

NewsFlash Rhinos for Serengeti

The Grumeti Fund is involved in an ambitious rhino relocation initiative, aiming to reintroduce the black rhino sub-species into this region.

The Grumeti Community and Wildlife Conservation Fund, under the leadership of conservationist Brian Harris, is involved in an ambitious rhino relocation initiative.

The black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*) sub-species that live in the area were in danger of becoming extinct through poaching and various other factors. In the 1960s, there were 1 200 of these mammals in the Serengeti ecosystem, but poaching reduced this number to 42.

Today, however, the number has increased to 84. Singita Grumeti Reserves has managed to acquire 34 rhinos from South Africa and will, in a joint effort with TANAPA (Tanzania National Parks) and The Frankfurt Zoological Society, be translocating them to the Serengeti in the next few years. This is the biggest single relocation of black rhino in history. This exciting initiative could not have been carried out if it were not for Singita Grumeti Reserves, which provided all the finance to acquire, transport and maintain a safe environment for the rhinos.

In order to ensure the success of the rhino relocation project, a number of important milestones had to be reached in the early stages. The first requirement was to tackle the poaching scourge, addressed over the past five years by the formation of a formidable anti-poaching unit, set up by the Grumeti Fund. The Grumeti Fund also focused on job creation for local community members at our lodges and the need to hunt for a living has been replaced by more sustainable alternatives.

NewsFlash

Rhinos for Serengeti

The next challenge was to garner support from the regional and national government, made possible once the politicians understood the greater vision for the Singita Grumeti Reserves region.

The third major task was to set up an extensive wildlife monitoring programme and the dedicated team at Singita Grumeti Reserves has been instrumental in setting up the necessary measures. Success in this area is evident in the census figures that reveal great increases in the number of wildlife species in the area. For example, in 2003 there were 605 buffalo in the area, which escalated to 3 124 in 2007; the Thomson's gazelle population has mushroomed from 3 480 to 12 162; and eland have increased in number from 254 to 1 211 for the same period.

With all three major objectives having been achieved over the past three years, Singita Grumeti Reserves is now in a position to fulfil the dream of the proposed rhino relocation - a significant programme, as the livelihood of the local communities is closely linked to the success of conservation in the region.

NewsFlash

Rhinos for Serengeti

Serengeti Rhino Relocation Team

07 May 2010, 11:49 | Laura Hartstone



Emile has been working with rhino for over a decade. Originally from South Africa, Emile brings a wealth of knowledge specifically pertaining to rhino populations.

He has worked with rhino in the Karoo National Park, Marakele National Park, iMfolozi Game Reserve and now Serengeti National Park.

He aided in a relocation effort in iMfolozi Game Reserve where he was stationed as a Section Ranger. iMfolozi has one of the highest densities of rhino in the world and made for an exceptional place to learn about rhino behavior and protection strategies.

Emile has worked with intensive boma management and monitoring of black rhino as well and has been a monumental leader in the current efforts to bring these rhino to the Serengeti.

NewsFlash

Rhinos for Serengeti

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Alastair currently works as a Programme Manager for FZS to oversee several of the projects in the field, one of which is the Serengeti Rhino Repatriation Project. His duties include managing FZS's projects in Zambia, Ngorongoro Crater and the Kenya Mara project as well.

Alastair has been working in the field of conservation across Africa for over thirteen years. His work has brought him to work across Africa beginning in his homeland of South Africa and working all the way up to areas in Ethiopia.

In South Africa's Mkuzi Game Reserve Alastair helped implement a black rhino monitoring program and assessed population trends among the reserve. His focus was on resource protection which he continues to encourage today in the Serengeti National Park through the Rhino Repatriation Project.

NewsFlash

Rhinos for Serengeti

Serengeti Rhino Relocation Team

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Shayo has been heavily involved in the lead of the project since it commenced in February 2009. He has been at the forefront of the trainings for the wardens and rangers that will be responsible for the protection of the rhino. Shayo also aided in the construction of the bomas and decisions surrounding where to situate them by composing a Habitat Suitability Assessment Survey.

Recently Shayo has been aiding in the preparation of the Seronera airstrip to upgrade the field so it is ready for the arrival of the aircraft transporting the rhino.

Shayo's studies include a diploma in Wildlife Management from the College of African Wildlife Management - MWEKA and he is continuing his training in South Africa to gain more knowledge of rhino monitoring and the use of telemetry in tracking rhino.

NewsFlash

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In preparation for the arrival of the rhino, 149 rangers working within the Serengeti Ecosystem have participated in a variety of training sessions. They have learned everything from basic field skills to engaging in live ammunition activities. They are expected to be the best trained in Africa and maintain a level of standards accordingly.

Each ranger was required to attend a six-week training session to acquire skills in firearm handling, rhino behavioral studies, map and compass orienteering sessions, adaptive patrol techniques and leadership skills.

An elite team was selected to become the Serengeti Rhino Protection Unit (SRPU), a specialized group of men able to take on strenuous field conditions and undergo advanced training. They continued on for an additional seven weeks to learn tactical firearm handling and movement, helicopter fast-rope training, how to approach a night ambush and extended foot patrols. The training will be ongoing and their efforts in the field will be vital to the survival of the rhino.

NewsFlash

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Martin has been leading the training sessions for the rangers and wardens alike. As an instructor for African Field Ranger Training Services, Martin was brought to Tanzania in 2009 to increase the intensity and direction of ranger training to prepare for the arrival of the rhinos.

Martin is a previous member of the South African National Defense Force providing him the ability to impart dedication and discipline among the rangers in the Serengeti. His experience has brought him to Mozambique, Angola, Swaziland, Tanzania and his home of South Africa as a chief instructor. He is well respected and has played an imperative role for the days ahead.

NewsFlash

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Dr. Peter Morkel, a wildlife vet with rhino experience, will work on the rhino monitoring and capture team. He has extensive experience relocating rhino and will accompany the rhino every step of the way.

He has been working full time as a wildlife veterinarian since 1986, specifically focusing his efforts on black rhino.

He is currently a member of the African Rhino Specialist Group of the IUCN SSC and will play an imperative role in the success of the health of the rhino from the capture in South Africa to their release in Serengeti.