

# DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES

When Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, its black rhino population numbered approximately 2,000 animals. Of these, around 1,300 were concentrated in the Zambezi Valley. Serious cross-border poaching then flared up, spreading to the other Zimbabwean rhino strongholds of the Sebungwe and Hwange regions and Gonarezhou National Park. In response, a national rhino conservation strategy was launched with the following main components:

- Creation of four IPZs (Intensive Protection Zones) within National Parks. These received significant donor support, and the more effective patrolling

achieved within them - combined with an extensive de-horning campaign - stemmed the poaching by 1995.

- Export of around 30 black rhinos to overseas captive breeding facilities (these suffered a high mortality rate)
- A rhino custodianship scheme, whereby 190 rhinos were moved to private land in the Lowveld region. The landowners undertook to look after them on behalf of the state. By 2000, despite some poaching problems, black rhino populations in several of these conservancies had doubled, achieving some of the fastest growth rates ever recorded

The successful rebuilding of Zimbabwe's black rhino population (from 370 in 1993 to the current level of 450), along with the establishment of innovative conservancy projects, earned Zimbabwe considerable acclaim within the international conservation community. Almost three quarters of Zimbabwe's black rhinos are on commercial farms and conservancies, with over 200 in the Lowveld conservancies of Save Valley, Bubiana and Chiredzi River.

In the last three years, however, the rhino populations have again come under threat. The rhino custodianship scheme has been greatly undermined by the large-scale land invasions throughout Zimbabwe and the deteriorating economic and political situation. Subsistence farming in former custodianship areas has displaced rhinos from their home ranges; fires started for bush-clearing have swept out of control through vast areas; and perimeter game fencing around conservancies has been torn down, the wire being used to manufacture snares for bushmeat. Poaching has returned with a vengeance.

- At least six black rhinos have died from snaring, with twenty more having to be

darted in order to treat the wounds.

- In March 2002, at a National Parks base in Matusadona IPZ, poachers used an agricultural carbamate pesticide to poison two semi-tame rhinos in pens. They succeeded in killing one, removed its horns, stole fuel, and escaped undetected.
- Parks are losing up to ten men per month, largely through mortality aggravated by HIV/AIDS. Posts are frozen and no new manpower has been recruited for three years.
- Fuel and maize-meal shortages have greatly reduced the ability of the patrol teams to operate effectively.

Long-term measures - including a Government plan for wildlife land reform - must be implemented, but the immediate need is for financial assistance: for ranger salaries, for vital equipment such as radios, and for patrol vehicle fuel.

Save the Rhino has made two initial emergency grants:

- £2,500 will pay the salaries of six rhino monitoring scouts for six months in the Lowveld conservancies (Save Valley, Bubiana and Chiredzi River), and help buy some equipment such as GPS units and binoculars.
- £2,500 for fuel for the anti-poaching patrol vehicles in Matusadona and Sinamatella. One month's fuel costs around £1,000. (The UK Rhino Group and the Born Free Foundation have each contributed a further £500.)

We will monitor the situation closely. Emergency funding is always a difficult decision: grants to Zimbabwean projects are "high risk", yet the rhino population is an immensely important one and unquestionably worth saving.

Cathy Dean

