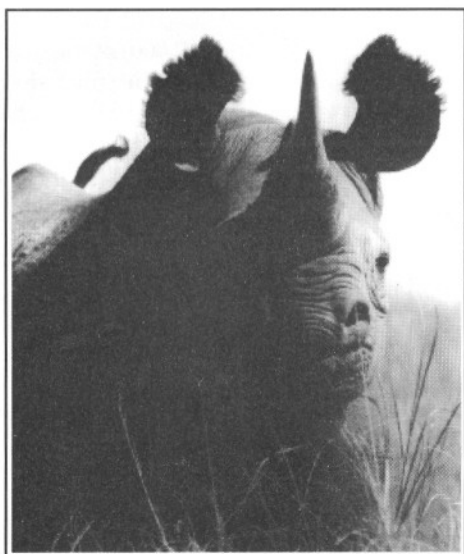


Rhinowatch

- black rhinoceros conservation in Zimbabwe

Story and photos by Felix Patton



One man's hands on experience of the programme to dehorn all Zimbabwe's remaining rhinos in the last ditch action to save them.

CONSERVATION WORK IS rarely glamorous but often tedious, involving hard physical work in unpleasant conditions. The results may be extremely disheartening - the battle may be shown to be a losing one. But without the efforts of the committed, such as Earthwatch volunteers, there would be no hope where even a glimmer of hope might be all that is needed.

Rhinowatch, a project led by Dr Sky Alibai of the University of London to conserve the black rhinoceros of Zimbabwe, sponsored by Earthwatch and supported by EarthCorps volunteers, set out to find, identify and where possible photograph, the 170 or so rhinos believed to inhabit the Chirisa Safari Area - at least that was the official population statistic.

Using a novel method of population measurement, which entails walking west to east, or vice-versa, transects at one kilometre intervals across the whole 1700 square kilometre area, evidence of only 16 rhinos was found and only four were actually seen. This was perhaps the poachers of Zambia, who have decimated their own, and now Zimbabwe's black rhinoceros population.

To be involved in a novel research project and to see a story unfolding daily is rewarding. To obtain the data required considerable personal discomfort, walking 15 to 20 kilometres a day often in intense heat, through thorny bush, up and down rocky hillsides and sometimes in such inhospitable conditions that the normally indigenous wildlife had deserted the area. Sore feet were the norm; litres of drinking water a necessity.

We worked in teams of four - an armed game scout, a navigator to plot our route through the bush with a compass, a recorder to note down what we

found on the transects, and a rangefinder to determine exactly where each sighting occurred.

With rhino signs clearly very scarce, it was a cause for real celebration if we found a dung heap, evidence of browsing, or spoor (footprints). It usually took the experienced eye of the scout to spot the spoor, and then it was down to the volunteers to make a tracing on acetate sheets.

Outlines were made of the print left by the front toe, two side toes and the heel of the rhino's back foot. Each rhino has a unique footprint, so by collecting all the tracing it was possible to determine how many individuals there were in the area and work out the area each one was covering.

On occasion, the evidence of rhino found on a transect was discouraging. The weathered white bones of a carcass shine out from the brown, parched vegetation. The hole in the skull where the poacher has hacked out the horn with an axe to get every last bit, is the tell-tale sign of an illegal death. It all has to be recorded. All the evidence, however grizzly, must be collected.

Team Six walked the final transects - the whole 1700 square kilometres had been covered and all details recorded. By now, the Zimbabwe Parks authorities had decided that there was a need for drastic last ditch action, and a programme to dehorn all remaining rhino was underway. Without the horn, hopefully the poachers would leave the rhino alone. But the Parks staff, with all their experience, were struggling to find any rhino to dehorn. Rhinowatch volunteered their data. Still only two rhinos were located in Chirisa in two days. Could we help out? Of course we could - we had come to conserve the black rhino.

Late one afternoon, three teams tra-

versed an area where rhino spoor had previously been found a few weeks before. We found strong signs that at least two rhinos were in the area, but it was too late in the day to do anything - it gets dark at 6pm. Next morning we went back and picked up the spoor again. By midday, one of the groups had found the animals, had called in the helicopter from which the immobilising dart is fired, and a female had been dehorned. The male had got away.

We went back to camp for lunch and the scouts decided to go back into the field taking only two volunteers, Dominic an American, and myself. We had to move quickly as time was not on our side - we only had that afternoon left as the helicopter was required for other duties.

We picked up the spoor along the ridge after a speedy five kilometre hike. We followed it down to the river bank and into an area of dense thorny acacia bush. Suddenly, we found ourselves almost on top of a rhino - but no, it was already dehorned. Had we really followed the wrong one and wasted our time?

We started to radio headquarters with the bad news, when suddenly the trees to our right came alive as the male headed straight for us. We fled for cover just in time.

Having lost sight of us, the male turned away and ambled off. With the adrenalin still pumping we used the radio to call the helicopter and set about regaining our composure. In minutes, the 'yellow bird' was hovering above us, but it was unable to see the rhino through the dense bush. We had to flush it out by directing the helicopter to it. We followed the spoor in total silence, treading each step slowly and quietly - then we saw it and the helicopter swooped down. It bolted and now our job was to follow it and the helicopter in case they got separated.

We ran flat out, thorns ripping at our clothes, sweat pouring as we gasped for breath but nothing mattered except keeping up. Suddenly, there was a clearing, the helicopter was coming down, the rhino had been darted and immobilised, and we were there within 30 seconds - exhausted and elated.

There is nothing dignified about the dehorning process. A cloth is placed over the rhino's eyes to protect them from the heat and dust, water is poured over the neck and back to keep the body heat down, blood and tissue samples are taken from the ear and injections given to help the rhino stay healthy. A large white number is painted on the flanks visible from the air for later identification, and

visible to the poacher to hopefully prevent unnecessary slaughter.

The longer front horn is sawn off first using a chain saw. Without any equipment to sharpen the blade, the blunt saw struggles against the horn of matted hair. With much smoke and grinding the horn finally falls to the ground.

Immediately attention is turned to the smaller rear horn. Time is of the essence, as a rhino immobilised for too long can die. The remaining two small stumps are shaved to the minimum as even a few kilogrammes of horn may be sufficient reward for a poacher. The cut area is sealed with tar, and all slivers of horn carefully collected from the ground.

A small wedge is cut out of the nail on the front and rear left feet. This will leave a unique footprint, which will enable trackers to recognise a dehorned rhino from a complete rhino. As conscientious Rhinowatch volunteers, we took acetate tracings of the back left foot before and after the wedge was cut. These tracings could be later compared with spoor prints - to compare the real print with that left on differing soils.

Finally, a full set of measurements were taken for the record, and then it was time for the vet, Mark Atkinson, to administer the recovery drug. We all took cover and a minute or so later the antidote took effect, and the rhino, number 04, staggered to its feet and slowly wandered off in search of his female companion.

My first experience of a direct involvement in dehorning was also

Dominic's and the two game scouts, Mishak and Elias's, first experience. All four of us walked back to our Chewonde campsite smiling, shaking hands, backslapping and telling the tale over and over. The climb up the escarpment at the end of the day's exertions was formidable. But together we had probably saved the life of an ever endangered rhino. All the pain, tiredness, aching limbs and disappointments of the previous days were long forgotten.

But now back down to earth. This was not what the project Rhinowatch was all about. What we had found was the best estimate of the rhino population in the area. Not the supposed 170 but probably only 20 at best, with a meagre six actual sightings.

Zimbabwe had boasted the largest surviving population (2,000) of the black rhinoceros in the world. With the help of Earthwatch volunteers, Rhinowatch could show, for Chirisa, the estimates must have been inaccurate and poaching had been widespread even in an inland region.

Coupled to reports from the dehorning in other areas which indicated similar problems, the authorities have now revised their estimates of black rhino numbers down to around 400.

The inevitable resulting publicity just might lead to sufficient pressure to give the hard working Parks authorities the resources for one final effort to conserve their remaining black rhino. If so, every last blister, aching limb and sore back will have been worthwhile. ●

RAFIKI BOOKS
BOOKS ON AFRICA
Free 40-page Catalog
Safaris to East Africa
Tiva Walking Safari
45 RAWSON AVENUE SW
CAMDEN ▲ MAINE 04843 ▲ USA
▲ 207-236-4244 ▲

AFRICANA BOOKS
E.T. FUNNELL,
 81 Manor Park
 Avenue, Princes
 Risborough, Bucking-
 hamshire, England,
 HP 27 9AR. Tele-
 phone: 0844 34 3165

Scarce and
 Out-Of-Print
 Books about East
 and Central Africa.
 Free Lists
 Issued Quarterly,
 Specific Titles
 Searched For.

for the finest collection of
AFRICAN ART & CRAFTS
Visit
Craftsales Gallery

University Way
 P.O. Box 74662
 Tel. 225695
NAIROBI
KENYA

Shanzu Beach
 P.O. Box 87458
 Tel. 485094
MOMBASA
KENYA

Wholesalers & Exporters of African
 Crafts & Jewellery





About Earthwatch :

Earthwatch was founded in 1971 as a tax exempt institution in the USA. The organisation sponsors scientists, artists, teachers and students to document a changing world. Members of the EarthCorps have supported 1,085 projects in 87 countries, providing scientists with 28,000 volunteers and \$15 million in funds and equipment.

For more information contact : Earthwatch Europe,
 Belsyre Court,
 57 Woodstock Road,
 Oxford,
 OX2 6HU Tel: UK - 0865 - 311600

Top of page : Tranquilized rhino - the dart is still in the rump

Centre; left : The small rear horn is removed. The rhino's eyes are open though he is tranquilized.

Centre; right : A number is painted on the tranquilized rhino and respiration checked.

Bottom: Dominic makes an acetate tracing of the back left foot of the dehorned rhino.

Felix Patton is a committed conservationist - companion of the World Wide Fund for Nature, Fellow of the Flora and Fauna Preservation Society, Friend of Howletts and Port Lympne Zoo - with special interest in rhinoceros conservation. Since 1986 he has produced a Rhinoceros Conservation Briefing document summarising the work being done world wide to preserve this endangered species both in the wild and in zoos.

