

HOPE

Translocated Rhinos Thrive at Ruma

The Ksh6 million translocation exercise, conducted in two phases, was a historic comeback of rhinos to the area.

By PAUL UDOTO



PHOTO: INTERNET SOURCES

Abouncing black baby rhino was recently born in Ruma National Park, near the shores of Namlolwe (Lake Victoria).

According to Mr Simon Wachuri, the warden in charge of the

park, the calf and its mother were given time to relax in tall grasses that had acted as the maternity and were both good health.

The birth implies that the translocated rhinos had settled down well in the park since it was declared a rhino sanctuary at the

end of last year. The Sh6 million translocation exercise, conducted in two phases, was a historic comeback of rhinos to the area. With a capacity of hosting 85 black rhinos, the last time rhinos were sighted in the Ruma general area was in mid 1950s, more than

half a century ago.

Ruma is one of Kenya's most unusual and beautiful national parks. The last surviving group of roan antelope in Kenya can be seen here - a large antelope with magnificent black and white facial markings and swept-back horns.

Ruma is unique among Kenya's parks and reserves in that it is the only place to showcase the two extremes of Kenyan antelope; the enormous horse-like roan and the miniature-sized graceful oribi.

Ruma is the only remaining sanctuary of the roan antelope, the wild animal whose existence is now severely threatened in Kenya. Once abundant in the park, the massive and magnificent roan has been ruthlessly hunted both for its meat and for its horn, which are valued as musical instruments and played during traditional ceremonies. It's one of Africa's rarest antelopes. Strongly territorial, the roan prefers a plains habitat with sparsely wooded grassland, exactly as it is in Ruma. The roan is highly dependent on water which it must consume in large quantities, so the Lambwe River's water supply proves idea.

Ruma National Park was first gazetted in 1966 as the Lambwe Valley Game Reserve to protect its indigenous population of the rare roan antelopes which exist nowhere else in Kenya. It acquired National Park status in 1983 and was renamed "Ruma" according to the request by the local community.

The area has been so named by legendary Gor Mahia. Living high on a hill which now forms part of the Kanyamwa escarpment, he could watch over all people, Gor Mahia's magic was so powerful that he controlled not only South Nyanza, but far beyond. People came to him for good and bad spells, knowing that he could read minds, cast spells, bring rain,

kill with a look and shape-change from man to dog, dog to bull in an instant. Husband to 22 wives, Gor Mahia's descendants still populate the region though none of them seem to have inherited the full power of his witchcraft.

He died in 1920 but his name is immortalized in the name of Kenya's most famous football teams, Gor Mahia, who still visit his hill before their most important matches; hopeful that, even from beyond the grave, his formidable powers will score them goals.

The park lies in Western Kenya, close to the shores of Africa's largest inland lake, Lake Victoria. It is one of the country's rewarding but less well known parks. Ruma offers sanctuary to the threatened roan antelope, one of Africa's rarest antelopes.

To enhance visitor experience, Kenya Wildlife Service has re-introduced some of the species that were present in the past such as rhino, ostrich and zebra and extending the road network and tourism facilities. Lying on the flat floor of the seasonally watered Lambwe River Valley, the park is bordered to the south east by the Kanyamwa Escarpment and to the north by the dramatic volcanic plugs of the Ruri Hills.

Black rhino numbers reduced from 20,000 in 1960s to less than 300 by mid 1980s in Kenya mainly due to hunting. However, renewed conservation efforts by Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and other conservation efforts have seen the numbers begin to rise again. Kenya's current national total of black rhinos now stands at 631, down from 20,000 in the 1960s. The steady recovery of the rhino population has been attributed to a Presidential Decree of 1985 that declared black rhino a special animal that required special protection combined by hard work and dedica-

tion of rhino monitoring staff on State, community, private and county council lands with rhinos

KWS in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) successfully completed the last phase of the black rhino translocation from Mugie Rhino sanctuary and Solio Ranch in Laikipia to Ruma National Park last year.

The introduction of rhinos in the park was meant to enhance tourism in the Western Kenya tourism circuit and unlock tourism potential in the area. Players in the tourism sector have been asked to invest and aggressively market the national park along with other tourism sites like the famous Thim Lich Ohinga ruins, the famous Luo legend, Gor Mahia, the Lake Victoria, the rich Luo culture and the Homa Hills hot springs of Simbi Nyaima. Last year's translocation came at a time when the world was witnessing an increase in the illegal killing of rhinos. A worrying note was the increasing sophistication and the level of organization of illegal traders in the rhino horn.

Nearly 2,400 rhinos have been poached across Africa since 2006, slowing the population growth of both black and white rhino species to some of the lowest levels since 1995, according to the latest facts revealed by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) experts.

Rhino poaching increased by 43 per cent between 2011 and 2012, representing a loss of almost 3 per cent of the population in 2012, according to IUCN's Species Survival Commission (SSC) African Specialist Group. Africa has 5,055 black and 20,405 white rhinos ■

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