

Even government bullets aren't enough to stop the desperate poachers who slaughter Zimbabwe's venerable rhinos.

HORNS OF A DILEMMA

BY MARGARET L. KNOX

This was not my idea of a sensitive wilderness trip across a national park. As we wobbled skyward in a roaring cloud of dust, our helicopter panicked a family of elephants. We skimmed acacia treetops like a giant tsetse fly gone berserk, frightening hippopotamuses into the Zambezi River. I wished I could apologize to the flocks of egrets we jolted from their roosts, but by the time my stomach stopped rolling we were touching down in Chewore Safari Area, where Zimbabwe's black rhinoceros herd is concentrated. ■ Zimbabwe's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management was hoping to show off the successful climax of an anti-poaching patrol. But conservation is never that simple, especially in Africa's youngest republic. What should have been a precision two-day sweep to roust a band of rustlers instead played out like a Keystone Kops farce:



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Rangers on patrol (above left). Black rhinos (right). Slaughtered rhino (left).



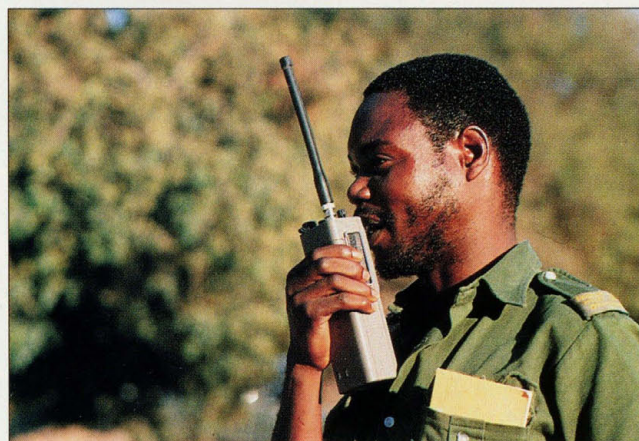
Late the previous night, Champion Chundu, a National Parks scout, heard the crack of a poacher's rifle. He, unfortunately, had forgotten his own gun, and could only stand ankle-deep in a malarial swamp shouting coordinates into his radio. The lookout team on a high cliff was socked in by fog and equally useless. So the operation's leader, Mark Brightman, jumped into a motorboat to head off the thieves as they crossed the river to the safety of neighboring Zambia. But the motor's pullcord broke and he drifted ignominiously downstream, silently apologizing to the 508 rhinos lost to poachers since 1984. The morning I arrived, he and his men found the carcass of number 509.

"We're just not winning," Brightman told me on the way back to anti-poaching headquarters in Mana Pools National Park. Like his British ancestors, Brightman is a master of understatement. Much has changed in the more than four years since this southern African country became the darling of the international conservation community with its shoot-to-kill policy against poachers. When announced in May 1985, the approach seemed the only hope for a species that was, in a sense, being impaled on its own horn: Pound for pound, rhino horn is more valuable in Taipei than wholesale cocaine is in Miami. The SAVE African Endangered Wildlife Foundation of New York and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, formerly World Wildlife Fund) of Geneva quietly agreed that nothing short of a rifle slug in the chest was likely to stop destitute poachers from annihilating the world's last viable herd of black rhinos.

The battlefield is the 22,500-square-mile Zambezi Valley, the border between relatively prosperous Zimbabwe and Zambia, a country so needy its export farms are reverting from tractors to oxen. All but wiped out in Zambia, the rhinos seemed to have a chance across the river in Zimbabwe. With his 1985 announcement, President Robert Mugabe put conservation above racial politics by sending white National Parks officers—who got their training in the Rhodesian army he overthrew—back into the bush to hunt down black poachers. In the early days of the rhino war, smartly turned out National Parks scouts sang fight songs as they paraded past dignitaries from wealthy donor organizations. Brightman thought then that the whole grisly affair would be sorted out in a couple of months, that he would soon be leading nature walks rather than combat patrols through his beloved bush.

Instead, Zimbabwe's showpiece campaign has turned into an unfunny good news-bad news joke. The good news is that unlike many African governments, Zimbabwe recognizes the value of wildlife, genuinely wants to preserve it, and has been artful in attracting the assistance of international conservation groups. The bad news is that conservationists here never have enough money, are often preoccupied with protecting their patch of influence, and have to please not only their donors but tribal chiefs 500 years dead. The rhinos are still being killed faster than they can reproduce.

Wildlife biologists, Texas millionaires, and local farmers all have rushed to the rescue, each with a "better" plan than the



Park rangers discuss the escape of two poachers (top). Issues are ordered by radio to scouts in the bush (middle). Mark Brightman, senior ranger in charge of Operation Stronghold, explains the day's strategy (bottom). National Parks scouts found 61 dead rhinos in 1988, less than half the number discovered in 1987. Nevertheless, says Brightman, "We're just not winning."

last. Kill the poachers. Co-opt the poachers. Sacrifice the habitat to save the species. Save the habitat to keep wildlife wild. Harvest the horn and flood the market. Annihilate the traders and extinguish the market. And every answer leads back to thorny philosophical questions about the definition and value of wildlife.

At the center of all the fuss is a pugnacious tank of a beast whose nose-mounted weaponry, alarming agility, and armor of thick, almost hairless skin are legacies of the Eocene epoch, 55 million years past. Time has whittled away at the family *Rhinocerotidae*: The biggest land mammal of all time, *Baluchitherium grangeri*, a rhino four times as big as today's African bull elephant, is long gone. The North American rhino died out in the Pliocene era, and other extinctions have followed. Today's black rhinoceros, most numerous of five remaining species, is a solitary, near-sighted browser known to charge bushes for no apparent reason. An unfortunate notion of its horn as macho magic has led to the species' losing battle with the automatic rifle.

It all began with European and Asian legends that this bulky creature that wallows in mud and eats thorn bushes was also fond of music, perfume, and virgins. The horn, people believed, contained the animal's strength. In 1298, Marco Polo reported Sumatran rhinos as unicorns, long a symbol of ferocity, and Arab traders were soon selling "unicorn horn" as a drug. The whole world had the same idea: In Africa men bathed in rhino blood for courage; in Borneo fertility rites featured dried rhino penises; in India the horn was considered an aphrodisiac.

A spate of poaching in the 1970s reduced the black rhino population from 65,000 to less than 5,000 worldwide. Suddenly, young men in North Yemen, flush with wages from Saudi oilfields, could afford rhino-horn dagger handles, an ancient symbol of manhood once reserved for the royal and wealthy. In Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, rhino-horn shavings now sell for as much as \$20,000 a pound as cures for everything from failing vision to heart ailments. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, more than \$5 million worth of medicines containing rhino horn slips into the United States illegally each year. Chemically, customers might as well bite their fingernails. Rhino horn isn't bone. Like fingernails, it is nothing but densely packed fibers of keratin and can be sliced off the beast's nose with a Swiss Army knife.

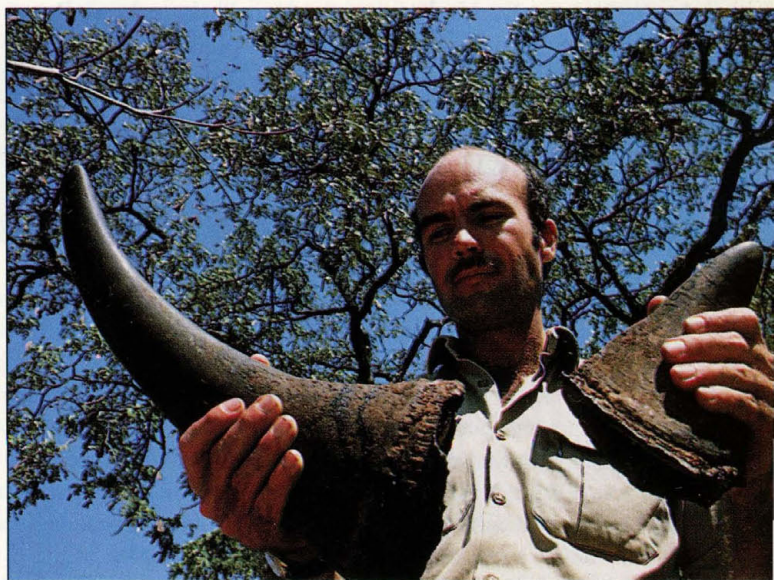
In Zimbabwe the first line of defense against such lucrative thievery is Operation Stronghold, the paramilitary program commanded in the field by Brightman. With radios and two small aircraft supplied by SAVE, and the helicopter from the WWF, 1988 was Operation Stronghold's best year. Brightman counted only 61 rhino carcasses, less than half the number killed in the previous year. But the estimated 600 rhinos remaining in the Zambezi Valley, reproducing at a maximum rate of 7 percent a year, could only have produced 44 babies.

Perhaps the greatest enemy of the rhino is the poverty that has settled like a plague across the river in Zambia. More than

60 poachers—and one National Parks scout—have been killed in firefights since the advent of Operation Stronghold, with no apparent deterrent effect. The poachers keep coming, stealing across the river at night in their dugout canoes with AK-47 rifles slung over their shoulders. A horn can bring them the equivalent of \$200, enough to feed a family for a year with plenty left over to grease the palm of a Zambian constable. Against their pathetic determination, Brightman's force of less than one man per 40 square miles is hardly a match. Peter Matoka, a former Zambian High Commissioner to Zimbabwe who spent much of his term claiming poachers' corpses, said many of his countrymen are so desperate and out of touch they smear their bodies with juju—magic prescribed by witch doctors to make them invisible. As we settled into deck chairs in front of Brightman's riverfront shack at Mana Pools, I told him lots of people argue that no one deserves the summary justice Zambia's barefoot desperadoes are getting.

"The bunny huggers don't like it," Brightman acknowledged, using a pejorative National Parks term for people who like animals but not enough to kill for them. "When a group of Arabs makes an assault on the British crown jewels there is a skirmish and lots are killed—to protect rocks—and nobody minds. Here we're protecting a world heritage, but it happens to be animals and that hangs people up. We're enforcing the law. They're using firearms. We must respond with the same force."

Mustering that force is a problem that drives Brightman



Charlie Haley of the Zimbabwean police force holds two rhino horns confiscated from captured poachers. Haley and two colleagues were jailed for killing a poacher in 1988; soon thereafter Zimbabwe officially endorsed the shoot-to-kill policy.

crazy. His funding is puny, and his jurisdiction is trampled by blundering, envious, or downright hostile rival agencies. "We need four times as many scouts and three times as much money," Brightman said as he furiously stacked firewood to cook his dinner. "The government has got to commit itself as it would for any other war." Then he paused to gaze upriver at a tangerine sunset streaked with lightning and dotted with fireflies. Beyond the barbecue, hippos bellowed and three elephants swayed in unison like Motown backup singers. For all his frustration, Brightman can't bring himself to resign.

But something is undermining his campaign that nobody much likes to talk about: racism. It took an eight-year guerrilla war ending in 1980 to turn white-ruled Rhodesia into black-ruled Zimbabwe. Since then, President Mugabe has made reconciliation between the races a top priority. About half of the 250,000 white Rhodesians stayed after independence (the country's total population is approximately 10 million). Whites still own the country's big commercial farms and many hold key positions in business and government. In National Parks and particularly in Operation Stronghold, whites remain, by and large, the "officers" and blacks the "foot soldiers." Some 200 black guerrillas were rewarded with National Parks jobs, and they, among others, tend to resent taking orders from their former enemies. For their part, white officers complain of insubordination, and many feel the government is trying to force them out. Mugabe seemed genuinely surprised when I asked him at a press conference in March about racial tensions in the parks department. He promised to investigate, and old Zimbabwe hands say that is just the kind of promise he is likely to keep. But racial wounds tend to fester.

"There used to be an assumption by people working in National Parks that no black person was competent to deal with conservation," Parks Director Willie Nduku told me a few days later as he lounged in a cheetah-hide chair in his Harare office. Most blacks have never seen Africa's treasure trove of large mammals, which during the past century has been funneled into reserves that only the wealthy (which includes anyone well-off enough to afford an automobile) can visit. "Before independence we used to call wildlife 'white men's property,'" Nduku said.

A lingering perception of national parks as a colonial indulgence often poisons the judgment of supposed allies. The squabbling that erupts between government agencies is nearly as detrimental to the rhinos as superstition or the park department's shrinking budget. (Parks officials say that between budget cuts, inflation, and the declining value of the Zimbabwean dollar, their buying power has been halved since independence in 1980.) The Zimbabwe police and army insist on participating in headline-grabbing Operation Stronghold, but untrained in bushcraft, Brightman complains, their men are as likely to shoot a lion in panic or poach an impala for dinner as they are to save a rhino. National Parks staff particularly resent the Zimbabwe Republic Police, and the feeling is mutual.

Just before Christmas, 1988, the National Parks chief war-

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DEBORAH COPAKEN / GAMMA-LIAISON

Mark Brightman amid
retrieved rhino skulls.

den and two assistants shot dead their first Zimbabwean poacher. The national police arrested them. After three years and threescore dead Zambians, the police discovered that no legislation allows National Parks to kill people. National Parks officials privately allege that the dead Zimbabwean was the nephew of a government official, and that the police envy the publicity National Parks' rhino campaign is getting. It didn't help that the three parks-agency employees were white.

Amid finger-pointing about racism and jealously guarded turf, morale in National Parks plummeted. Nine rhinos went to the slaughter over the holidays before charges were dropped. Throughout the crisis, police officials sounded like Alfred E. Newman: What, me worry? While the three were still facing charges, Patrick Chingosho, the senior police officer at Mana Pools, told me relations between police and the parks agency had "never been better." That same week, a constable who fell asleep on an anti-poaching ambush was



devoured by lions within earshot of his horrified comrades, and the police began boycotting anti-poaching patrols. Brightman threw up his hands. "We can carry on killing poachers forever," he said, "but I reckon the rhinos will be gone before we actually stop them. The only way to win is to fight at the level of the dealers."

Getting to the dealers is Graham Nott's job. As National Parks' chief investigator, he tracks horn brokers all over the continent. "For these people the rhino is nothing but a horn," he said, pacing his dingy Harare office like a prisoner. "It doesn't matter that we're running out of animals—that just pushes the price higher."

Coordinating international enforcement in this region is about as easy as getting two male rhinos to share the shade of a sausage tree. Nott alleged, for example, that captured poachers have implicated Zambian government ministers. But Nott's counterpart, Paul Russell, a Briton who heads the Zambian Anti-Corruption Commission, sputtered at me

over a crackling telephone line from Lusaka that the Zimbabweans have failed to present a "shred" of evidence. Not only do the so-called frontline states disagree about who is a criminal, they can't even agree on what constitutes a crime. In Zimbabwe the minimum penalty for illegal possession of a rhino horn is five years in prison. In neighboring Botswana, a trucker caught en route to South Africa with 96 horns—the biggest haul Nott has ever heard of—was fined the equivalent of \$2,000 and set free.

The tiny central African nation of Burundi used to be the continent's horn-smuggling hub. But after a coup in 1988 the new government showed astonishing zeal in enforcing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Now the bulk of the rhino-horn trade flows through South Africa, Nott alleged.

South Africa's success in protecting rhinos within its own borders makes Zimbabweans wonder why Pretoria can't stop the trade in horns brought in from neighboring coun-

tries. "Perhaps they want us to fail," said Parks Director Nduku, "so they can say, 'See? Black Africa can't take care of its wildlife.'" The South African connection gives Zimbabwe just one more grievance against the implacable racist enemy. "We can't get any cooperation down there at all," Nott sighed.

National Parks can't even get cooperation from its donors. The WWF became so frustrated that it stopped funding the rhino campaign's only helicopter in May. "The Parks directorate is too bloody disorganized," WWF program manager Raoul du Toit told me. "The helicopter was a holding action until the agency could come up with a long-term approach." Du Toit blames all the top park officials—ecologists, enforcers, and executives, black and white. "They still haven't formulated a realistic plan," he said. "Without one, the WWF isn't willing to carry on."

For the first time in three months of following the rhino campaign, I began to despair. If National Parks and the WWF couldn't get along, it seemed the poor beast everyone was bickering about had small chance for survival. When I mentioned my fears to du Toit, he said Operation Stronghold could yet succeed: It will simply mean some painful choices for the parks department. Du Toit wants the agency to stop patrolling the entire Zambezi Valley and concentrate instead on a few small sanctuaries. Rangers could throw a human net around the densest populations, he said, step up the removal of rhinos from other areas, and kiss the rest good-bye.

Texas millionaire Harry Tennyson, founder of Game Conservation International (Game COIN), takes the sanctuary philosophy to an extreme. For him, saving the species—not the habitat—is paramount. "Since we are the predators, it's our job to take care of the prey," Tennyson said, sipping scotch in the lobby of Harare's posh Meikles Hotel while I watched cheetahs chase prey across his necktie. "Your Sierra Clubbers don't like me," he chuckled. "We're conservationists—as in conservative. We don't want to preserve—as in formaldehyde." Tennyson hasn't given up on saving the Zambezi Valley; in fact, he said, he would try to find National Parks a new helicopter. But he advocates "rhino ranching" in Texas, which he claims offers "identical weather, food, and surroundings" to the Zambezi Valley, an assertion that makes Zimbabwean ecologists shudder.

"Rhino ranches" are luxury zoos with no visitors. On vast estates near Fort Worth, Texas, three black rhinos, fenced and guarded round the clock, graze at a cost of \$1,000 a month each to their Game COIN hosts. Getting them there cost at



A Zambian poacher lies dead, shot by an anti-poaching patrol. In the early days of Operation Stronghold, rangers simply arrested the raiders who stole across the Zambezi River to Zimbabwe. The rhino war escalated when poachers began shooting rangers rather than face arrest. More than 60 poachers have been killed.

least \$25,000 a beast, Tennyson said. "We're not in it for the money. Our board managers are billionaires," he said with a wink. "Except me. I'm just a multimillionaire."

Even the most antagonistic Zimbabweans concede the scheme shows results. Macho and Chula, two black rhinos flown by Game COIN from South Africa to Texas in 1986, became parents in February. Like the Arabian oryx and the North African addax, the black rhino might die out in the wild and have to be reintroduced from such sanctuaries. That, says Tennyson, may be the rhino's only hope.

The rhinos may not have to flee as far as Texas to find a haven. Some 300 have been moved from the Zambezi Valley to other parks and commercial farms within Zimbabwe. So far, not one has been poached off a farm. National Parks officials are also watching South African experiments in dehorning white rhinos to render them undesirable to poachers. But the horns grow back, and Brightman predicts that even if the agency started farming rhinos and harvesting the horn, it would take five tons a year to meet demand.

For all their bluster and fearsome appearance, rhinos are emotionally and physically delicate. Shooting them with tranquilizer darts or dehorning them often causes heart attacks. The animals break their horns on the crates used to move them, and the wounds become infected. Some 20 percent die in the relocation effort. In October 1988, ten black rhinos removed from the Zambezi Valley by presidential order sweltered in crates in Harare while Tennyson haggled unsuccessfully with airlines. One rhino died of stress after a veterinarian ordered their release, a National Parks ecologist told me. For these reasons and more, parks officials still balk at the idea of evacuating the Zambezi Valley.

"Once the rhino goes, the elephant will be next," Brightman said. "It's happened all the way down the continent. And when the big animals that draw tourists are gone, we will have trouble justifying these vast tracts of wilderness."

Wilderness already is a hard concept to sell to Zimbabwe's land-hungry peasant majority. Half of the country's people live on communal lands. Most occupy marginal terrain, such as the fringes of the Zambezi Valley, where soils are poor and rainfall unpredictable. They farm or graze their soils to exhaustion, deplete their wildlife, and begin trespassing on government land as squatters or poachers—of warthog, wildebeest, or rhino. That's bad for the animals, and it's not even good for the people. Under Zimbabwean law, farmers own the wildlife that wanders onto their land; commercially savvy whites already have learned to harvest hefty fees from safari operators hauling Land Rovers full of tourists or hunters on private lands. But the communal farmers live in a different world—without facilities to handle tourists or the experience and capital to attract them. The same elephant that a tourist on a private farm might pay big bucks to photograph or shoot is, to them, nothing but a crop-trampling pest.

Some communal districts near the protected areas stand to earn more than \$150,000 a year from safari hunting.

"Educated to their rights and given some help managing in the modern economy, these people could be spinning their wildlife into schools, roads—rural development," said Dick Pitman, chair of the conservationist Zambezi Society. Around him in a sunny glade an unlikely group of allies called the Mvuradonha Wilderness Committee had gathered. The committee formed to manage 160,000 acres of land set aside by tribal chiefs who want to market their mountains' beauty just as their white countrymen would do.

The big-money plan is to bring in foreign tourists and wealthy urbanites for mountain climbing, spelunking, horseback riding, and wildlife viewing. Nick O'Connor, who owns a tobacco farm nearby, plans to operate horseback safaris in the area, paying fees to the communal farmers and taking a profit for himself.

"At the moment, the poachers are Robin Hoods," said O'Connor, who looks—and rides—like a leathery bush jockey. "But when the community realizes these animals are worth a lot more alive, anybody who poaches will be an outcast. The community will police itself." The committee, in other words, will use social pressure in place of guns.

Chief Matthew Chiweshi's people are poachers, and it is his job to convince them to sacrifice a kudu haunch today for a piece of Zimbabwe's burgeoning tourist pie tomorrow. The



A two-year-old rhino whose mother was killed is one of seven rhinos in captivity at Imire Game Park. With the rhino population dropping, poachers have begun killing elephants and hippos for ivory.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

Whether Zimbabwe can stop the poaching of black rhinoceroses in the Zambezi Valley may not matter. Mobil Oil has been negotiating with Zimbabwe since June 1987 for exploration and drilling rights from one end of the valley to the other.

Mobil says it has a 5- to 10-percent chance of discovering oil under these 22,500 square miles of wilderness. To find out, the company wants to build base camps, equipment yards, and more than 750 miles of road for seismic machinery. A government geologist told me the discovery of oil could earn Zimbabwe \$180 million a year in precious foreign exchange. But a report published in January by the Geneva-based International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) states that the effects could be devastating. It warns of noise, fumes, chemical spills, and, above all, the grid of roads that would become topsoil-erosion chutes and highways for poachers.

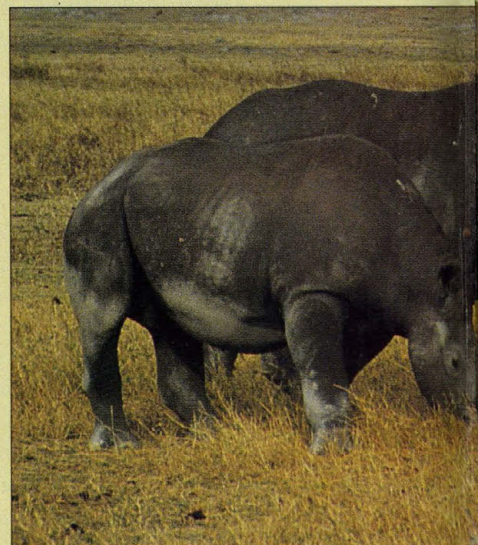
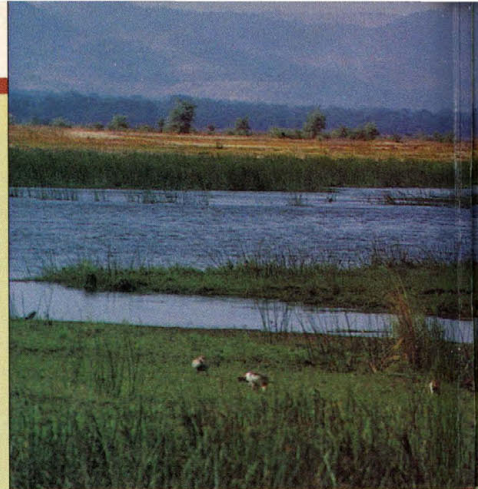
Nobody was surprised to learn that the exploration would be destructive. What surprised environmentalists here was that negotiations had gone on for more than a year without the Department of National Parks and Wildlife

Management even being told. National Parks Director Willie Nduku was outraged.

"This is the subject of a serious quarrel between our department and the rest of government," Nduku said. "If they don't modify the contract, I am very much afraid for the rhino."

Mobil says it made a special effort to notify the right people when negotiations began. At least it stuck to the letter of Zimbabwean law, which requires notification of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism when any development on state land is planned. That's when the comedy of errors began. The Ministry has two branches, and Natural Resources—not National Parks—received the message. The Ministry sent to a meeting with Mobil not an ecologist but an accountant, whose report was filed and forgotten.

When National Parks staff learned a contract was about to be signed in September 1988 they stalled negotiations long enough to commission the IUCN report. But when the report came through in all its hair-raising detail, they couldn't get the information to Victoria Chitepo, the department's minister: The number-two official in



The Zambezi River Valley (top) is home to 600 black

rhinos. The Ministry for some reason didn't think the matter worthy of Chitepo's attention and would not return my calls to explain why not.

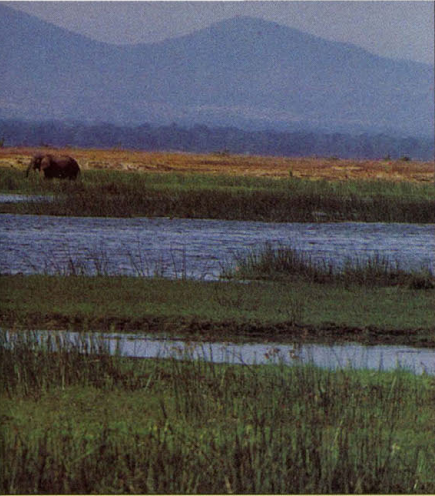
Dick Pitman, chair of the Zambezi

traditional view of wildlife, Chiweshi told me, is "meat in the pot." At first his people were suspicious of the wilderness project, he said: "They thought these people would take the land." Chiweshi asked the committee for \$30 to buy a length of black cloth for his tribe's spirit medium. The medium will wear the cloth, he said, to call the royal ancestor whose land this is. A camper had been injured slipping over a waterfall and the chief thought it best to make sure the ancestor understood who these strange visitors were. O'Connor, who consults a medium about his own tobacco harvest—"just for good measure"—voted in favor.

On paper at least, the committee's plans seem to have something for everyone: the white entrepreneur, the black villagers, and the wildlife. But are the Mvuradonha Mountains a good place for rhinos? The bush here certainly looks like rhino habitat elsewhere, and we found evidence that this is potential rhino country in an unusual place. O'Connor took Dick Pitman and me on horseback far into this craggy

wilderness of lacy miombo forest and hooting fiscal shrikes. Like pink ghosts, the delicate outlines of horned and hook-lipped creatures painted on rocks hundreds of years ago by Bushmen showed us that this remote corner of Zimbabwe once did nurture the rhinos.

Even with the Bushmen's proof and the ancestor's blessing, the renewal of wildlife—and the rhino in particular—in the Mvuradonha Mountains will depend on the animals' survival 4,000 feet below on the Zambezi Valley floor. Though recreation (tourism and safari hunting) is the country's third-biggest industry after agriculture and mining, the rhino's habitat may yet be yanked from under it. In 1980 conservationists had to fight plans to dam the Zambezi River and flood the valley. Then came DDT and the efforts to wipe out the tsetse fly; eradication of the tsetse would open the valley to livestock and eventual settlement. This year the government is considering giving Mobil Oil exploration and drilling rights throughout the whole valley—across national



DEBORAH COPAKEN / GAMMA-LIAISON



PAUL CONKLIN / UNIPHOTO

rhinos (bottom), less than half the population in 1983.

tised against the contract. "They wouldn't get away with this in the developed world. They wouldn't dare try it in Yellowstone."

Mark Gunther, the Mobil geophysicist in charge of the project, shrugged when I asked him whether the Zimbabwean government made a mistake sending only an accountant to the meeting. "I'd feel pretty silly about that," he said. "But we tried." Gunther, who introduced himself to me as a Sierra Club member, said opponents should visit South Luangwa National Park in Zambia, where he finished a similar project in 1987. "Reports we get from Zambia are pretty good," he said. "The roads allow Parks and Wildlife people greater access to the park."

"Completely false," ecologist Richard Bell shouted over the phone from Luangwa. Bell, who helps run a government resource-management project in Luangwa, said the straight lines bulldozed across gulleys and hills make perfect footpaths into thicketed areas for poachers. "We've found animals killed close by," he said. "Elephants. And rhino."

Zambia is so dependent on drilling that its Mineral Exploration Act completely overrides its National Parks Act, Bell said. Only the arrival of earthmovers alerted National Parks authorities in Luangwa to the Mobil

contract. Then followed nine months of argument over ebony and acacia groves, rowdy crews, oversize camps, and a trail of oil drums and old tires. "Mobil's idea of restoration is, after bulldozing the vegetation to one side, to bulldoze it back again," Bell said. "And you must bear in mind what will happen if they find oil: wellheads every square kilometer [each occupying] one hectare (two and a half acres) of 'improved ground,' which means asphalt or gravel with access roads. Zimbabwe must sew Mobil up as tight as it possibly can."

Cautioned by Bell, Zimbabwe National Parks officials finally got through to Minister Chitepo. "Once we managed to get the facts to her, she was terrific," said National Parks ecologist Debbie Gibson, who camped outside the minister's office the morning the Cabinet was to discuss the matter and greeted her with a hastily typed and impassioned brief. Chitepo persuaded the other ministers to put off signing a contract with Mobil until at least an environmental impact statement is guaranteed. The government will also consider excluding three areas critical to the rhino: Mana Pools National Park and Sapi and Chewore safari areas.

"Apart from the fact that we'd like them not to do it at all," Gibson said, "it's an improvement."—*M.L.K.*

Society, blames Mobil for taking advantage of a government that is green with a small *g*. "They nearly pulled a fast one," said Pitman, whose 500-member group has lobbied and adver-

parks, safari areas, and a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site (see sidebar). For all its enthusiasm for the rhino, the government often lets concern for pressing financial problems override conservation. When Pitman described his group's seven-year struggle to keep the Zambezi Valley wild, I thought of the dung beetle, a Sisyphian creature I'd watched time and again in the valley pushing its growing burden uphill only to lose control at the crest and have the load tumble back down.

"You're sitting in the Zambezi Valley," Pitman said as we watered our horses by a bamboo thicket, "and you think about dams, tsetse eradication, rhino poaching, oil—and you wind up wondering: How long is this going to go on?"

To contemplate the problem one last time, I canoed the Zambezi River in April, 100 miles from Mana Pools to the Mozambique border—past the spot where another canoist had been shot at by poachers, past poachers' camps and armed Zimbabwean patrols, past a safari operator who

cynically flouted the law by taking his noisy inflatable Zodiak where motorboats are forbidden. Mostly, though, my small group of paddlers floated quietly among crocodiles and buffalo, under clouds of fluttering quelea and skeins of migrating storks. This sparkling river and the wilderness it bounds are charged with a wary vitality the visitor comes to share. A hippo's head once breached the windruffled surface too close for comfort. We slept on islands to avoid tempting lions and hyenas. The constant thrumming of insects only deepened the valley's silence. It was the kind of experience one returns from with a softer voice, a smaller ego, and a larger soul. Perhaps some bizarre alchemy of sleuthing, diplomacy, gunfire, and a scrap of black cloth will assure a future for this Edenic river valley and the rare beast it cradles. If that happens, the battles will have been worth fighting. ■

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