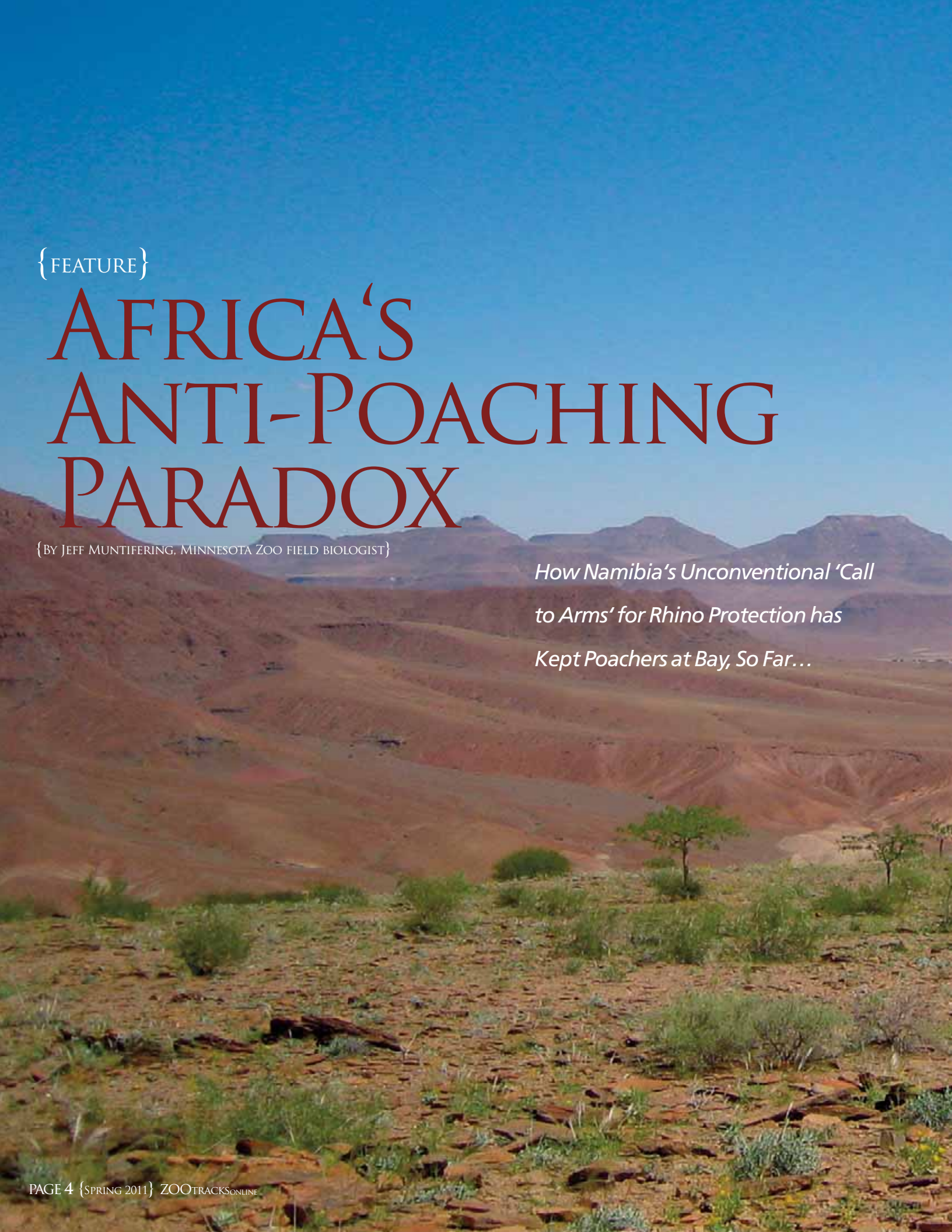




{FEATURE}

AFRICA'S ANTI-POACHING PARADOX

{BY JEFF MUNTIFERING, MINNESOTA ZOO FIELD BIOLOGIST}

*How Namibia's Unconventional 'Call
to Arms' for Rhino Protection has
Kept Poachers at Bay, So Far...*

In 2010, poaching of threatened and endangered rhinos in Africa skyrocketed. Nearly one rhino per day was poached in South Africa—more than double what experts predicted as the worst-case scenario. With sophisticated criminal gangs threatening to derail years of conservation efforts for rhinos, what is the solution to the poaching epidemic? Fences, fines, and jail time? Or is there a better way forward by working with local communities?

Just to the north of South Africa, in Namibia, the Minnesota Zoo is working with partner organizations, the Namibian government, and local communities to protect the largest remaining free-ranging population of critically-endangered desert black rhinos. Using a somewhat unconventional approach to rhino protection that originated during desperate times, we are working with these groups to keep poachers at bay.

A local community member conducts a routine patrol to monitor the community's natural resources. By giving local communities governance and benefit rights to natural resources, Namibia has promoted a grassroots movement to care for the environment and protect against poaching in the northwestern Kunene region.

By the mid 1980s, fewer than 50 black rhinos were thought to be clinging to existence in the last few wild refuges.

CIRCA 1982

Rampant rhino poaching occurring at an unprecedented rate was sweeping across Africa fueled by the illegal trade of rhino horn used mainly in traditional Chinese medicine. Between 1970 and 1992, poaching claimed over 95% of Africa's rhino population, one of the most catastrophic declines ever documented for any species.

In many African countries, the anti-poaching efforts of the 1970-80s resembled all-out warfare. Shoot-outs were common and lives were lost on both sides as heavily armed anti-poaching teams were dispatched to hunt down elusive poachers. Many of the culprits were local people, tempted by lucrative bribes that equaled or exceeded a lifetime's earnings. The incentive to poach was made worse by the simple fact that local people had no rights to benefit from or manage the wildlife on their lands, and thus had no real reason to care for it.

Even the remote Kunene region of northwestern Namibia, one of the least densely populated regions on earth, was not spared. By the mid 1980s, fewer than 50 black rhinos were thought to be clinging to existence in the last few wild refuges. It appeared a lost cause.

But to a few innovative souls it was a call to arms. They placed their hope in the idea that if local people viewed rhinos to be more valuable alive than dead, the incentive to poach would diminish. This approach united government, local conservation organizations, and the local traditional authorities to combine strict, yet non-lethal, law enforcement with a local 'game guard' patrolling system that was governed and carried out by some of the communities' most respected, elite individuals.

In 1982, Rudi and Blythe Loutit created a field-based organization called Save the Rhino Trust that assumed rhino monitoring responsibilities and employed local expert trackers, including many ex-poachers, to undertake the arduous but vital anti-poaching task. Their tireless work led to numerous convictions and key local people began to see the benefits of keeping rhinos alive. This emergent value placed on rhinos by local communities was further enhanced in the mid-nineties as tourism began to increase in the region. A few tour groups began to pay local communities to see rhinos on their lands and soon an entirely novel anti-poaching ethic was forged.

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The statistics speak for themselves. Since 2005 a total of 38 black rhinos have been translocated into thirteen communal conservancies in the northwest Kunene region...

THE CARROT VERSUS THE STICK

Going directly against Africa's more popular and traditional 'fences and fines' approach to wildlife protection, an innovative 'Rhino Custodianship Programme' spearheaded by Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism in 2005 promoted further incentives to keep rhinos alive and poachers at bay on formally unprotected lands. The idea is based upon the "user as best manager" principle and enables communal land residents to regain governance and utilization rights over resources within their lands. Although all of Namibia's rhinos remain state-owned, the devolution of benefit sharing provides local communities with the freedom to enter into contractual agreements with private tourism enterprises.

The initiative has sparked an unrivaled demand for black rhino recovery across historical rhino rangelands in the Kunene, driven mainly by Namibia's unprecedented nature-based tourism boom and the region's unique draw that its vast, timeless desert and wildlife, particularly its black rhino and elephant, inspire. Furthermore, word-of-mouth quickly circulated news about the incredible success of two new tourism camps that offered rhino viewing safaris with trained rhino trackers employing over 50 local community members.

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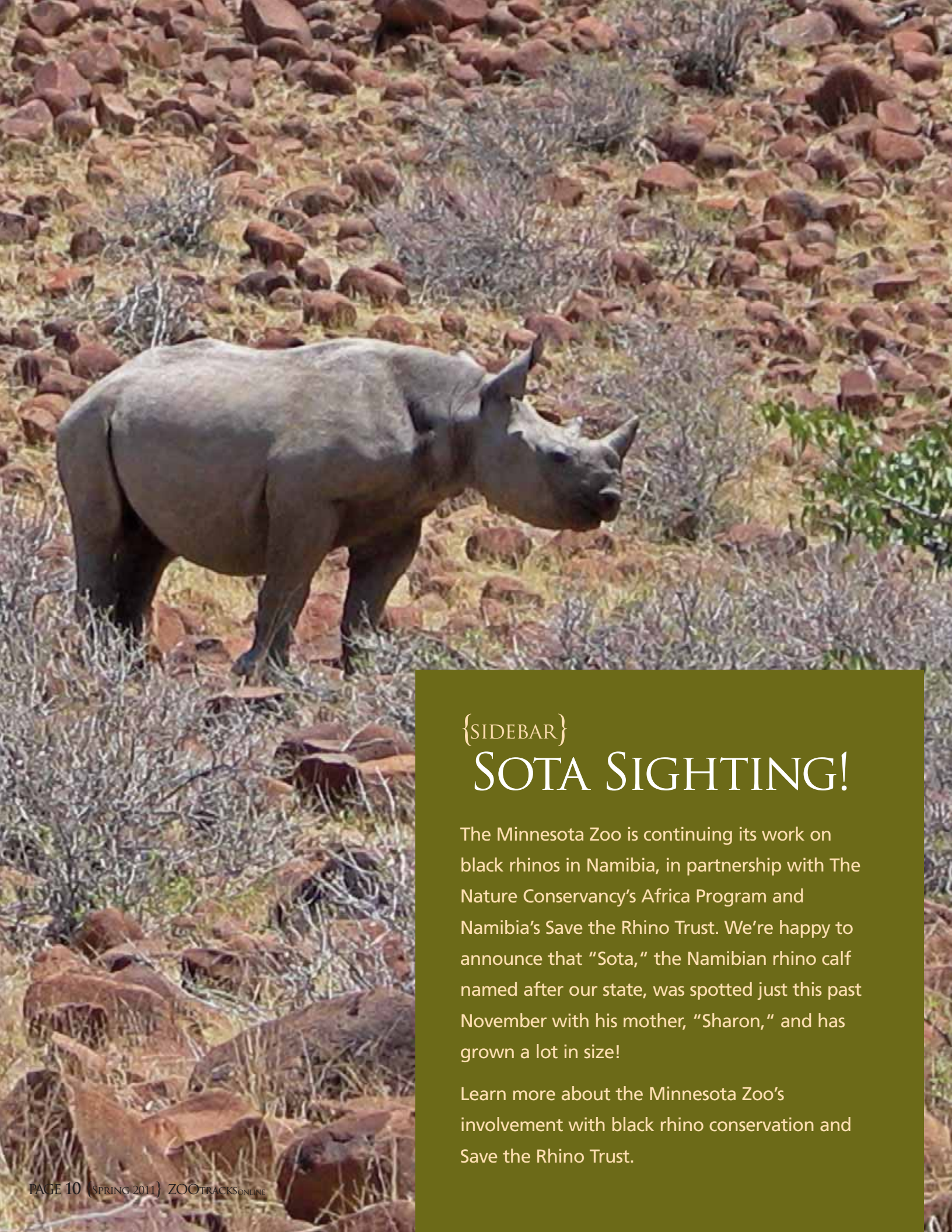
northwest Kunene region, each entering into custodianship agreements with the government. These efforts have so far increased the rhinos' range by roughly 20 percent, making significant contributions to our goal of re-establishing a connected network of black rhino populations that can support local, regional and national-level economies as an alternative, lucrative land use strategy. The last confirmed rhino poaching case in the region was 1994. The Kunene region now supports the largest truly wild population of rhinos on the planet. Moreover, the conscious land use trade-offs that communities are now willing to make, setting aside valuable livestock grazing pasture for rhino wilderness, is helping secure functional landscapes that support many other aspects of the region's native biodiversity.

However, with successes come new challenges. The sustainability of the larger vision for securing a future for Namibia's wild black rhino population in Kunene is severely threatened by the recent upsurge in poaching in neighboring South Africa and Zimbabwe. The Minnesota Zoo and The Nature Conservancy's Africa program are working closely with Save the Rhino Trust, the Namibian government, and others to design and implement a new strategy that will meet the increasing demand for rhino protection due to an increasing range and increasing threat.



Namibia's rather unconventional anti-poaching strategy holds that the rhino's future lies not behind an armed military guard with an AK47 but in the hands of the local communities that truly value rhinos and choose to invest in their future as an improvement to their well being. Namibia's Honorable Minister Nandi-Ndaitwah recently summed up the situation with a warning to would-be poachers: "Our communities have also become our policemen. Poach a rhino in Namibia and the blood of the people will be on your hands. You will not be poaching a state rhino, but you will be stealing from our people, depriving whole communities of a livelihood."

Learn more about the Minnesota Zoo's conservation work in Namibia.



{SIDEBAR}

SOTA SIGHTING!

The Minnesota Zoo is continuing its work on black rhinos in Namibia, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy's Africa Program and Namibia's Save the Rhino Trust. We're happy to announce that "Sota," the Namibian rhino calf named after our state, was spotted just this past November with his mother, "Sharon," and has grown a lot in size!

Learn more about the Minnesota Zoo's involvement with black rhino conservation and Save the Rhino Trust.