



# 4 Vacations That Help Endangered Species

By Mia Taylor   | 12/11/15 - 02:52 PM EST

The headlines are increasingly hard to ignore, and the situation grows more dire with each passing day.

Last month, one of the world's last four northern white rhinos was euthanized at San Diego Zoo.

In July, Cecil the Lion was killed by an American trophy hunter, sparking worldwide outrage and sadness.



And within the past year, thousands of elephants and rhinos have been slaughtered for their tusks and horns, prompting England's Prince Harry during a visit to Africa last week to issue a call to action, after noting that Kruger National Park has become a killing field where the number of rhinos poached has grown nearly 500% in just five years.

Rhinos have been targeted at an unprecedented rate in recent years. In 2014 poachers slaughtered a record 1,200 in South Africa, according to *National Geographic* reports.

As for elephants, if the killing continues at its current pace, which is estimated at about 30,000 animals each year, the African elephant could be extinct in the wild within the next two decades. Put another way - of the millions that roamed the continent 50 years ago, just an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 still exist.

As Prince Harry noted in his emotional speech, delivered to a graduating class at Southern Africa Wildlife College, there may very well be no wild African elephants or rhinos left by the time children born this year turn 25.

An equally disturbing assessment was offered by Rick Schwartz, the San Diego Zoo's global ambassador, during a recent interview when he stated that "the speed in which these animals are careening towards extinction is frightening."

But there are ways to get involved and and try and help, particularly if you have time and money.

A number of hands-on opportunities exist for those who want to visit Africa and pitch-in: people can help to track and tag rhinos or care for orphaned baby elephants and rhinos and other endangered species, funding ongoing conservation in the process.

Those on the ground in Africa say tourist visits, or conservation-oriented safaris, are vital and invaluable for numerous reasons. To begin with, the trips educate travelers about the severity of the situation, and participants often then return home as ambassadors for the cause.

A steady stream of tourists also ensures that there is money coming into the communities and parks where the animals exist, helping to fund preservation efforts and support local residents, which is also important in this battle.

"A lot of people don't realize how fragile things are right now. Going on trips like these shakes people up a bit and they realize what the situation is really like," explains Elizabeth Gordon, who grew up in Kenya and now runs Extraordinary Journeys, a company that offers several conservation oriented trips. "These trips are important because [these parks and conservationists] need money, they are fighting a very difficult battle. Poaching is so high, you need money to pay park rangers, you need money to track the animals...if suddenly tourism goes down, then the money is gone. And in addition, if people (in the communities) don't have money to live and support their families, they can be swayed to get into poaching."

What's more, Gordon says, more tourists on the ground means more eyes on the animals, watching over them, keeping poachers at bay. Without their realizing it, the mere presence of tourists serves as an anti-poaching measure.

"Less things happen when tourists are around," Gordon notes. "A poacher can't just slip in there."

If you don't have the time to participate in an African conservation safari, there are several organizations and efforts dedicated to helping rhinos and elephants and other endangered species, to which you can donate money.

Some of the notable leaders in the effort include the [David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust](#), outside Nairobi, in Kenya.

Among the most well-known of the Trust's programs is the Orphans' Project, which has earned worldwide acclaim thanks to its hugely successful elephant and rhino rescue and rehabilitation program. To date, the Trust has successfully hand-raised more than 150 infant elephants. Those interested can "foster" an orphaned animal for as little as \$50 a year.

In particular, as Christmas approaches, the Trust is promoting the opportunity to give a loved one the novel gift of registering them online as a foster parent, allowing them to play an important part in the much needed care a baby elephant or rhino.

[Big Life Foundation](#), is another well-known and well-respected leader in the fight to save elephants.

Co-founded by Los Angeles based photographer Nick Brandt and award-winning conservationist Richard Bonham in September 2010, the organization employs hundreds of Maasai rangers and has more than 40 permanent outposts and tent-based field units, 13 vehicles, tracker dogs, and aerial surveillance - all of which protect two million acres of wilderness in the Amboseli-Tsavo-Kilimanjaro ecosystem of East Africa.

Big Life was the first organization in East Africa to establish coordinated, cross-border anti-poaching operations.

You can support Big Life Foundation through various levels of donation, such as a one time donation or a recurring donation. A one-time donation of \$250 for example, pays the salary and upkeep of one ranger for one month, while \$4,000 pays for one lightweight mobile camping unit.

"Five years ago somebody told me that my grandkids wouldn't see a rhino in the wild, and I thought they were being dramatic, but I don't feel like that anymore," says Angus Sholto Douglas, of the Kwandwe Private Game Reserve in South Africa, which also works to preserve rhinos. "The magnitude of what we're losing, and the current rate of loss of these animals is not sustainable for the species. They are an iconic species in Africa and we are battling to keep that species alive and education is invaluable. It's critical to make this a global issue."

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"This is a test for all humanity and we cannot afford to fail," he said. "Nature needs us to fight her battles and in this case, protect her animals, some of which have been on this planet for tens of thousands of years."

Here's a look at some of the travel opportunities available for those interested in working with endangered animals in Africa.



### [African Conservation Experience](#)

This incredibly active organization helps endangered species in numerous ways, including providing a variety of hands-on opportunities for tourists seeking to get involved.

ACE currently works with projects based in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mauritius, offering people from all walks of life sustainable volunteer placements involving unique opportunities to work with wildlife - whether you want to work in a wildlife care center, gain wildlife veterinary experience, perform field research skills or participate in a conservation internship.

There are also two week trips such as the organization's "Care for Wild Africa" offering in South Africa, which works with a local program of the same name that runs

a specialized rhino rehab facility. Participants on this trip help with the hand rearing, care and nutritional needs of the traumatized and injured infant rhinos whose mothers have been killed by poachers.

"Care for Wild Africa has a memo of understanding with Kruger National Park, which is the hardest hit area when it comes to rhinos, mostly due to the sheer size of the park - it's vast, which makes it harder to control," says ACE's Ellen Sziede. "Just the sheer number of people you need to patrol makes it hard. Plus the park has a large border with Mozambique that poachers are continually coming across. Care for Wild Africa really relies on volunteers to help. It's a small private project, so they really need do need international volunteers. The rhinos are traumatized, they are dehydrated and need 24-7 care. The volunteers are kept very busy and make a big difference."



### [Kwandwe Private Game Reserve](#)

A privately funded reserve in South Africa, Kwandwe offers several active participation activities that allow guests to get involved in the conservation and community initiatives being carried out here. Among the opportunities is a three-day, not for profit, rhino conservation safari, during which participants can help with measures to safeguard the species including rhino darting and notching. A truly up close experience, travelers shadow a specialist ranger team that is administering medication, taking measurements for scientific and medical purposes and DNA samples, while the rhino is under sedation.

"People can assist with injections, or putting identification microchips into the horn," says Kwandwe's Angus Sholto Douglas. "Or they can watch and be in awe. It's an incredible privilege to basically work with dinosaurs. It can be an incredibly emotionally experience. It has a very interesting impact on some people, some weep openly, some are shocked by softness of the animal's skin...They are quite fascinating animals."

With wildlife management costs being so high, guest participation in such efforts not only helps create further awareness for the issue but also provides much needed financial support. The rhino conservation safaris take place eight to ten times each year.

"Our initial reason for having rhinos was because we are photographic tourism property," Sholto Douglas says. "They are wonderful, iconic species that occurred here, part of the ecosystem. But it's evolved to something completely different. We have become a single species conservationist, we are so mad about rhinos. And that includes armed patrols, trained trackers and attack dogs."



### Extraordinary Journeys

This is yet another company that offers multiple opportunities, among them a 12-day trip in South Africa that allows for personally interacting with elephants, rhinos and meerkats, as well as an 11-day Zimbabwe conservation safari, from which 10% of the proceeds go toward safeguarding a future for Africa's elephants.

"40,000 elephants were killed in five years," says Extraordinary Journeys Founder Elizabeth Gordon. "If this can be stopped, the good news is [the elephants] do bounce back, you can get the numbers back. But at this rate right now, it's alarming and I'm not convinced we will have these animals for the next generation if the poaching continues."

On the Extraordinary Journeys "Elephants, Rhinos & Meerkats in South Africa" trip, participants learn about conservation efforts throughout the country, including spending time at Phinda Private Game Reserve where guests participate in rhino tracking and notching. This trip also includes a visit to Camp Jubilani in the Kruger Private Reserve, a haven for orphaned elephants.

On the "Zimbabwe Conservation Safari," visitors meet with representatives from Friends of Hwange Trust, witnessing first-hand the non-profit's efforts to create a stable environment for Hwange's wildlife.

Extraordinary Journeys also offers a 10-day "Elephant Conservation Safari to Kenya" that provides a chance to engage with and learn about rhino and elephant conservation and anti-poaching efforts. Travelers spend several days at Elephant Watch Camp, owned by Oria Douglas Hamilton, wife of Iain Douglas Hamilton, wildlife research scientist and head of Save the Elephants. Travelers have the chance to visit the Save the Elephants Research Station. This trip also includes a chance to see Daphne Sheldrick's Elephant Orphanage, a nursery and rehab center for orphaned elephants as well as the occasional rhino, zebra and other wildlife.



[Country Walkers Namibia Safari](#)

One of the newer offerings on the block, Vermont-based Country Walkers has developed a special trip that is not typically among its offerings - a nine-day journey in Namibia during which travelers join the field team of Dr. Julian Fennessy, one of the world's leading giraffe experts.

The highlights of this experience include working with Fennessy to collar and examine giraffes, as well as visiting the Save the Rhino Trust, to learn about efforts to conserve the rhino and helping to track it. Travelers will also be able to observe the desert-adapted elephant and study how they live.

The maximum number of participants for the trip is 12 people, and it requires a \$2,500 donation to conservation efforts, that is above and beyond the cost of the trip itself.

"Our hope is to make this an annual trip, running one departure a year, if not two," says Country Walker's Sonya Bradley. "It is really important to create some consistency and reliable income for these projects. This is a bit of a prototype project...But tourism can play a really vital role in terms of education, funding and awareness for these conservation programs."