

30th ANNIVERSARY OF THE RHINO CHARGE



A UNIQUE AND EXTREME OFFROAD COMPETITION WITH A NATIONAL CONSERVATION PURPOSE

From 1989 to 2017 the Rhino Charge has raised KES 1,319,219,359 towards the conservation of Kenya's vital water towers. It is one of the few sport events run with a national conservation purpose to safeguard the integrity and ecological functions of Kenya's mountain forests, also known as water towers as they are the source of all main rivers in the country.

Implemented by the Rhino Ark Kenya Charitable Trust, the conservation work supported by the Rhino Charge are positively impacting on three of the five main water towers of Kenya: Mt. Kenya, Aberdares and the Mau Forests Complex. Over 80,000 households benefit from the protective functions of the 620 kilometres of electric fences built to date. These fences are instrumental as a management tool in addressing key challenges affecting these mountain forests: (i) regular crop damage and occasionally human fatalities caused by marauding wildlife, especially elephant; and (ii) threats arising from human activities, including poaching, bush-meat hunting, snaring, illegal logging, charcoal burning and encroachment.

THE ABC OF THE CHARGE

The **Rhino Charge** goes back to the early days of Rhino Ark in 1988, and the need to raise funds to support the construction of the electric fence – at that time being built around the spur of the Aberdare National Park – to protect the highly endangered black rhino from poachers, and the farmers in the area from the ravages of wildlife.

The result was the conceiving of an unique one-day off-road competition, held in a remote part of the country, which grew rapidly into the toughest off-road event on the African continent and, possibly, the world. It has since become an indispensable fundraiser for expanding Rhino Ark projects. Such is its popularity in Kenya that, every year, record sums of money are raised, now comfortably above US \$1million for each Charge – and rising to US \$1.5million in 2017 which represents such a incredible increase as to compare to approximately US \$2,500 raised in 1988.

To prevent any significant damage to the environment, the duration of the competition is limited to ten hours and only 65 competitor cars may participate. All cars in the competition are required to visit 13 control points scattered over 100km of rough bush country. In order to avoid cumulative impact from consecutive events, the Rhino Charge is organised each year in a different location. The location is a closely kept secret until the day before the event.

As the Rhino Charge takes place in differing but remote locations, an agreement is made with local communities that own the land where the event will take place. They, in turn, benefit from the vehicle entry fees raised and from employment opportunities to prepare the event. Over the past years, the amount raised from the Landowners Access Fee has been well over Kshs 4 million. This amount goes towards communal projects, such as the building of classrooms, a borehole or a dispensary. Environmental audits, commissioned by Rhino Ark, have found that there was minimal impact on the sites involving Rhino Charge activities.

In order to ensure that the funds raised by the competitors go to conservation, the Rhino Charge is organized and run largely by volunteers who provide their professional skills and time to prepare and run the event every year. The event also benefits from in-kind support provided by many event sponsors and raffle donors.

BIG CARS FOR A BIG CAUSE

The **Rhino Charge** underpins the vital conservation work undertaken by Rhino Ark and its partners, the Kenya Forest Service and the Kenya Wildlife Service.

Most of Kenya's forests are in mountain areas – in Mount Kenya, the Aberdares, the Mau complex, the Cherangani Hills, and Mount Elgon. They are known as the



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'water towers' of Kenya, forming the upper catchment of all main rivers of Kenya. The water towers are vital national assets in terms of climate regulation, water storage, recharge of groundwater, river flow regulation, flood migration, control of soil erosion, and conservation of biological diversity. They are Kenya's single most important source of water for direct human consumption and for industrial and farming activities. The majority of Kenyan livelihoods depend in some way on the rivers, climate, forest and wildlife of these mountain ecosystems. **The protection of these forested areas is a national necessity.**

Rhino Ark activities have expanded rapidly since the early days, as has the need to protect the black rhino and reduce human-wildlife conflict. What was originally a 38km fence along the park salient of the **Aberdares** became – over 21 years – the world's longest conservation fence, nearly 400km in length, protecting over 2,000 sq km of prime forest and water catchment, now called the Aberdare Conservation Area. The electric fence, rising seven feet above the ground and wired down to three feet below ground, was completed in 2009. It was formally commissioned by President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga in March 2010.

The same year, Rhino Ark made a formal commitment to support the conservation of the **Mount Eburu ecosystem**, in the Mau escarpment, with a comprehensive electric fence around the entire protected forest of nearly 9,000 hectares. This natural forest, rich in biodiversity, is home to over 40 species of mammals, including the critically endangered Mountain Bongo antelope. However, surrounded on all sides by human settlement, illegal logging and charcoal burning, the forest cover had been seriously degraded and the wildlife decimated by bush meat hunting. Another fence – drawing on the experience of the Aberdare fence – was an obvious solution and, with private sector support, the 43.4 km long fence was completed in November 2014.

Mount Kenya, the third project to be tackled by Rhino Ark, in partnership with the Kenya Forest Service and the Kenya Wildlife Service, was designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997.

Mount Kenya's forests are rich in biodiversity, not only in terms of ecosystems but in terms of species. It also plays a critical role in water catchment for the entire country – including the Ewaso Nyiro and the Tana River, Kenya's largest. However, it has faced daunting challenges, with dense forests next to some of the most populated areas of the country. Regular crop damage – particularly by elephants – is a major problem for farmers, sometimes leading to human fatalities.

Based on the experience of the Aberdares, it was decided to build an electric fence around Mount Kenya – a fence that would be even longer than the Aberdare fence, at 450 km in length. Work was started in September 2012 and, to date, 170 km have been completed.

The lessons learned from the successful fencing projects undertaken for Aberdares, Mount Eburu and Mount Kenya have opened up other forested areas for fence protection. These now include the **South Western Mau** and possibly the **Kakamega Forest** in western Kenya.

Building a fence is one part of the equation. **Equally, fences need to be maintained and protected.** In the Aberdares, parts of the fence are over 20 years old and have to be replaced. Vigilance, too, is a crucial part of fence management. Working with its partners, Rhino Ark conducts ground and aerial patrols and surveys of the forested areas it covers – identifying illegal activities and taking remedial action as necessary. Engaging local communities has been an essential part of Rhino Ark strategy – both to guard and protect the fences. Schools, on the periphery of the fences, are involved in bringing home to pupils and students the necessity of conserving Kenya's natural and national heritage. Initiatives such as the community livelihoods platform in Eburu provide value and inspiration to forest-adjacent communities.

For all this activity – building, maintaining and protecting – **the funds raised by the Rhino Charge can be used flexibly** and are not restricted to a particular part of the project. They are therefore essential for the long-term benefit of Rhino Ark, and ultimately for the future health of Kenya itself. The work is essential – and every contribution to the Charge plays its part in supporting the work of Rhino Ark.

THE TRUE IMPACTS OF THE CONSERVATION EFFORT SUPPORTED BY THE RHINO CHARGE

In 2010, Rhino Ark commissioned an independent study on the environmental, social and economic assessment of the fencing of the Aberdare Conservation Area. The study was co-funded by UNEP, Rhino Ark and Kenya Forests Working Group and supported by the Kenya Wildlife Service, the Kenya Forest Service and the Greenbelt Movement.

The study revealed **key positive outcomes attributable to the fence**, including improved forest cover, safer living conditions for local communities and greater security for wildlife. It affirmed that the fence has been instrumental as a management tool in addressing the challenges that were affecting the Aberdare ecosystem.

The study recorded socio-economic effects, such as higher household incomes and land values (as high as 300% in some cases) due to improved farmland security, crop yields and safer living conditions.

Wildlife crop destruction has been all but eliminated and children travelling to school face fewer risks from animals. In addition, cattle rustling using the forest as an escape route has ceased and disease transmission between wildlife and livestock has greatly reduced.

In addition, the study's economic analysis highlighted the importance of the environmental services that are protected by the fence and that serve key national and global interests. The study estimated the **total values of products and environmental services provided yearly by the fenced ecosystem at KES 39.3 billion with an additional KES 20 billion for biodiversity conservation**, amounting to an overall total of KES 59.3 billion.

“The Aberdares conservation efforts underline the extraordinary and wide-ranging returns possible when a more creative, decisive and sustainable approach to managing nature is undertaken-they also offer a model for exemplary public-private partnerships.”

Achim Steiner, former United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UNEP.

