

Notes from the Field

FALL 2021

Creating a Bear Oasis

**A Lasting Legacy
for Penguins**

**Returning Black
Rhinos to
Gonarezhou**



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Creating a Bear Oasis



Waterholes are a vital and rare resource for spectacled bears.

THERE ARE ABOUT 100 SPECTACLED BEARS THAT INHABIT THE PARCELS OF LAND THAT SBC IS AIMING TO PURCHASE AND ONLY ONE YEAR-ROUND WATERHOLE. AN ADDITIONAL THREE TO FOUR WATERHOLES WILL BE A SIGNIFICANT BENEFIT TO THIS POPULATION.

Thick as paste and spattered with leaves and pebbles, the cool mud encircling the waterhole was heavenly for Marco. He wriggled around, caking it into his fur, and then eased into the water. It gets upwards of 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the Peruvian dry forest, and this is the only place to escape the heat. Shaded by a small cluster of fig trees, this waterhole is everything to the dry forest spectacled bears: a place to hydrate, find food, cool off, play, and communicate with other bears. Spectacled Bear Conservation (SBC) is currently focused on protecting this vital bear habitat, even going a step further by enhancing the land through creating additional waterholes. This will bring food and water to an area severely lacking in both, and could be a key to helping this endangered population not just survive, but grow.

As bears move around the waterhole, glands in their paws leave behind a scent. With no rain to wash it away, this marker stays for weeks. The

scent of a male bear, like Marco, is a dangerous signal to females with cubs. A male could easily hurt a cub that isn't his own, so this scent keeps bears with cubs away. However, if females with cubs can't access the waterhole, they have to travel farther to find food and water, or go long periods without either. There are only six waterholes available year-round across their 150 sq. mile habitat, so options are limited. In an environment where starvation is a real possibility and water is precious, limited access to waterholes for mothers and cubs affects the survival rate of the population.

SBC has identified private land purchase as their top priority for saving the unique dry forest bear population. The dry forest offers limited food sources, which are difficult for bears to access due to expanding agriculture. Additionally, to increase their genetic diversity and improve their overall health, bears need more space to connect with and breed with other bear populations. SBC's strategy is to purchase land in order to protect it, keeping food accessible and connecting fragmented habitat. With private owners looking to sell, SBC is undergoing a

campaign to purchase more land, after which they plan to construct several new waterholes to further improve the bears' ability to survive.

Creating waterholes is a fairly simple and affordable process that would give bears more options, allowing females with cubs to avoid confrontation with males. By also planting multiple fig trees at the waterholes, which naturally occur in this forest and fruit year-round, the bears also gain a consistent food source. Moreover, these waterholes would be a valuable resource for other wildlife, like pumas, foxes, and many other species.

SBC is currently creating a new waterhole on land they recently purchased and after procuring more land, they plan to build three or four more. These waterholes will create a true oasis for spectacled bears and all wildlife in the dry forest. ■

By creating more waterholes, SBC is enriching bear habitat and helping their population to grow.

SBC's current strategy to save dry forest spectacled bears centers around purchasing private land. This kind of investment to permanently protect habitat is the best way for supporters to make the most immediate and longest lasting impact for highly threatened spectacled bears.

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TO LEARN MORE AND CONTRIBUTE TO SBC'S LAND PURCHASE PLEASE VISIT
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A Lasting Legacy for Penguins

The shadows of gulls slid across the uneven sands of Punta Tombo, a peninsula along Argentina's central coast. Dr. Pablo Borboroglu watched them glide away before returning his attention to the thousands of Magellanic penguins nestled along the beach. With 766 acres of nesting ground, Punta Tombo is one of the world's largest Magellanic penguin colonies. Gazing at these remarkable birds, he recalled how a disastrous oil spill in 1991 nearly destroyed this idyllic coast. Three decades later, the impact of that tragedy has greatly shaped the course of both penguin conservation and Pablo's life.

Oil spills were a frequent danger in 1980s Argentina, often going unreported and claiming the lives of 40,000 penguins annually. In 1991, a massive oil spill darkened the waters several hundred miles from Punta Tombo, directly in the path of thousands of migrating penguins returning from the north for breeding season. They were covered in oil by the time they reached the shore. This poisonous coat interfered with the penguins' ability to withstand cold water, preventing them from returning to the Atlantic for food. Over the course of several weeks, roughly 17,000 penguins died of starvation.

At the time, a 21-year-old Pablo was trying to raise awareness about the dangers of chronic oil pollution. When he heard about the thousands of languishing penguins, he knew he had to think bigger to address this crisis. He went to Punta Tombo and established his own rehabilitation center, bringing a group of university friends to help. They set up stations for washing and drying, providing critical care, and feeding the starving Magellanic and southern rockhopper penguins. Coordinating the delivery of food and water was especially difficult, as the beach was about 75 miles from the nearest city. Pablo's efforts attracted the attention of the media,

who sent teams to broadcast directly from the colony. Soon after, dozens more volunteers joined the effort.

For two months, Pablo's team saved the lives of over 2,000 penguins. The unexpected extensive news coverage about the penguin rescue led by young people swayed the government into acknowledging the pollution problem, and in 1997, they created new regulations that moved oil tanker lanes farther offshore from Punta Tombo. It was Pablo's first major conservation win, and penguin conservation became his life's work from then on.



WHEN OIL SEEPS BETWEEN A PENGUIN'S DENSE FEATHERS, IT DESTROYS THEIR INSULATING AND WATERPROOFING PROPERTIES, EXPOSING THE BIRDS TO HYPOTHERMIA.

On the 30th anniversary of that transformative event, Pablo remembers how special it was to release that first group of rehabilitated penguins back to the ocean. The cleanup at Punta Tombo helped him realize how much of an impact he could have for penguins, and motivated him to deepen that impact by founding Global Penguin Society (GPS) in 2009. GPS's efforts helped Punta Tombo become a designated protected marine area in 2016, where they continue their research and work to further expand the area. Today, fewer than 30 penguins are killed each year by oil pollution in this province, thanks in great part to a young student's passion in 1991. It's clear proof that every conservation action matters, which Pablo sees in every penguin nesting safely in Punta Tombo today. ■



While rehabilitation is important, it is not a solution to chronic habitat pollution. Long term solutions, like working with governments to enact policy change, are needed to protect penguins and their habitat from oil spills.

INSPIRED BY HIS EXPERIENCE AT PUNTA TOMBO IN 1991, PABLO BORBOROGLU
FOUNDED GLOBAL PENGUIN SOCIETY TO PROTECT ALL PENGUIN SPECIES.

Returning Black Rhinos to Gonarezhou



Markus Hofmeyr

Under the bright Zimbabwe sun, Markus Hofmeyr watched the trucks rumble across the plains and approach the gates. The convoy, led by a flatbed truck carrying a large metal crate, pulled into Gonarezhou National Park and stopped near the waiting team of conservationists. Markus' colleagues set to work, opening the crate to reveal a sedated black rhino, resting comfortably after a long journey. This rhino was part of an ambitious project to reintroduce the species to Gonarezhou, where they once roamed until poaching claimed them all.

Rhinos have been absent from Gonarezhou for nearly three decades. A large reintroduction effort in the 1970s brought black rhinos from the Zambezi Valley to Gonarezhou, which was chosen for its relatively low levels of poaching. But the 1980s brought civil war to neighboring Mozambique, destabilizing the region and forcing the park to close to the public. With a low level of security and large rhino population, Gonarezhou soon became a victim of a rampant wave of poaching that swept through southern Africa at the time. These heightened pressures prevented this first reintroduction

from succeeding, and by 1994, all rhinos had disappeared from Gonarezhou.

This defeat taught conservationists and law enforcement valuable lessons, and earlier this year, a second black rhino reintroduction project was launched. This endeavor was spearheaded by the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT), a partnership between Rhino Recovery Fund (RRF) grantee, Frankfurt Zoological Society, and the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority. GCT spent 12 years bolstering park security and developing an intricate plan to source suitable rhinos from nearby protected areas and relocate them to Gonarezhou. With this reintroduction, Gonarezhou is now home to more black rhinos than any other national park in Zimbabwe.

As Director of the RRF and a wildlife veterinarian, Markus played an important role in this milestone by helping coordinate the relocation process with GCT's team of experts. They spent nearly a week selecting and securing 29 black rhinos, who were carefully moved to the park by truck. Each rhino was kept in a protected enclosure for several weeks to ensure they were healthy and acclimatized before finally being released. Since many of these rhinos were pregnant, GCT is hopeful that the population will grow quickly. With less than 6,000 black rhinos remaining in the wild, establishing a new, viable population from different genetic sources will help this critically endangered species recover its numbers.

Rhino horn remains valuable, so the threat of poaching will likely always be present, but GCT has taken extraordinary measures to ensure Gonarezhou's black rhinos are protected. They are in communication with poaching intelligence networks, receive support from law enforcement, and have trained an extensive ranger team to monitor every rhino daily. GCT is eager to see the impact of this new rhino population on the Gonarezhou ecosystem in the coming years, and the success of the project will act as a template for future rhino reintroduction efforts elsewhere. Most of all, these rhinos embody the hope that, despite once being lost to poaching, endangered wildlife can return to their rightful homes for a chance to thrive again. ■



Top & center photos by Bad Rabbit Studio; bottom by Markus Hofmeyr.

Opposite page: A pair of black rhinos being monitored in their boma.

Above top: Markus Hofmeyr, a wildlife veterinarian and Director of the RRF, helped coordinate the rhino relocation process. Center: GCT built bomas to house the rhinos prior to release. Bottom: Sedated rhinos were transported in large crates by truck to Gonarezhou.



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EIN # 30-0108469 • CFC # 63038

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