

Saving Zimbabwe's rhinos is all about people

It was naïve and frankly optimistic of me to think that the situation in Zimbabwe might have improved since my last visit a year ago. But however insuperable the problem, where there is a will, there is a way. Both black and white Zimbabweans left here are determined that the country and its wildlife will thrive again.

My feet had hardly touched Zimbabwean soil before I was thrown into the back of a Landrover and driven eight hours to the lowveld country. Here, in the Save Valley Conservancy, yet another rhino translocation was required to move a young bull who was sharing his habitat with informally settled subsistence farmers. Within twelve hours of landing, I was in pursuit of a rhino that, through no fault of his own, was costing conservation precious man-hours and money to move him out of re-settled areas where snares are prevalent.

We did move him with the help of John McTaggart and his Robinson 44 helicopter. Only minutes later another animal was sighted, this time with a snare around its neck. These sorts of problems are occurring on a weekly basis. Managing these issues is taking up a lot of time and money, but in the foreseeable future there is no other choice.

Back in Harare the following day, I spent an enjoyable and informative evening with Dick Pitman and his wife. Dick set up the Zambezi Society to help conserve Zimbabwe's last indigenous population of black rhinos in the Matusadona National Park, amongst other objectives. Numbering between 20-40 animals, they are the last viable population left in the Zambezi Valley. The Zambezi Society has moved from helping to monitor rhinos, to becoming more involved in the actual management of these animals through data collection, which is now showing more accurate distribution patterns of the rhinos in the Park. This year, the plan is to immobilise some of the more peripheral

animals in the Park, so that they can have radio transmitters inserted into their horns.

My final destination was Sinamatella IPZ (Intensive Protection Zone) in Hwange National Park. The IPZs, which were set up in the 1990s specifically to protect the black rhino, stated that in order adequately to do so, there needed to be one ranger to every 50 km sq. Today, the ratio in Sinamatella is 1:250 km sq, making rhino protection nearly impossible. Consequently some 35 rhinos have been poached in the last three years. The Senior Warden, Norman English, has become so demoralised with the decreased capacity of Parks to service rhino operations, both with equipment and personnel, that after 25 years of service, he has decided to leave and live in Australia. To make matters worse, during my two-day visit a white rhino was poached. The culprits were later apprehended, and turned out to be none other than a park ranger and a local tour operator!

Recently I received some heartening news from an NGO in Zimbabwe that after some workshops with the Park's authorities, there seemed to be a genuine commitment from them to recruit and train personnel in protection and monitoring to combat this ongoing crisis. Let's hope so....

David Stirling
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Save the Rhino intends to put £5,000 from Ecko's imminent donation towards the cost of the census in Matusadona National Park later this year. A further £5,000 of Ecko's grant will go towards the work of Chris Foggin, of the Wildlife Veterinary Unit, for emergency and planned rhino veterinary work, including snare removal, darting, ear notching and implanting horn transmitters.



ALL IMAGES: DAVE STIRLING

Chris Foggin Zimbabwe Talk

The talk by Chris Foggin from the Wildlife Veterinary Unit in Zimbabwe last November raised £1,000. Part of this has been used to buy a receiver and attachments to use for aerial tracking of rhinos in Hwange National Park; the rest is being held until it is needed.