

Opinion & Comment

Why tracking black rhino on foot in Kenya is key to their survival



RICCARDO ORIZIO,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE,
SARUNI SAMBURU

Imagine a wildlife reserve in the Big North of Kenya. Picture some of the most inspiring landscapes you can imagine, 350,000 hectares large – more than Malta, Andorra, Liechtenstein and Luxembourg put together. Inside it, imagine a fenced sanctuary of 54,000 hectares, larger than the Isle of Man and with one of the longest electrical fences ever built in East Africa. In addition to the great African fauna, now picture 11 black rhinos – big, unpredictable, beautiful and happy to be in such an amazing wilderness, protected by security teams that make this place one of the better surveyed corners of the continent.

This is Sera Conservancy, the community-owned reserve where we have just opened Saruni Rhino, probably the smallest safari

property in Kenya with only two rooms – but already a record-breaker. It is the first time that indigenous black rhino are back in northern Kenya, after an absence of 30 years. It is the first time that a community (made of proud and picturesque Samburu warriors and herdsman) owns and manages a black rhino sanctuary in East Africa – other rhino sanctuaries are owned and managed by trusts or private companies. It is also the first time rhino tracking is being offered in Kenya (it is available only in Namibia and South Africa) and it is also one of the first “good news” stories about rhino after years of doom and gloom, with the headlines dominated by poaching, loss of individuals, loss of territories, loss of hope.

The start has been amazing. Not only have the rhino sightings been exceptional, but the magical atmosphere of the place has already made it a small sensation in the Kenyan tourism industry. The birding is superb too, the Samburu’s “special five” (reticulated giraffe, Grevy zebra, Beisa oryx, gerenuk and Somali ostrich) are abundant and the waterhole in front of the camp provides some of the most incredible elephant watching. But, above all, it is a victory for community-based conservation.

The organisation behind this extraordinary story is the Northern Rangeland Trust (NRT), which is a model of how to support community conservancies. By providing them with income



from tourism, it increases – as never before – the area of land available to wildlife, thereby also providing security and peace to neighbouring tribes. Sera is one of the many conservancies under the NRT umbrella and, with its rhinos, now one of its most important.

The plan is simple: rhino will reproduce and multiply, Saruni will provide good income to the Samburu, the warriors will feel they have moral and legal ownership of this project and will protect it. Meanwhile, guests will love it and support it, feeling that they are not only tourists but conservationists as the “park fees” they pay make them feel they are key contributors to the rhino project’s success. This is already happening and we are committed to it for the long term.

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