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## Tracking Black Rhino on Foot in Community-Owned Sera Rhino Sanctuary, Northern Kenya

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Joanna Eede

A wind was blowing from the west, sending dust devils spinning across northern Kenya's plains as our guide, Sammy Lemiruni, explained how to track black rhino on foot.

We were in Samburu-land en route to Sera Rhino Sanctuary, which became the first sanctuary in East Africa to offer a pioneering rhino-tracking safaris to tourists in February 2017. I was privileged to be one of the first guests.

It was searingly hot: the rains were late and the gneiss rock face of Ololokwe, the monolith sacred to the Samburu tribe, was hazy in the shimmering heat. The snaking, ochre road was pot-holed and lined with flat-topped acacia trees, red termite hills and the blackened remains of scrub fires. Samburu herders with elaborate hair braids pulled back encircling branches of calendula to release sheep from an overnight corral; small boys with sticks tended goats, yellow water canisters slung across their backs.

A mile behind the electrified, metre-high fence that protects a growing population of Critically Endangered Black rhino – today there are ten adults and 3 calves – we found a black rhino scout standing on a granite boulder, holding a telemetry transmitter high above his head. He was searching for GPS signals emitted by microchips implanted in rhino horn; when the receiver beeped it informed him that 'no. 7', a male called 'Loicharu', was nearby.

We crept through arid bushland, pushing aside prickly commiphora bushes and avoiding the sandy soil that crunched noisily underfoot. When we were 30 meters away from a creature that has lived on earth for 50 million years, we stopped.

Loicharu was sleeping. And we were close enough to study the thick folds of his dark grey skin and his powerful prehensile upper lip. I waited behind a sandpaper tree while Sammy inched cautiously forward; he stopped when Loicharu stirred and occasionally shook his ash bag to check on wind direction. Black rhino are shortsighted, but their powerful olfactory sense makes up for poor vision, so it was essential Loicharu didn't detect our scent.

A sandgrouse erupted noisily from a whistling thorn tree and Loicharu's feathered ears twitched, rotated and twitched again. Then suddenly he was upright, alert, facing us and making an explosive 'puffing' sound, his stocky body taut and ready to move. *'He can't see us from that distance, so is puffing to establish if we are rhino,'* whispered Sammy.

We didn't return the puff, so the rhino turned and thundered deep into the bush. *'This was the land of the black rhino, all the way from here to Ololokwe,'* Sammy said. *'All the stories from my father and my grandfather told of rhino everywhere.'*

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Samburu was home to Black rhino for thousands of years, until the last was poached in 1990. The species was once widespread across Africa, but a booming illegal wildlife trade and lack of secure habitat ensured that between 1960 and 1995 there was a 98% collapse in numbers; now there are approximately 5,500 wild individuals left. Kenya is one of the black rhino's last strongholds, with approximately 690 animals.

Sera Rhino Sanctuary is thought to be one of the most advanced conservation projects in Kenya. It became the country's first community-owned black rhino sanctuary when, in May 2015, the Kenya Wildlife Service, Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy partnered to move 10 black rhino to the 120km squared sanctuary. Two years later, Sera Conservancy opened the only black rhino tracking on foot experience in East Africa, in partnership with tourism operator Saruni Lodges. 'Saruni Rhino' is now celebrating its first anniversary. This is conservation tourism at its best: each guest pays a conservation fee of \$175; as such, they are actively contributing to the protection of the species.

*'Tourists used to be spectators of a sighting, observers of a reality, ' says Riccardo Orizio, Founder of Saruni Lodges. 'Today, our travellers want to play a direct role in conservation, by paying the conservation fees that support the future of the land and wildlife and provide local communities with the incentive of an income.'*

Sera Conservancy has received over \$30,000 USD in conservation fees from Saruni Rhino's first year. The income will be split 60/40, with 60% funding community development projects and 40% going to Conservancy operations.

*'Tourist dollars are not only helping to protect wildlife but, just as importantly, helping to instil pride and a sense of ownership in wildlife amongst conservancy members, who can see tangible benefits between the elephants and rhinos that share their pasture, and their children's education, jobs and future', said Tarn Breeveld, Tourism Development Director, NRT. 'Saruni Rhino's first year of operations has blown away all our expectations in terms of the amount of conservancy revenues raised'.*

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The sun was lowering over the peaks of the distant Matthew's Range as we headed back to Saruni Rhino's riverside camp. Sammy took a call from a colleague urging us to head to the airstrip, where we found a 'plane waiting to fly a 3-day old rhino calf to nearby Reteti Elephant Orphanage. Abandoned by his mother, he had spent 48 hours without suckling, and was vulnerable to dehydration and predation. Loijipu, as he was later named, became the first rhino resident at Reteti. A year on he is thriving, and may soon be moved back to Sera Rhino Conservancy. 'Sera Sanctuary is the first peg in the ground to show that livestock and wildlife can co-exist,' said Ian Craig, founder of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. 'Kenya will be a richer place for the success of this.'



The road to Sera Rhino Sanctuary,  
Sera Conservancy, northern Kenya  
©Joanna Eede



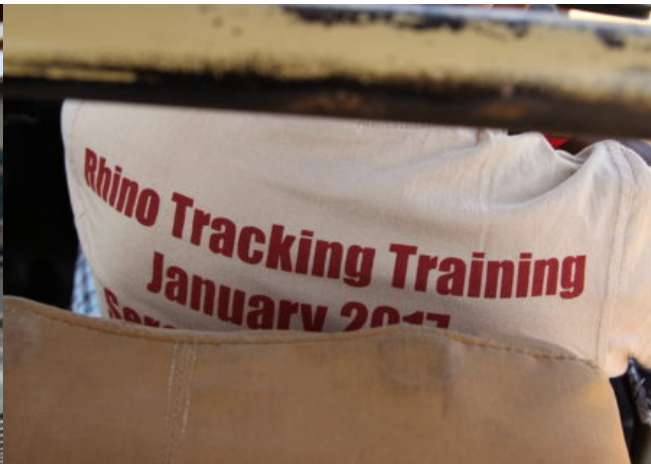
The 45 km fence line surrounding  
Sera Rhino Sanctuary ©Joanna Eede



Sera Rhino Sanctuary scouts with  
telemetry transmitter ©Joanna  
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Sammy Lemiruni, Samburu guide at  
Sera Rhino Sanctuary ©Joanna Eede



Sammy Lemiruni ©Joanna Eede



Sera Rhino Sanctuary Ranger  
©Joanna Eede





Sammy Lemiruni points to Black rhino tracks ©Joanna Eede



Sammy Lemiruni signals to us to stand still ©Joanna Eede



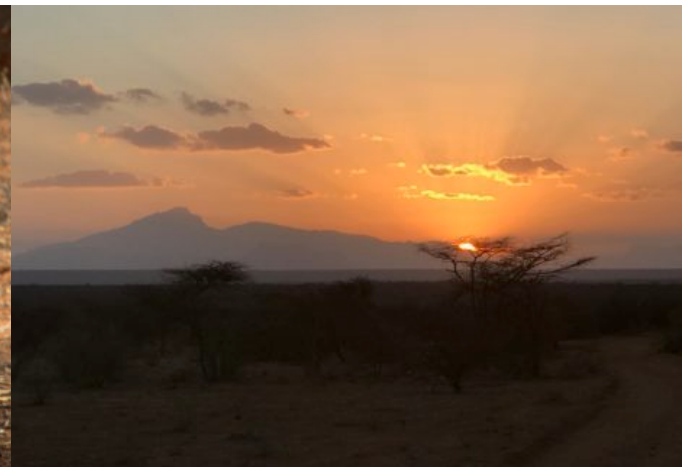
Loicharu in Sera Rhino Sanctuary © Stuart Butler



Rangers at Sera Rhino Sanctuary with Loijipu, an orphaned baby rhino, en route to Reteti Elephant Sanctuary ©Joanna Eede



Loijipu at Reteti Elephant Sanctuary ©Stuart Butler



Sunset over the Matthews Range, Samburu, northern Kenya ©Joanna Eede





## MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including *Portrait of England* (Think Publishing, 2006) and *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.

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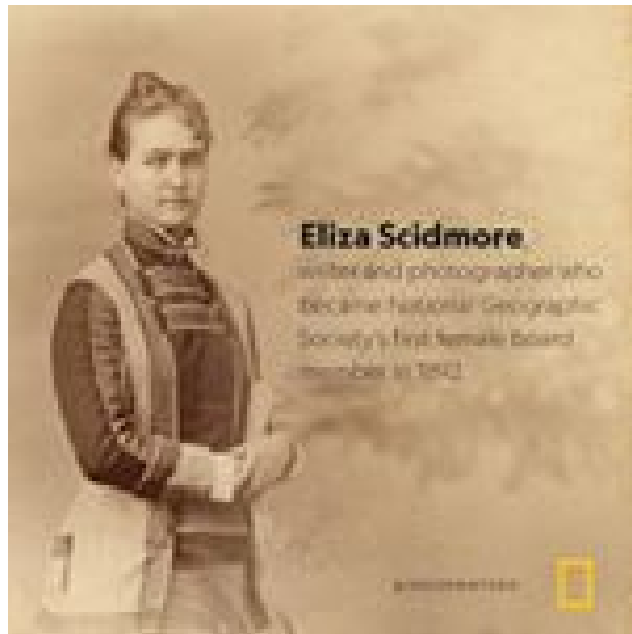
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