

{FIELDNOTES}
FROM GOAT HERDER TO RHINO RANGER
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This photo was taken by a
rhino ranger in Namibia.

Africa's majestic rhinos are under siege from poachers that are currently killing more than two rhinos per day to feed the black market demand for rhino horn.

Namibia, in southwestern Africa, is the remaining stronghold for Africa's critically endangered black rhinos.

Since 2009, I have worked as a Minnesota Zoo conservation biologist to help protect and expand the black rhino population.

Under the Namibian government's innovative Rhino Custodianship Program, rhinos are being returned to communal lands. When locals become stewards, the rhinos benefit from protection and the communities benefit from wildlife tourism. To further engage local communities and increase protection efforts, we have trained 18 "rhino rangers" in advanced rhino monitoring skills. The background of the rangers is varied; most are only familiar tracking small livestock such as goats and sheep. The transition to monitoring a massive, potentially dangerous wild animal can be shocking! The work is both physically demanding and psychologically challenging.

Daytime highs in Namibia can easily reach 125 degrees Fahrenheit, and one steamy afternoon we were hot on a trail in more ways than one. Our trainee rhino rangers

had little trouble maneuvering through the basketball-sized stones up and down the broken basalt landscape while carefully tracking a rhino's fresh path. Within an hour, a gray mass was spotted 200 yards in the distance. Now this is where the fun comes in!

I crept closer and closer and began to quietly instruct the rangers about our main tasks upon seeing a rhino: we would record the exact location, assess the general health of the animal, and get a clear photograph for our records to help identify individuals. I patiently walked through each step of the monitoring, turned around to see if there were any questions, and realized I was talking to myself! The trainees had completely vanished, nowhere in sight!

I backtracked to find our newbies hunkered down in a small ditch, looking up at me sheepishly and frightened while shaking their heads back and forth muttering to themselves. After coaching and convincing, I finally got them to slowly approach the rhino with me. We always take special care to first monitor wind conditions in order to decide the best approach angle so the rhino remains unaware. By the end of the week they were snapping their own breathtaking photos—it is precisely this level of local enthusiasm and pride we hope to promote for all rhino custodians. Fighting the war on poaching by bolstering local community support for rhinos is our weapon of choice.