



{FIELDNOTES}
UPDATE FROM NAMIBIA
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In July 2010, Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism spearheaded the first ever rhino airlifting re-introduction in the country. The initiative was nothing short of epic: it involved two helicopters, two fixed-wing airplanes, between 4-6 Toyota Land Cruisers, six camels, four donkeys, and on any given day, a minimum of 20 field staff from the government, local conservation organizations, tourism operators, and curious community members. The mission was to transplant a handful of rhinos back into Kaokoland, the land that is legendary across Africa for its vast, rugged wilderness and home to the traditional Himba people. This would be the first time in nearly two decades that rhinos would once again roam these vast badlands alongside the nomadic Himba livestock herds.

As I stood in amazement watching the Super Huey helicopter gently lift the sedated rhino off the ancient basalt ground, I pondered how the rhinos would react to their new home. What would a Himba shepherd think when he came across a fresh rhino track in the sand? Does the community really understand how difficult and dangerous it is to protect rhino these days, as heavily armed poachers in neighboring South Africa are currently slaughtering a rhino a day?

The Minnesota Zoo's Namibia Program is working closely with its local Namibia partner, Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), with support from The Nature Conservancy's Africa program, to explore these critical issues in depth over the next three years. Since the release last July, tremendous collective effort has gone into planning a novel initiative that will replicate SRT's science-based model for integrating rhino monitoring, management and tourism practices across the northern

expansion area that stretches all the way to the border with Angola. It is a bold and ambitious prospect, something no other African country has managed to achieve; the restoration of rhino across unprotected communal lands. As science advisor to SRT, it is my job to ensure that our hard-won research findings and monitoring data is compiled and communicated to guide decision-making each step of the way.

All big visions must be realized with small victories: our most recent was the successful completion of a customized training program I co-led alongside Simson Uri-!Khob, SRT's Director of Community Extension & Training. Simson, a local Damara-speaking Namibian, has trained over 60 local community

members in rhino monitoring since 2005. Switching between Damara, Herero, Afrikaans, and English with astonishing ease, Simson handled all the translations while we tag-teamed the course modules including basic rhino biology and conservation, monitoring and tracking techniques, use of monitoring equipment (binoculars, GPS units and digital cameras) and how to accurately complete SRT's standardized Rhino ID Forms. After three days of coursework and a short practical, we took our new rhino recruits to the field for a full day patrol. This was the climax of the course, particularly since the community had not been able to confidently confirm how many rhinos were still alive since the release last July.

Armed with new knowledge and state-of-the-art rhino monitoring equipment, we quickly discovered a fresh track and followed it by foot a few miles up a rough canyon to a broad mountain saddle. There below us, about 100 feet away, stood the rhino. For the first time, the local community scouts recorded the ear notches, horn shape and GPS location on the rhino identification forms. Furthermore, using the digital photos and pre-made rhino profile cards, the team was able to accurately identify the rhinos themselves. They all proudly posed with their first completed form following the sighting glowing with pride and excitement. It was a watershed moment for us all, and hopefully a good omen as Namibia prepares to hold the line against the relentless poaching and maintains its national reputation as a leader in African rhino conservation.

