

WWF South Africa's Black Rhino Project Exceeds 400 Thriving Rhinos in Major Conservation Success

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WWF South Africa's Black Rhino Range Expansion Project (BRREP) proudly announces a significant milestone: the population of black rhinos across its partner sites has surpassed 400 individuals. This achievement underscores the remarkable success of an initiative that began with modest goals and has since evolved into one of the country's most impactful conservation efforts.

Launched in 2003, BRREP initially aimed to establish just one or two new black rhino populations. Today, the project supports 17 robust populations spanning over 360,000 hectares, with 280 translocated rhinos and their offspring contributing to this impressive total. Notably, eight of these vital conservation sites are either wholly or partially community-owned, demonstrating the power of collaborative stewardship in achieving substantial biodiversity outcomes.

With fewer than 6,500 black rhinos remaining globally, BRREP's efforts now account for approximately 16% of South Africa's total black rhino population, establishing this metapopulation as a crucial component of the species' long-term survival.

"Reaching 400 black rhinos across our project sites is an incredibly exciting milestone," stated Jeff Cooke, Rhino Conservation Manager at WWF South Africa. "It unequivocally demonstrates the long-term efficacy of BRREP and validates our strategy of relocating rhinos to safe, suitable new habitats. This project is about more than just translocations; it's about meticulously building healthy, genetically diverse populations that can thrive."

Black rhino numbers, once exceeding 100,000 in the 1960s, plummeted to just 2,500 by the mid-1990s due to relentless poaching and habitat destruction. Targeted conservation programs like BRREP have been instrumental in their slow but steady recovery, with global populations now exceeding 6,400.

A cornerstone of BRREP's success has been the strategic acquisition and management of suitable land. The project collaborates with private landowners, local communities, and government conservation agencies such as Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency. Often, this involves encouraging neighboring landowners to remove internal fences, creating larger, contiguous conservation areas that benefit not only rhinos but also other wide-ranging species like wild dogs, cheetahs, and vultures.

The initiative's enduring strength lies in its blend of bold translocations and a commitment to long-term care. Managing these rhino populations for genetic diversity, ensuring their safety, and fostering their growth represents a decades-long commitment, one that BRREP has diligently honored for over 22 years.

While South Africa remains a critical stronghold for the black rhino, the challenges of securing adequate space and ensuring ongoing safety persist. BRREP's expanding network of protected habitats offers a beacon of hope for one of the world's most critically endangered species, proving that collective action can indeed provide a second chance for these magnificent animals.