

Making conservation pay - a tale of two lodges

By Felix Patton

Enclosing wildlife in a fenced area, often termed a sanctuary or conservancy, prevents the natural inflow and outflow of the animal population. Management of the wildlife has to be by human intervention and comes at a cost. If endangered species are involved, the costs can be particularly high as special measures are required, not least for ensuring security.

Conservancies have limited sources of income with the two most significant being the business of tourism and the benevolence of donors - be they government or private. Donors, while often essential for starting up a conservation operation, are not often prepared to maintain their interest over the longer term. When there is a shortage of funds, donations can come to an abrupt end, leaving the

management high and dry. Clearly, the long-term future for wildlife can only be assured if it pays for itself.

For long-term sustainability, the animals must be of financial value to the owner - be they on private, community or government land - with most of the value being returned to the owner to reinvest. This value mainly comes from tourism through a gate fee and through all, or a share, of the revenue from accommodation. Attracting guests to stay on a conservancy makes the visit more valuable in terms of income. How two wildlife conservancies - Solio Game Reserve (Solio) in Kenya and Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary (Ziwa) in Uganda - have tackled this is 'a tale of two lodges'.

Solio and Ziwa have much in common. Both are of similar size - Solio comprises 69 km² and Ziwa 70 km². Both have a swamp area

with permanent water available to the wildlife and both manage rhino populations, which require extensive security and monitoring.

However, Solio is a mature area with a high density of wildlife especially Black and White rhinos and it dates from 1970. Ziwa is, comparatively speaking, in its infancy, having been established in 2004, but is unique in having the only wild rhinos in the country. Solio's vegetation is principally open bush with grass plains while Ziwa is woodland with grass under-storey plus swamp grass areas. Solio receives on average around 700mm of rain per year compared to 1,000mm at Ziwa. These differences have affected the approaches taken to the development of the tourist lodges.





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KENYA

In 2005, following a five-year period of rhino poaching, Solio management decided that a dedicated rhino security and monitoring ranger team was necessary. This required an initial investment of some \$250,000 and an annual operating cost of \$100,000. In the first instance, funding for this came from company reserves and through the establishment of a new cattle-milking operation. Since the Reserve was a business unit in its own right, it was necessary to cover the additional costs by increasing revenue from tourism.

Solio is renowned for rhino breeding; over 150 Solio-bred individuals have been relocated to help establish other breeding populations. The management did not want to jeopardise this breeding success by exposing the animals to stress from excessive tourist traffic. They also wanted to maintain the habitat and wildlife as naturally as possible. To accommodate more tourist traffic, they would have needed to improve and extend the road system, which would have affected the animals and their habitat.

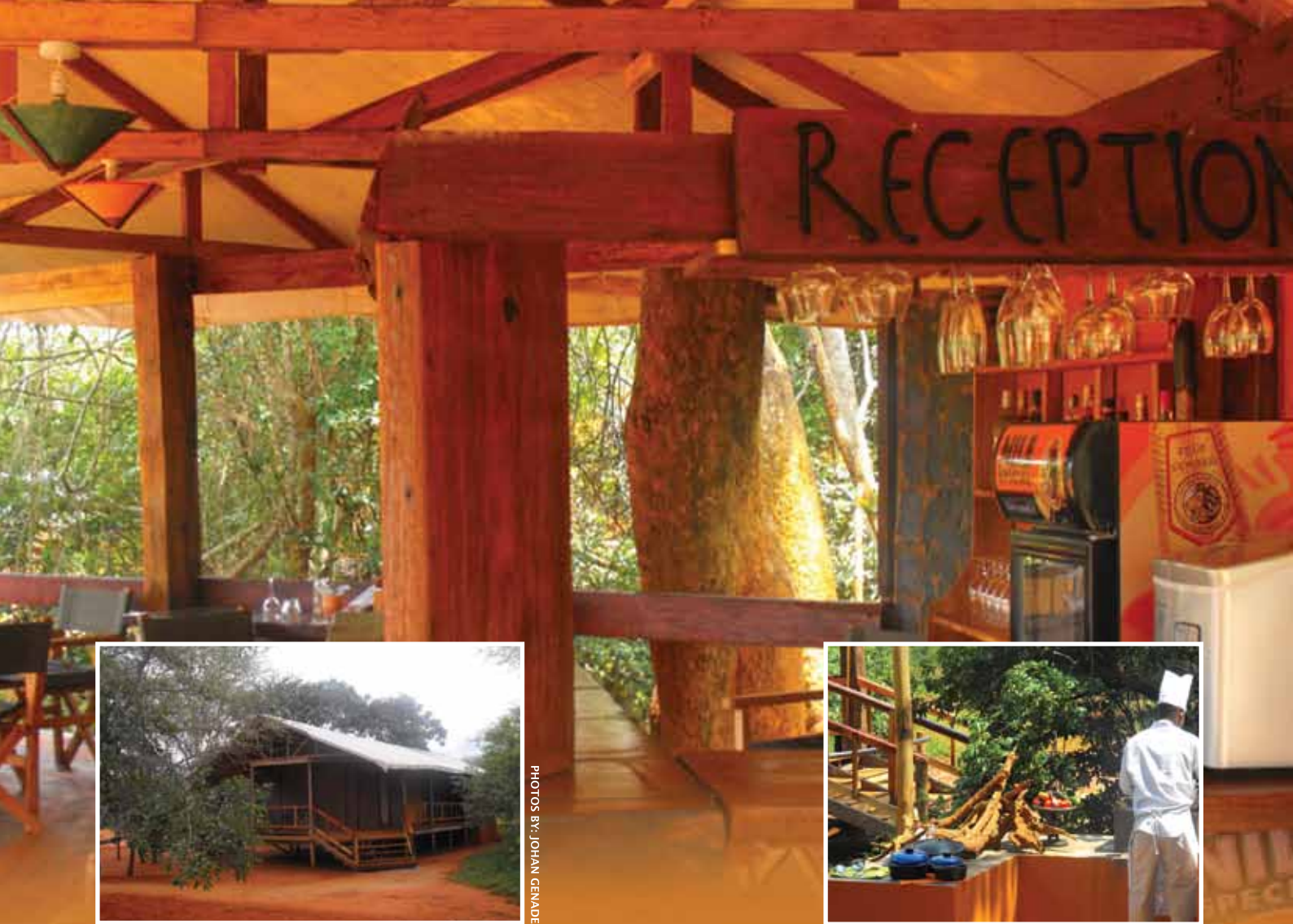
The answer lay in adding exclusivity value by controlling the number of visitors and vehicles in the reserve in order to minimise disturbance to the wildlife, to control pollution and give guests a more natural wildlife experience. The tourist franchise in Solio was granted to experienced high-end safari operators Tamimi Kenya who were to build a luxury lodge, manage the two established campsites for up-

market mobile safaris and control the number of day visitors. Owners Mikey and Tanya Carr-Hartley shared the vision of Solio management to give guests a really unique wildlife experience.

SOLIO LODGE

Solio Lodge was opened in August 2010. Situated at the southern end of the Laikipia plateau, the Lodge nestles between the Aberdare Mountains and Mount Kenya and guests can fly in to Solio's own airstrip. Accommodation consists of six cottages, four of which house two people while the others can be used together for families, with extra beds if required. Maximum occupancy is 16 people. Each cottage has a private lounge area warmed by a corner fire, as well as large bathrooms with double sink, bath and shower. With large glass windows and a deck in front, guests can relax and take in the panoramic views, which are framed by Mount Kenya.

Exclusivity, privacy, exceptional game viewing and luxurious accommodation are hallmarks at Solio. Guests currently pay \$620 per night in high season with a rack rate of \$545 per night. In addition there is a \$60 per person per night conservation fee. Apart from day and night game drives, guests can also enjoy horse-riding, nature walks, excursions to the Aberdare mountains and helicopter rides to Mt Kenya for a day of fishing or a picnic surrounded by breathtaking views. ●



PHOTOS BY: JOHAN GENADE



UGANDA

The reintroduction of wild rhinos into Uganda in 2005, following their extermination in 1983, required an extensive and unique security system to guard the individuals for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Over 40 rhino rangers plus some 100 ancillary staff needed an operating budget of over \$400,000 in 2011 -- this does not include necessary repairs and development of the road system, vehicles and so forth, which came to some \$250,000.

Rhino Fund Uganda raises this income from donations, fund-raising events and tourism. The aim is for Ziwa to become sustainable, mostly through tourism using a variety of different income-earning options, not least of which is a lodge. The Sanctuary is in Nakasongola, some 7km off the main road between Kampala and Murchison Falls, and the majority of visitors come via tour operators going to or coming from the Falls. Ziwa offers guests a guided walk to see, photograph and learn about the only wild rhinos in Uganda. With a good location and unique wildlife experience, visitor numbers have increased rapidly.

AMUKA LODGE

From the outset the plan was to build a lodge within the sanctuary, and agreement was reached in June 2010 with the newly formed private company, Amuka Lodge Limited. The aim of the lodge is to attract clients mainly from the

individually tailored safari, self-drive and, particularly, the Ugandan resident tourist sectors.

The first phase start-up comprises two chalets, each with two bedrooms, which can accommodate four people. The maximum capacity is eight people. The secluded location with views across the main swamp with its special wildlife – the rare Shoebill stork can sometimes be seen – offers a real hideaway from city life for which guests will pay \$180 per night, a rate that includes a guided walk to see the only wild rhinos in Uganda. Other activities include a bird walk, mokoro (canoe) trip on the swamp, and guided nature walk. There is also a swimming pool. Special rates are offered to Ugandan citizens and residents. The second phase of development will add eight more chalets to house a maximum of 24 guests. By staying at the Lodge, guests are able to view the rhinos when they are more active in the early morning or late evening, allowing them to avoid the tourist rush hours.

It is important for wildlife reserves to have more than one income stream in case one falls short of expectation. The development of the Solio and Amuka Lodges, albeit with different marketing strategies, offers significant revenue earning opportunities to help cover the costs of the two reserves, and will lead to the ultimate goal -- sustainability. ●

All prices quoted correct at time of publication but check for any changes.