

Zimbabwe's rhinos under threat

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

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After the black rhino populations of eastern Africa had been severely reduced through the 1970s and early 1980s, traders eager for more horn spread their attention southwards. By the mid-1980s, the rhinos in Zimbabwe and Namibia were under serious threat from poaching. Namibia retaliated by dehorning rhinos in the north-western desert regions of the country in 1989, increasing anti-poaching staff, and by stepping up its intelligence gathering network. Zimbabwe, meanwhile, began a war with the poachers, killing over 150 men. Rhinos in the Zambezi Valley were particularly under threat from Zambian poachers who would cross the border at night to kill the animals. Although Namibia's desert rhinos have remained safe since 1990, the situation in Zimbabwe is becoming desperate.

Zimbabwe's Department of National Parks and Wild Life Management believed there were 2,000 black rhinos in the country in 1991, over half the entire population in Africa. It was an extremely important last stronghold. This year, however, Parks' officials have been finding many more hornless carcasses hidden in the thick bush than they had expected. Matusadona National Park in northern Zimbabwe had an estimated population of 150, but in June 1992 only 15 could be found. The shocking reality is that there are probably only 500 to 1,000 black rhinos left in Zimbabwe.

There are three general reasons that rhino poaching has increased in Zimbabwe in the last year or so. First, the economy of Zambia has gone down further, giving a greater incentive for more poaching, while the Zambian authorities have been unable to prevent poachers from crossing the border. Second, in Zimbabwe, the anti-poaching staff have become war-weary; they now have poorer terms of service, and there is not enough equipment nor people in the field. Third, in local currencies, the value of rhino horn has gone up sharply, and the number of trade routes for the horn has increased.

The horn is smuggled into Lusaka and then mostly taken by air to Swaziland or overland to South Africa for export to Taiwan. To combat this trade, however, the Endangered Species Protection Unit was created in 1989 in South Africa, and several large consignments of horn have been recently intercepted. It seems that as a result, traders have been exploring routes up to the Yemen market, where traditionally, most East African horn was sent. Although traders in Yemen are only paying about US\$1,000 a kilogramme, half the Taiwan price for horn, some middlemen may be choosing to smuggle rhino

horn, originating in Zimbabwe, via Lusaka to Dar es Salaam. From there, rhino horn is known to be flown to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The horns are hidden in lorries and driven overland from Dubai and Sharjah, across Yemen's long unpatrolled boundary to the capital, Sanaa. This route avoids Sanaa airport where customs controls have become far tighter. In 1991, rhino horn imports almost doubled into Yemen, reaching about 450 kilogrammes or the equivalent of 150 rhinos. Although some of this horn could have come from poached animals in Tanzania, Mozambique and southern Sudan, as well as from old stocks, it is probable that Zimbabwe has become a significant supplier.

The Zimbabwe authorities, in an urgent bid to stop the poaching, have started to dehorn their rhinos, despite the many risks involved. Unlike in Namibia where a rhino without a horn is easily noticed, in dense bush poachers may only have a glimpse of the back of a rhino and may shoot without checking for a horn. Already several dehorned black rhinos have been poached. Another option would be for the Zimbabweans to form more enclosed sanctuaries. This has worked well in Kenya. At the moment, only 150 rhinos are on privately managed conservancies in Zimbabwe and most of the rhinos on state land are in the wild. Not only does a sanctuary enable a far greater concentration of guards to operate, but also it allows rhinos to be in close proximity giving them better chances to meet and mate. As their numbers dwindle in the wild, these solitary animals will become too widely dispersed and will have fewer and fewer opportunities to find one another.

What is immediately required is more international funding for Zimbabwe's rhinos. No other large mammal in the world is being so heavily slaughtered and threatened with near extinction. More money would buy much needed equipment for anti-poaching, improve the salaries and benefits of the Parks' field personnel, and increase manpower in the poaching areas which in turn would strengthen staff morale. Extra funds would also improve intelligence gathering. The Zambian connection must be investigated and eliminated. Furthermore, the governments of Tanzania, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia must make a serious effort to intercept the smugglers. Of vital importance is to increase pressure on the main markets in Taiwan and Yemen in order to end this persistent trade that has succeeded in obliterating the rhinos from much of Africa, and if allowed to continue, will destroy one of the most important populations left: those of Zimbabwe. 