



By 1983, Zambia had lost most of its rhinos to poachers as these skulls in the South Luangwa National Park illustrate.

The slaughter of Zimbabwe's rhinos

Story and photos by Esmond Bradley Martin



Top; left : Poachers from Zambia have been crossing the Zambezi Valley into Zimbabwe.

Top; right : This black rhino was dehorned in May 1993.

Bottom : Until late 1992, rhino horns were commonly on display in Taiwan's traditional medicine shops.

THE BLACK RHINO POPULATION of Zimbabwe reached its peak this century at about 3,000 in the early 1980s, the largest in Africa at the time, but since then has declined by over 85 percent. Since the mid-1980s more rhinos have been illegally killed in Zimbabwe than in any other country. From 1984 until February 1993, official figures show that at least 1,134 rhino carcasses have been found by the authorities, but the total number of rhinos poached during this period probably exceeded 1,500. As recently as 1990, senior officials in the National Parks and Wild Life Management Department believed that there were still 2,000 black rhinos in the country, which was an over-estimation. By early 1993 there were probably under 400 black

rhinos. Zimbabwe also has a population of white rhinos, mainly in Hwange, Kyle and Matopos Parks, which numbered about 200 in 1984. Despite some poaching, the population in early 1993 was 230.

In the late 1980s Zimbabwe still had more black rhinos than any other country, but now Zimbabwe has only the fourth largest population after South Africa, Namibia and Kenya. What has caused this catastrophic decline? Who has been responsible for this massive slaughter? Where have the horns gone? These queries will be examined in this article and in addition, recommendations to try to rectify the situation will be offered.

From the 1960s until 1984 very few rhinos were poached in the country be-

cause Zimbabweans felt it was not worth the risk of being caught, despite the economic returns. In mid-1984, however, a new group of poachers appeared: hunters from Zambia. These people were far poorer than their Zimbabwean counterparts, so their incentive to kill rhinos for the horns was much greater. Zambia had thousands of black rhinos in the early 1970s, but by mid-1984, very few were left. Zambia's economy also was collapsing by the mid-1980s. Hunters in Zambia had few alternative ways of earning a livelihood due to a massive increase in unemployment which continues today. They were, and still are, prepared to risk their lives to look for rhinos in Zimbabwe. From 1985 to February 1993, 166 poachers, mostly Zambians, have been killed by the authorities, and 88 captured. Four Zimbabwean government personnel have been killed in this continuing war for the rhinos.

These poachers started shooting Zimbabwe's rhinos in the area closest to the Zambian border: Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley, where also the animals were very numerous. From 1984 until 1987 at least 398 of the Valley's rhinos were poached, an estimated 92 percent of Zimbabwe's total number of poached rhinos during this period. By 1988 the hunters were finding it more difficult to locate rhinos in the Zambezi Valley, so they turned westwards to the Chete Safari Area and Hwange National Park. Then in 1989 they moved into Matusadona National Park, killing 16 rhinos and the Chizarira National Park, killing 28 rhinos. By this time, Zambian poachers were killing 65 percent of their rhinos beyond the Zambezi Valley. By 1991, they were regularly travelling more than a hundred kilometres into Zimbabwe to shoot rhinos in the Chirisa Safari Area and the adjoining Sengwa Wildlife Research Area. In 1992 some Zambian poachers went all the way to southern Zimbabwe for rhinos in Matopos Park. From January to September 1992 the worst rhino poaching occurred in Matusadona National Park, with 28 shot dead and Chete Safari Area where 17 were killed.

The official number of rhinos poached in Zimbabwe increased from 19 in 1984 to 184 in 1987, the worst year. From 1988 to 1991, the numbers averaged 148 a year despite the falling rhino population, and were 105 in 1992. With the disappearance of most rhinos in the Zambezi Valley by the late 1980s, the poachers started to kill elephants as well. From an official average of 28 a year killed from 1980 to 1989, 104 were killed in 1990, 71 in 1991 and 89 in 1992. Although these numbers are rela-

tively low, animals with large tusks were selected. If allowed to continue, their loss will damage Zimbabwe's very lucrative elephant sport-hunting industry.

Most of the poaching gangs are from western Zambia; often they are the descendants of Angolan refugees or their families who live in this area and who are experienced hunters. Others are from Lusaka, especially the Chawama Compound where western Zambians live, and from villages along the Zambezi River. The poachers are mostly recruited by middlemen. Often these organizers, who are Zambian citizens or residents from West Africa, provide the rifles (AK-47s and G3s), ammunition, transport and food. Recently, some of the rifles have come from UNITA forces in Angola and are therefore relatively modern and at least as effective as those used by the Zimbabwean game scouts.

They usually do not give up until they have killed a rhino or failing that an elephant or are detected by the Zimbabwean authorities.

The poachers cross the Zambezi River at night, either using portable or makeshift rafts or with the help of local fishermen. There are four to seven men in an average gang which consists of hunters, who bring one or two rifles, and porters who carry maize meal, salt, knives, axes and later the trophies. In the mid-1980s, the gangs needed only two or three days in the Zambezi Valley, but by the late 1980s when most rhinos had been eliminated, poachers were having to stay in Zimbabwe for up to two weeks, and still do, often travelling long distances to find rhinos.

The gangs return to Zambia, usually by crossing the Zambezi River at night. Then they sometimes bury their firearms near the river for future use. Middlemen arrange the gang members' transport by road to Lusaka. The gang is paid for the number of horns they bring, not by weight. In 1992, the figure was about \$100 to \$150 per horn (about \$83 per kilogramme). So if a gang of four shot one average-sized black rhino (with the two horns weighing three kilogrammes), the gang would receive \$250, or an average \$62.50 per person, although hunters usually obtain a larger share than porters. This figure is very low compared with the amount earned by rhino poachers in other African countries. It is nevertheless a good enough economic return for the

unemployed and desperately poor hunters from Zambia. With the drastic decline of the Zambian kwacha from eight to the dollar in 1988 to 300 in late 1992, the amount earned in local currency for rhino horn is more reasonable.

After receiving their payment, gang members will buy clothes, radios and other consumer goods or equipment, then return to their villages. Others will envy their new belongings and will in turn be encouraged to poach rhinos in Zimbabwe for the middlemen in Lusaka.

Zambians have recently started poaching rhinos in Botswana as well. In January 1993 a large gang of 12 carrying three AK-47s went from Livingstone in Zambia to Chobe National Park in north-east Botswana. The gang leader shot two white rhinos at 9:00 am. The gang took the four horns and returned to Livingstone. The gang leader and the middleman were subsequently caught by Zambia's Anti-Corruption Commission. The former, a 38-year-old from Kaoma near Kafue Park in western Zambia, admitted he had gone previously to Zimbabwe 11 times for rhinos, but said there was now less chance of being caught in Botswana; the gang never came across any government personnel during their hunt there. Zambian officials learned that the gang leader was paid about \$72 while the other gang members received only \$35 each for the horns. The middleman who organized this poaching was a businessman from Livingstone and he offered the four horns, weighing a total of 6 kilogrammes, for \$395 a kilogramme which was accepted by a buyer. Thus the gang received only \$77 a kilogramme while the middleman was to earn \$318 a kilogramme.

Although the middlemen who organize the poaching are mostly Zambian citizens, the next tier of middlemen who buy the horns are usually foreigners based in Lusaka, believed to include West Africans, Greeks and diplomats, especially North Koreans. Such foreigners trade also in ivory, gemstones and sometimes drugs. They are sold rhino horn for the equivalent of \$350 to \$500 a kilogramme. They pack the horns mostly into containers on lorries which are driven directly to South Africa. A few rhino horns also have been found hidden in mattresses and tyres on lorries passing through Malawi and Botswana on their way to South Africa. Sometimes the horns are smuggled by aeroplane in personal luggage to Swaziland. There is no strong evidence that the horns are being transported north to Tanzania for eventual export to Yemen. Since 1984 traders in Zambia have used contacts in

South Africa for the Taiwan market and have not developed new contacts in East Africa for the Yemen. One reason is that the price paid for rhino horn in Taiwan until at least mid-1992 was about double the price paid in Yemen. Also, the rand is a fairly hard currency and there are many consumer items to buy in South Africa.

In addition to the main rhino horn exporters in Lusaka, other individuals bring small quantities of horn to South Africa to sell. In 1989, these small traders were mainly from Botswana, Namibia and Zambia. In 1992, they were mostly Zambians, Malawians and Zimbabweans and a few Nigerians; they obtained almost all their horns from animals killed in Zimbabwe. By the early 1990s some Zimbabweans were involved in actually killing rhinos in their country as well as co-operating with the Zambian poachers by helping them with transport and buying the horns. In early 1993, Zambians and Zimbabweans were still the main small sellers of horns to South Africa, but people from Mozambique and South Africa were also transporting the horns south.

South African middlemen have recently been buying these horns in their country from the small traders for \$370 to \$400 a kilogramme. They in turn sell these horns to Chinese (mostly Taiwanese) within South Africa for \$535 to \$890 a kilogramme. In 1991, horns bought in South Africa earned a Taiwanese importer in his home country about \$2,000 a kilogramme. From the end of 1992 to mid-1993 the price declined due to a decrease in demand, probably because of a slowdown in the growth of Taiwan's economy, an already existing large rhino horn stockpile on the island, and the reduction in the purchase of horns by Taiwanese speculators for investment.

Taiwanese are the main buyers because, from 1985 to the end of 1992, Taiwan was one of the largest importers of African horn in the world and traders there could pay some of the highest prices.

The Taiwanese buyers in South Africa are sometimes sailors who wish to supplement their incomes by trading in rhino horn, while others are businessmen or manufacturers resident in South Africa. These Taiwanese either post the horns to Taiwan or take them there by ship or aeroplane. Until very recently, this smuggling continued virtually un-

hindered as the police and customs in Taiwan were extremely remiss in intercepting rhino horn.

In order to defeat this organized chain of poachers and middlemen through several African countries to Taiwan, a major effort is needed, especially in Zambia and Zimbabwe where government authorities are losing the rhino war.

Rhino poachers continue to be successful, mainly on public land, because Zimbabwe's National Parks and Wild Life Management Department has not got adequate numbers of game scouts to patrol the rhino areas, nor sufficient vehicles, radio systems and other equipment. Nor is the Department given funds for a good intelligence network to ascertain the probable points of entry poachers are using into Zimbabwe. Nor do officials have funds to collect information on the names of the main traders in Lusaka and Harare. The official reason given for these severe problems is shortage of money allocated by the government. However, more funds could be easily raised. Daily park entrance fees to all of Zimbabwe's parks are absurdly low (less than \$1 in early 1993 compared with \$15 for non-residents in Kenya and Tanzania). Park accommodation fees are also extremely low: for example, a two-bedroom cottage in Main Camp Hwange costs \$7 per night. If these fees were raised significantly and if the Parks Department could keep this money instead of the funds all going to the central government, the Department could afford to run its anti-poaching efforts properly. In the financial year of 1992/93, the Department received only \$6.5 million. With increased park entrance and accommodation charges similar to those in East Africa at least an extra \$5 million could be raised. But this is still not enough: in the early 1980s when the Department ran well, it received \$20 million a year. Foreign tourism is expanding rapidly in Zimbabwe. According to the Zimbabwe Tourist Development Corporation, the number of foreign visitors in 1988 was 452,000 and they spent \$24.5 million. It is estimated that in 1992 650,000 foreign tourists came to Zimbabwe leaving behind \$100 million, four times the amount of foreign currency compared with five years earlier.

A government with an industry which produces \$100 million of hard currency, mostly based on viewing wildlife and scenery in National Parks, needs to invest more than \$6.5 million for their upkeep, especially when certain animals in the parks are threatened with local extinction by foreign criminals!

Rhino conservation has been success-

ful in certain African and Asian countries because the rhinos are concentrated in relatively small, defensible areas with the necessary manpower, equipment and informant money allocated to protect them. Regrettably, this concept was not acted upon until quite recently in Zimbabwe, after most of the animals had been eliminated. Approximately 175 black rhinos were translocated to private farms from the late 1980s. Some of these farms united to form larger areas called conservancies, hoping to raise funds from tourism. The Parks Department still plans to set up Intensive Protection Zones on public land, initially in Hwange and Matusadona National Parks. Tom Milliken of TRAFFIC believes 'the failure of the Department to move the Intensive Protection Zones concept forward at an early stage is perhaps the single greatest failure in safeguarding the country's rhinos'. As a stop-gap measure to the intense poaching, the Parks Department dehorned 117 black and 108 white rhinos from May 1991 to November 1992, hoping this would prevent them from being poached. In fact, 13 dehorned rhinos were poached up to February 1993, mainly because about ten percent of the horn has to be left during dehorning as it is live tissue; also the horn gradually regrows. There is still economic incentive to poachers. Thus, the crisis management policy of funding the dehorning may not have been as cost-effective as putting the money into law enforcement, especially intelligence.

The government of Zambia can also do a great deal more. It is scandalous that thousands of Zambians have left their country illegally and crossed into a neighbouring state, carrying modern rifles to kill rhinos and elephants. There has been very little effective patrolling along the Zambezi River on the Zambian side. The National Parks and Wildlife Service blames lack of patrolling on a shortage of funds and thus manpower. In September 1992, the Service was forced to make redundant 475 of their staff due to financial constraints; many of them were game scouts. The overall budget (both recurrent and capital) in 1992 was only \$1,650,000. Senior members of the Service believe that the budget needs to be increased ten-fold to be adequate. The present take home pay for an average game scout is only \$26 a month, and night allowances are fixed at \$6 a month. It is no wonder that morale is low. What is required immediately is funding to establish a new elite group of well-trained and motivated anti-poaching personnel attached to the National Parks and Wild-

life Service, to patrol along the northern side of the Zambezi Valley.

Zambia's Anti-Corruption Commission also needs to be well-financed so that it can obtain information on poaching gangs and, more importantly, on the main middlemen in order to apprehend them. In mid-1992, the Commission had run out of money except to pay salaries. There were inadequate funds to send officers overnight into the Zambezi Valley to obtain information and not enough money to pay informers. Sufficient long-term funding of the Anti-Corruption Commission is a high priority as the poaching gangs must be infiltrated in order to identify and arrest the middlemen and exporters of horns from Zambia.

The South African police, in contrast, have reasonable funding to investigate illicit rhino horn transactions. In 1989 the South African government created the Endangered Species Protection Unit within the South African police. Many rhino horns were seized annually. In 1992 the Unit impounded 84 illegal horns. Closer co-operation is required, however, between this Unit and intelligence branches in the other southern African countries. Perhaps regular meetings could be arranged for the heads of the various intelligence units to exchange and benefit from confidential information.

Much closer co-operation is needed as well between both the police and customs departments of South Africa with Taiwan's. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Taiwanese government was very lax in its enforcement of its 1989 Wildlife Conservation Law banning imports, exports, internal trade and display of rhino products. Little effort was made to assist officials in South Africa in order to apprehend the smugglers. Taiwanese officials very rarely intercepted illegal supplies of horn or prosecuted medicine shop owners who openly displayed and sold rhino horn. Taiwanese officials must now become more competent and initiate action. They need to learn the names of rhino horn importers and buyers, and prosecute them. Penalties for dealing in illegal rhino products in Taiwan must be increased (in early 1993 the maximum fine was only \$1,115), and the illicit trade must be stopped.

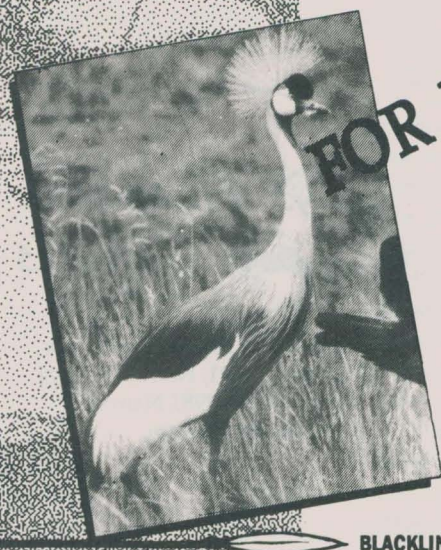
The status of the black rhinos in Zimbabwe is critical. The Department could implement the necessary action to conserve the remaining rhinos if financial constraints could be overcome. The authorities need to increase the park fees, and the Parks Department must be allowed a 'retention scheme' to keep the money it earns and spend it on conserving endangered wildlife. Additionally, the government of Zambia must make a

greater effort, both by preventing nationals from illegally crossing the border into Zimbabwe and by infiltrating the poaching gangs and arresting the traders. The South Africans are arresting many middlemen in their country, but still some horns are illicitly exported. Taiwan - the main importing country for rhino horn from 1985 to at least the end of 1992 - must put a higher priority on eliminating this trade. Taiwan is a rich and disciplined country, and with proper motivation the government could achieve a lot more. It is tragic and even shameful that certain officials in Taiwan have not put enough effort into arresting the illegal importers, middlemen and pharmacists who deal in illegal rhino horn from Zimbabwe. It is these rich traders in Taiwan - the end market - who must take a considerable amount of responsibility for the massacre of what was formerly, up until the late 1980s, the largest black rhino population in the world and which is now in danger of suffering extermination. ●

POSTSCRIPT

The author would like to thank the East African Wild Life Society for funding the fieldwork for this article. The research ended in February 1993 and thus does not include the more recent killings of dehorned rhinos on public land.

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