IRDNC) facilitates a discussion with northern Conservancy leaders on Rhino Tourism*

The introduction of this Conservancy-led steering committee to the programme appeared to be a major development whereby the attitude and willingness to support the programme took a major swing

towards local ownership and interest. Time will tell if this shift leads to greater level of contribution and support from Conservancies towards the programme. Yet, the preliminary indications are positive. A Conservancy recognition scheme was also suggested that would acknowledge and reward various levels of contributions by Conservancies towards the programme and used as both an incentive and a benchmark to promote increased local stewardship of the programme.

Lastly, on request from MEFT, we took time to carefully review a draft Rhino Tourism Policy Guidelines on Communal Lands produced by the CRR Support Group (see above Photo 4). These guidelines are critical as the frequency of un-regulated and un-coordinated rhino tourism activities in the region continue to increase threatening both rhino security and tourism sustainability while marginalizing the Conservancy's ability to generate income from such tourism activities. The guidelines were grounded upon 15 years of lessons learned from operating responsible rhino tourism in the region and sought to strengthen the 'Rhino Custodian' rights to manage and benefit from any rhino tourism conducted on their lands. There was unanimous agreement from all Conservancies for the guidelines with the hope that they shall either be included in the emerging Communal Rhino Custodian contracts with MEFT or even integrated within the nearly finalized National Wildlife Bill.

On the final workshop day gathered under a corrugated steel roof in sweltering 45 deg C shade at a ranger fly camp deep in the Puros Conservancy, three final statements were posed by Chief Luck Kasaona. Each participant, with eyes closed, was asked to respond by raising their hand if they AGREED with the statement.

1. I have a much better understanding of how our Rhino Ranger programme functions.
2. I respect the hard work and dedication of our rangers and appreciate the difficult conditions they work under.
3. I will do what I can to support increasing our Conservancy's contributions towards our Rhino Ranger Programme.

Every hand was raised.



*Photo 5: Final group photo after visiting one of the ranger fly camps in Puros Conservancy*