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Rhino Conservation Botswana

Media Release: Rhino poaching in Botswana

9 March 2020

Maun, Botswana

Despite significant anti-poaching efforts, the rhino poaching onslaught continues unabated in Botswana with 47 rhinos lost to poachers over the last 12 months. This has devastated Botswana's rhino populations and significantly set back the work of Rhino Conservation Botswana. For the past two decades we have worked with the Government of Botswana and private sector partners to bring rhinos from high poaching areas in South Africa and Zimbabwe into Botswana's Okavango Delta. Here we have been closely monitoring the rhinos, enabling their populations to grow at one of the highest rates ever achieved, adding to the global population of these highly endangered animals.

We always anticipated that word of Botswana's healthy rhino populations would get out, but this sudden and intense poaching onslaught was not expected. Botswana is under rapid attack from highly organized international criminal syndicates who employ African poachers with bush experience to do the shooting. It is poverty that enables poaching in Africa, and the high price paid for rhino horn is a major incentive for poachers to undertake risky incursions into the deep wilderness of the Okavango Delta. Rhino poaching is driven by demand from an increasingly wealthy middle-class in Asia where rhino horn is illegally traded on the black market, largely as a symbol of wealth and status. It is our hope that China's recent ban on the trade and consumption of wild animals in response to the Covid-19 viral epidemic will reduce demand for rhino horn, but this waits to be seen.

It is likely that the criminal syndicates who have set their sights on Botswana are linked to those who have targeted South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe over the past 12 years. South Africa has been the main poaching target since 2006, losing on average three rhinos a day at its poaching peak in 2014/2015. The country is slowly turning the tide on rhino poaching by deploying highly trained men, tracking dogs and a fleet of helicopters to the poaching areas, as well as using advanced detection equipment and investing heavily in intelligence. As conditions become less favourable for poachers in South Africa, the poachers seem to have turned their attention towards Botswana.

Director Martin 'Map' Ives (Botswana) | **Patron** The Duke of Sussex (UK)

Trustees Derek Flatt (Botswana) Angela Berney (Switzerland) Jeff Blumberg (UK) Kai Collins (Botswana) Map Ives (Botswana)

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Rapid response

Botswana is serious about the protection of its natural resources and has mandated the Botswana Defence Force to operate a robust defence of its wildlife. The Government has reacted to the crisis by allocating its special forces to the high incident poaching areas. These highly trained soldiers are achieving success in intercepting poachers and Rhino Conservation Botswana's rhino monitors, who are skilled bush trackers and know the Okavango Delta well, work closely with them. Of huge value to the men on the ground is the aerial surveillance support that we provide from our light aircraft. We are rapidly increasing our presence both on the ground and air and we are seeking further resources to put in place the same level of anti-poaching defence as in South Africa.

Dehorning Botswana's rhinos

The Government of Botswana is currently considering the option of dehorning Botswana's wild rhinos as an emergency protection measure. Dehorning has become commonplace in South Africa where it has been effective at decreasing the reward for poachers' efforts. As rhinos use their horns for defence and mate selection we are, in principle, not in favour of dehorning rhinos - especially wild rhinos that live among predators in the Okavango Delta. We do however understand that Botswana is facing a crisis situation and dehorning will likely reduce the incentive for poachers to journey into the Okavango Delta. This, together with increased protection on the ground and air, will allow us time to bring the rhino poaching crisis under control. Rhino Conservation Botswana is formally mandated by the Botswana Government to monitor the country's rhinos and, should the Government decide to go ahead with dehorning Botswana's rhinos, we will assist. We will ensure that the immobilization and dehorning is done to the highest professional standards, that data is collected from each rhino, and that each horn removed is catalogued and embedded with a microchip.

Intensive Protection Zone

Rhino Conservation Botswana is also considering the benefits of an intensive protection and breeding zone - a large fenced area into which a number of Botswana's wild rhinos can be moved and placed under high protection. This approach has worked well in Zimbabwe and we are exploring financing options to make this expensive undertaking a reality in Botswana.

Local communities

While we have currently turned the focus of our work to anti-poaching activities, we will not lose sight of our core rhino monitoring and management work as well as our important community

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outreach programme. We have built solid relationships with the local communities living in the Okavango Delta, assisting these villagers to improve their livelihoods while educating them about conservation and their magnificent natural heritages. Not only does this program bring us immense satisfaction, we also know that it is these local people who may be the first to encounter poachers, and as such they are our first line of defence against poaching.

Rhinos have roamed the Earth for 50 million years and we are not prepared to let them go extinct under our watch. We will continue to work tirelessly to conserve Botswana's rhinos, adding significantly to the world's African rhino population. Further to bringing rhinos back from the brink of extinction, our work in the Okavango Delta also safeguards this magnificent ecosystem – one of the last great wilderness areas on Earth.

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