

Sera Conservancy
Conservation for rhinos and peace in Northern Kenya
A Ground-breaking community-run rhino sanctuary

Once pushed to the very brink of extinction, a black rhino crashes through the silver-coloured thorn bush, confident and secure: Sera in northern Kenya is East Africa's first community-run black rhino sanctuary, a pioneering restoration programme creating wider ecosystem change, economic opportunities, peace and development.

Sera is a flourishing model of community conservation, part of an extraordinary movement protecting some of Africa's most iconic endangered species and wildlife areas while transforming lives.

Two decades ago, these lands faced a formidable multitude of challenges ranging from environmental degradation, rampant poaching, insecurity from cattle raiding to an absence of opportunities with a dire of lack of schools, healthcare, and clean water.

People were struggling amid bandit attack and cattle raids, and the very idea of trying to protect wildlife in a conflict "hot-zone" seemed impossible - let alone the suggestion of returning rhinos under the constant threat of poachers. In the face of those threats, people united.

Sera, totalling 3,404 km², (1,314 miles²), has defied the critics who once said black rhinos would be made extinct in northern Kenya – with the population today rapidly increasing.

Not only have the rhinos returned with the support the community, but through the conservancy they set up, peace has been restored to a once much troubled land.

- Hot zone -

In the early 2000s, the area had become too dangerous for herders to take their flocks to graze. "Sera was known as a bandit area: this area was a poaching zone, and a place where cattle rustlers hid," said Johnstone Lemerketto, Sera Conservancy Warden.

"Before, when people wanted to come to graze their cattle, they had to come in big numbers, so that they would be safe, to be prepared to face any kind of attack. It was a dangerous place to be. People would sleep at night with their shoes on, in case there was an attack."

Wildlife was also wiped out - including rhinos. According to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), the government rangers, Kenya's black rhino population "declined from approximately 20,000 animals in 1972 to fewer than 400 animals in 1987."

Prices for rhino horn soared.

The reason varied: initially wanted as hunting trophies, they were later used as ostentatious dagger handles for wealthy Gulf sheikhs flush with cash after the oil boom.

It was only later that, after a dangerous marketing myth, demand escalated to supply Asian markets as a fake cure solving everything from cancer to impotence, despite it being made only of keratin, the same as fingernails.

In Sera, the last was shot in the late 1980s: a species safe on earth for 50 million years was intentionally exterminated.

- Conservancy brings change -

In northern Kenya, the land is largely owned collectively, and beginning in the late 1990s, people came together to create a community-run conservancies.

They were set up to not only protect the wildlife from being wiped out, but to kick-start far wider social, environmental, and political change.

In the simplest of terms, what they did sounds straightforward: creating a local council, a decision-making institution to manage the resources of a fixed area of land.

But the traditional systems of self-governance and communal landownership needed a new framework to be effective in the modern world.

“A conservancy meant the rangers provided security for people and their cattle, and that meant people could be at peace,” Johnson said. “With that, then all the other benefits could follow: development, water, education, health.”

The people in Sera had seen in neighbouring areas the changes that had come with the establishment of community conservancies, and in 2001, formed their own.

For Yankai Lenapai, vice-chair of the board of Sera conservancy, the conservancy transformed her life. Two of her sons were killed when a rival community attacked in the early 2000s.

“Before there was a conservancy, life was terrible,” she said. “We would go to bed at night thinking that we may not see tomorrow.”

- Early steps -

From 2001, an initial 12 rangers were recruited from across the community, trekking out on 14-day patrols carrying all their rations and kit - and later using camels to carry supplies.

“The scouts began their patrols across the area: tracking any sign of poaching, of cattle raiding and intruders, and of the wildlife they see,” said Johnstone, the conservancy’s chief ranger.

Reuben Lendiria, Sera Conservancy manager, said the conservancy changed local security for good. “Before the conservancy, the people in Sera and our neighbours, we could not even meet,” he said. “Now, through the structures we have set up in the conservancy, we organise people to come together to discuss issues before they become a problem.”

In 2006, thatch huts were constructed as the initial tourist accommodation.

“That helped us, as it was the start of the revenue that goes to the community,” Johnstone added. Today, Basecamp-Saruni provide a key revenue to the conservancy through the visitors it hosts, generating the income for the operation of the conservancy.

- Return of the rhino -

Kenya conservationist Ian Craig had begun work in 1983 rescuing the very last few isolated rhinos in the wild before they were killed, bringing them to safety under protection of Lewa Conservancy to create a viable breeding population.

“The dream was that one day we could eventually restock the lands they came from, when the wave of poaching was over,’ Ian said.

In 2010, Ian asked the Sera community if they would consider the rhinos returning – and five years later, the plans were in place: a 107-km² (41miles²) sanctuary was created surrounded by a 45-kilometre-long solar-powered electric fence.

Of the total 340,450 hectares of Sera, a conservation area of 51,740 hectares was set aside for managed grazing, and 10,700 hectares within the fenced sanctuary for wildlife alone.

In 2015, 10 black rhinos were successfully translocated, including from Lewa – from where the population was nearing capacity, returning rhinos taken from the northern Kenya back to Sera once again. The first calf was born a year later.

“Rhinos are a flagship species, a highly charismatic animal that can serve as a rallying point for conservation, capturing the attention of people from all over the world and generating significant returns from wildlife-based tourism,” the government KWS wildlife service said.

As of 2023, there are now 21 rhinos in Sera, with rhinos giving birth to a second generation of calves.

- Impact for Community -

For Johnstone, seeing the rhinos return was an emotional moment. “People say: we are earning our daily bread from those animals,” said Johnstone. “My children now go to school because of

the wildlife, and my relatives are getting something from my salary too: in our culture, we share what we have with our family all around.”

Today, Sera Conservancy employs 110 conservancy staff including 21 women, the single biggest employer in the area by far, with jobs including rangers, anti-poaching and security teams, to administration roles.

The revenue earned in Sera from hosting visitors through Basecamp-Saruni is split 60:40, between a Community Fund dedicated to development projects in education, health and sanitation, and conservancy operating costs such as salaries for the wildlife rangers.

“It is a remarkable partnership, helping us to protect our wildlife and the land we all share, by ensuring that conservation benefits the right people in the right ways,” said Pauline Longojine, a community leader who played a founding role in the Sera Community Conservancy.

“It also means we are able to run sustainable land management initiatives that benefit wildlife and livestock equally, and launch community-development projects like school infrastructure, water access points – and even business loans for local entrepreneurs.”

Northern Kenya is facing one of its worst droughts for over four decades, and the community conservancies are helping support people. As livestock herding has become harder and harder, the conservancies are providing alternative incomes.

It is also providing school bursaries to support children to go to school.

“Through employment, the income of people has increased,” said Reuben Lendir, Sera Conservancy manager. “Through that income, that has encouraged a lot of people to take their children to school, because they know the conservancy will support them with a bursary.”

- Rhino under guard -

Rhinos remain under constant threat: Kenya has made huge advances in stopping the killing of rhinos, but the rangers cannot afford to let their guard down. In Southern Africa – in South Africa and Namibia – rhinos are being slaughtered, with worrying upward trend in numbers killed.

Rhino monitor Joseph Lesanjore, a specialised wildlife ranger for Sera Conservancy, tracks the rhinos each day.

“Our community depends on the rhinos, so we do everything we can to protect them,” Joseph said, who is constant contact with anti-poaching teams equipped with the latest technology, locally recruited rangers on patrol in the area.

Lekapana Ngison, who was once a Samburu warrior and cattle herder, was once involved in heavy gun battles when rival groups tried to steal his community's livestock.

But he spent over two decades as a ranger, including for a mobile special response anti-poaching unit, trained as Kenyan police reservist to be able to carry a rifle. Now he is working as a rhino tracker for the conservancy, leading visitors in the bush.

For Lekapana, the biggest protection of the rhino is not the security he works hard to protect – but from the people around who value the rhino because of the benefits that they bring.

“Of course, we cannot let our guard down as the threat of poachers remains,” he said. “But the real protection of rhino isn't about guns, it is about the communities.”

- Ecosystem restoration -

Before the creation of the conservancy, Sera was left almost devoid of wildlife, with even gazelles and giraffes shot for meat.

While the sanctuary at Sera was set up for rhinos, they were not the only wildlife to have found safety there.

Two dozen Grevy's Zebras from Lewa were brought in to establish a new population of the endangered species, after global numbers fell from some 15,000 in the 1970s, to just over 3,000. It is also home to an important population of besia oryx, and vast flocks of sandgrouse, which gather in staggering concentrations at water points in the dry season.

Sera also became the first point of release for the elephant orphans from the nearby Reteti Elephant Sanctuary, an increasingly popular site for visitors, giving rescued elephants a wild future.

As soon as it is possible, the young elephants were released inside the sanctuary at Sera back into the wild.

With satellite tracking collars on each elephant, they are also providing a unique research tool for ecologists learning about their behaviour to help others in the future.

Future Steps: the way forward?

Sera offers enormous potential: 20 years ago it was a barren and dangerous land devoid of wildlife, where it was almost unthinkable tourists could ever want to visit. Today it is flourishing.

With support and investment, the advances it has made so rapidly in so few years can continue on a positive trajectory to benefit the environment, wildlife, and the people who live there.

Key challenges ahead are providing ways to mitigate for the increasing impact of climate change. For Sera, that means water – already the most precious resource – will become increasingly rare. Supporting the community to provide alternative livelihoods as traditional livestock herding becomes more difficult is therefore more important than ever.

The threats globally to rhinos continue and show no sign of stopping; the only way is to increase the numbers of rhinos to secure the future of the species, and to provide the protection for those animals.

However, safe spaces of heavily guarded sanctuaries inside government-run national parks are strictly limited and approaching peak capacity of the rhinos that they can hold.

The future must also include areas such as the blueprint model that Sera offers, of a flourishing rhino population made safe by community protection because they know the value rhinos bring to them are far higher alive than dead.