



Phase 1: UWEC

On December 8, 2001, the then Minister of State for Tourism, Jovino Akaki, officially welcomed rhinos back to Uganda at the Uganda Wildlife Education Centre, formerly known as Entebbe Zoo. The two sub-adult Southern White rhinos - a male Sherino and a female Kabira - were imported into the country from the Solio Game Reserve in central Kenya. After mandatory one month quarantine, they were released for public viewing.

The importation of the rhinos was said to be necessary and timely in order to build community awareness about the plight of the

species and gain credibility for Uganda within the international rhino conservation community. In Uganda, rhinos were of significant cultural and emotional value. Rhinos are seen as a tribal symbol in Lango and were held in such high esteem that they would never be killed by locals, giving them a higher chance of not being poached while in Lango district.

BRINGING RHINOS BACK TO UGANDA

Uganda was once the home to thousands of rhinos but, by the 1960s, the numbers were down to around only 400 Eastern Black rhinos (*Diceros biconis michaeli*) mostly in Kidepo Valley National Park and Murchison Falls National Park and 300 Northern White rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) mainly in Murchison Falls NP. During years of civil unrest in the 1970s and early 1980s, the remaining rhinos were poached to extinction with the Northern White rhino last seen in 1982 in Murchison Falls NP, while the last Black rhino was last seen in Kidepo Valley NP in 1983.

In the latter part of the 1990s, with the return of peace and governance, the Government of Uganda (GoU) through its Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry (MTTI), the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and Rhino Fund Uganda (RFU) started a programme to reintroduce rhinos.

The objective of the programme was to reintroduce and re-establish the Black and White indigenous rhino species into Uganda. A three phase approach was to be used to achieve this objective:

Top: **Rhino male Sherino in UWEC**

Right: **Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary**

Pictures by: **Felix Patton**

MTTI, the government ministry in charge of wildlife in Uganda, is responsible for policy guidance and direction. UWA, the lead government agency, is responsible for wildlife policy implementation, overall management of wildlife resources, global/regional/local coordination on conservation issues and soliciting support towards conservation. Rhino Fund Uganda (RFU), an NGO established in 1997 with the mandate of rhino reintroduction in Uganda, aims to undertake acquisition of rhino breeding stock, develop in-situ and ex-situ breeding programmes, undertake fund raising and awareness creation and develop human resources and tourism activities.

Phase 2: ZIWA

The second phase was to start a breeding programme. Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary, located in Nakasongola, 138km away from Kampala, was started by Rhino Fund Uganda, which was given a lease of 30 years on 70 km² of land by Captain Joe Roy of Ziwa Ranchers.

It took the sanctuary until 2002 to be operational, as there was need to erect a 40 km long, two metre high 14-strand electric fence around the land. An airstrip and rhino bomas were built and rhino monitoring rangers trained. The US Fish and Wildlife Service gave one of its 2004 grants to Rhino Fund Uganda for the 'Establishment of a Rhino Sanctuary for the Breeding of White and Black Rhinoceros' to develop the infrastructure and security team needed to reintroduce rhinoceros to Uganda. The project included equipping and training 28 UWA rangers. Rhino Fund Uganda also leveraged funds worth \$239,000 in addition to the \$47,458 grant.



The first four Southern white rhinos arrived at the sanctuary on July 20, 2005 from Solio Ranch in Kenya some 920km away. They were held in quarantine until September when they were released into the sanctuary proper. They were named Taleo, Moja, Bella, and Kori.

Taleo is the dominant male spending some time with the other rhinos but also a lot of time roaming the sanctuary on his own and marking his territory. Moja is the second in command male and is dominant when Taleo is not with the other rhinos. Sometimes Moja and Taleo fight for dominance, but Taleo remains the dominant rhino at the sanctuary.

Bella was the first female to become pregnant. She had a still born calf on March 13, 2008 but became pregnant again and gave

birth to a bull calf, to be called Augustus, in October 2009. Kori is currently being courted by Moja and Taleo.

In August 2006 two more Southern White rhinos, Hassani and Nandi, a brother and sister, arrived from the USA as a donation from Disney's Animal Kingdom. Hassani is a juvenile male and spends time grazing with the females. Ten year-old Nandi had her first calf on June 25, 2009, 16 months after mating with Taleo. This was the first birth of a rhino in Uganda in the last 28 years. Being a male calf with a Kenyan father and US mother it was named Obama! These are the only wild rhinos in Uganda today.

The rhinos roam freely in the 70 km² of dry combretum savannah, laced with swamps and the cactus-like *Euphorbia candelabrum* trees. It has been estimated that this habitat

could accommodate a maximum of 39 White and 9 Black rhinos. Each rhino is guarded 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. Every hour the rangers make a report to HQ. These are probably the most secure and closely monitored rhinos in Africa.

More rhinos are needed to be introduced into Ziwa to create a stable founder breeding population. In November this year a further six Southern White rhinos are expected from South Africa with another six following in 2010. These are a donation from Sun Park.

A loan of four Eastern Black rhinos from Kenya was also expected by the end of this year while the South African government has offered two Black rhinos to help Uganda create its breeding population. However, the suitability of introducing such a small number has recently been questioned. The guidelines of the African Rhino Specialist Group on starting new breeding populations recommends a founder population of some 20 individuals and in an area that can accommodate at least twice that number to enable rapid breeding development. Ziwa does not have the habitat for this number of Black rhinos so, to satisfy this guidance, a new sanctuary would have to be established.

Phase: 3 THE FUTURE

The third phase of the rhino re-introduction programme envisages building up the phase 2 breeding populations to a level where excess rhinos can be moved back to areas where they once existed most notably the National Parks of Murchison Falls and Kidepo Valley. Clearly this is a long way off and Uganda firstly must show the conservation community that it can contain poaching and successfully manage rhinos over a significant period of time.

The objective of the programme was to reintroduce and re-establish the Black and White indigenous rhino species into Uganda



In the long term, and assuming the success of its other rhino programmes, Uganda currently offers the all-but-extinct Northern White rhino the safest haven in its former range states. The Ajai Wildlife Reserve, a stronghold of the Northern White in former times, in the Arua district of North West Uganda would probably be the best location for a wild population in a secure fenced area if this could be achieved. Recently the UWA appointed a private company, Uganda Wildlife Safaris Limited, to manage the Reserve. The company plan to improve the infrastructure and relocate a number of species into the 16,600 hectare reserve including waterbuck, hartebeest, buffalo and zebra. Some of the anticipated activities to bolster income from tourism include boat

Felix Patton is a rhino ecologist writing and broadcasting about the species from Africa and Europe

racing, sport fishing and sport hunting. The company state that they plan to re-introduce rhinos after fencing off the two major roads that run through the Reserve and opening up trails, but this could only be sanctioned when security issues have been adequately dealt with and shown to be sustainable.

Uganda is a member of the newly convened East African Community Rhino Management Group which has a shared regional strategy to achieve the following overall goals:

- A well distributed, growing Eastern Black rhino population, aiming at establishing 3000 animals collaboratively within 30 years.
- Support all efforts to re-establish and recover the Northern White

rhino within its former Eastern African range states.

- Cooperatively manage Southern White rhino within the region as a species for community conservation, education and tourism and as a possible surrogate for the near extinct northern subspecies.

Ultimately the most important thing is to spread the risk for the endangered rhinos and secure adequate and safe rhino habitat for future generations. While Kenya has the largest rhino population in East Africa with Tanzania following, Uganda has now taken the first steps to bringing the rhino back to its former home and can offer added hope for the future of this magnificent animal. ●

UGANDA WHITE RHINO HISTORY

In 1924 an article appeared in the Bulletin of the Zoological Society of New York that drew attention to the danger of extinction of the Northern White Rhino, going the same way as had the Southern White Rhino (only between 20 and 50 individuals left in the wild worldwide at the turn of the century). Action was immediately taken in Uganda to preserve the country's population. A census was carried out which revealed some 150+ individuals mainly in the area along the left bank of the Albert Nile especially near swamps and marshy areas. However poaching using spiked foot traps and rope nooses was heavy in West Nile district and the population fell to 130 by 1926.

To assist in protecting the White rhinos, sanctuaries were designated in 1938. These included the 170 mile² Mt. Kei Forest Reserve with 12 individuals, the 80 mile² Mt. Otze Forest Reserve from where individuals moved into Sudan and the 20 mile² Aiya River Sanctuary. Organised hunting was permitted in the dry season which changed the behaviour of the rhinos from placid/fearless to timid/suspicious. Nevertheless by 1939 the population had increased to 220 in West Nile and West Madi areas.

By 1948 numbers had dropped to 190, 125 in West Madi and 65 in West Nile where the rhinos had finally left the vicinity of Rhino Camp (made famous as the headquarters of Theodore Roosevelt when collecting *Ceratotherium* material on behalf of the Smithsonian African Expedition) due to the invasion of their habitat by increasing native settlement. By 1951 the total White Rhinoceros population of the West Nile District was estimated to have risen to 300 or so animals and, in 1955, to be some 350 animals with the main concentration in the area of Palorinya, Itula, Lumunga and Kali.

In 1956 the price paid for rhino horn was at an all time high and poaching was severe. In 1958 Heppes estimated that 335 White rhinoceros survived in the Aringa and West Madi counties of the West Nile District.

The Uganda Game Department and the National Parks began considering the introduction of White rhino into the Murchison Falls National Park. This raised another question—should the White rhino be introduced to the section of the Park north of the Victoria Nile, into the area already inhabited by the so-called Black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*)?

Arrangements were made for the Kenya big game trappers Randall and O'Connell to catch and transport twenty White rhino in December-March, 1961, the dry season. In March, ten White rhino were released in the Park. Two adult cows died, probably from the after-effects of bruising during capture. One had a two-year-old female calf which was captured and reared at Paraa (the headquarters of the Park). It was hoped to capture a further ten animals for release in the same area but it was not until 1964 that another five were moved in from Lomunga Game Reserve.



In the period 1962-63 there were probably no more than 80 White rhino individuals remaining in a strip of terrain some 70 miles long by 20 to 30 miles wide restricted to the Madi, West Madi, and Aringa counties of the West Nile District. About 25-30 animals inhabited Aringa and West Madi counties and not more than 50 inhabited Madi county. They were centred roughly upon Inde and the swampy land along the west bank of the Nile. The 158 km² Ajai Game Reserve was established with funding from the East African Wildlife Society and World Wildlife Fund to, primarily, give protection to those rhinos in the Inde area.

Year Estimated Total Uganda White Rhinoceros Population

1928	130 animals
1939	220
1948	190
1951	300 +
1955	350
1958	335
1962	80



A Katwe crater

In 1967 there were 60 Whites in Ajai GR and 18 in Murchison Falls NP but the latter bred well so by 1974 there were 30. However by 1975 only 6 rhinos survived in the Ajai GR and 13 in the north west sector of Murchison Falls NP. The 1979 Liberation War saw the virtual extermination of White rhino in Uganda. The northern White rhino was last seen in 1982 in Murchison Falls NP.

UGANDA BLACK RHINO HISTORY

While at one time Black rhinos were probably distributed throughout all suitable habitats in Uganda, by 1925 they were only found widely through the Karamoja district and parts of Chua and in south Lango with fewer in Gulu. They were plentiful south of the River Kagera but there were none to the north.

In 1929 Black rhinos were reported to be found all along the right bank of the Victoria Nile from near Kandini to Koba and along a strip of broken bush from near Murchison Falls to Tengri (10-12 miles inland from the Albert Nile) north to the left bank of Aswa.

By way of protecting the remaining population in 1934, a Special Licence was required to hunt Black rhinos and these were strictly limited and carefully controlled. By 1937 Black rhino could be found in Liri, near Zaipi, Gwere, Lango and there were many in East Acholi.

In 1950 there were thought to be between 120 and 160 Black rhinos in an area with boundaries to the south - the Victoria Nile, to the west - the Albert Nile, to the north - the Ajumani-Zaipi road and to the east - the Kamdini-Amma-Athak road. In Chua and Lamwo the rhinos were constantly harried and hunted by Sudanese.

The need to control the tsetse fly to prevent sleeping sickness led to the killing of 22 Black rhinos in Lango district in 1956.

By 1959 Black rhinos could only be found scattered in two's and three's mostly in the Lango district with a few in East Madi but over 100 in Karamoja mostly in the north western 486 mile² Kidepo Game Reserve which was declared a National Park in 1964. The species was well represented in the northern part of Murchison Falls NP. A country total of around 300 animals was estimated in 1962.

Ten years later, following civil war, insecurity and armed poaching, Black rhinos were only to be found in Kidepo National Park (around 50 in 1971, reduced to 16 by 1978) and Murchison Falls NP with other former areas lost to cultivation. The last Black rhino seen in Uganda was in the Narus Valley of Kidepo in May 1983.