

Black Rhino:

Securing a Future for the Black Rhino in Kenya's Mountain Forests



The muscular black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) is quick, skittish, and enigmatic. This iconic 2-horned wonder was once abundant in the pristine forests of the Aberdare mountain range. In the 1980s, however, the fate of the wildlife and forests of the Aberdare ecosystem took a grave downturn. Human activities including poaching, bush-meat hunting, snaring, illegal logging, charcoal burning and encroachment decimated the wildlife population. The black rhino, relentlessly poached for its extremely valuable horn, was nearly wiped out, becoming critically endangered.

Concurrently, regular crop damage on forest-adjacent farms by wildlife, especially elephant, was causing great losses to farmers. On occasion, encounters between farmers and wildlife resulted in human injuries and fatalities.

Rhino Ark was established in 1988 to save the dwindling black rhino population and resolve human/wildlife conflicts in the Aberdare ecosystem. Our first intervention, building and sustainably maintaining a 38 km game-proof electric fence around the Eastern Salient of the Aberdare National Park, proved to be a highly effective solution. This novel approach was subsequently adopted as model for natural forest conservation and human wildlife conflict management. In tandem with fencing, we have continued to support to the Aberdare Rhino security programme.

Over the years, the Aberdare fence was extended to cover the entire ecosystem (over 2,000 sq. km of prime forests and water catchments), becoming the world's longest conservation fence. The completed 400-km-long electric fence was formally commissioned by the President of Kenya, H.E. Mwai Kibaki on 12th March 2010.

In 2010, Rhino Ark commissioned an independent study: the environmental, social and economic assessment of the fencing of the Aberdare Conservation Area. The study was co-funded by UNEP, Rhino Ark and Kenya Forests Working Group and supported by the Kenya Wildlife Service, the Kenya Forest Service and the Greenbelt Movement. The study revealed key positive outcomes attributable to the fence, including improved forest cover, greater security for wildlife and safer living conditions for local communities. It affirmed that the fence has been instrumental as management tool in addressing the challenges affecting the Aberdare ecosystem.

Over the past decades, the remaining small black rhino population has stabilized, but its low number remains a challenge to its viability.

Protection of the black rhino remains core to our conservation work. To secure the long-term of the Aberdare black rhino population, Rhino Ark and the Kenya Wildlife Service have jointly embarked on a new initiative to establish a black rhino sanctuary in the Eastern Salient. This will be the first mountain forest rhino sanctuary in Kenya.