A PRIVATE WILDLIFE ENTERPRISE FULFILLS ONE OF ITS OBJECTIVES – TO PROVIDE SANCTUARY FOR AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

Located 50 kilometres north-east of Kwekwe, Iwaba occupies middleveld altitudes, but features many lowveld plant species such as baobab and mopane, as well as a range of highveld ones like msasa and the evergreen mcuna. It supports diverse wildlife species including elephant, cheetah, leopard, sable, giraffe, eland and crocodile, besides endangered species like the rhino, pangolin and aardwolf, and common ungulates and small mammals.

So far trophy hunting has been the must successful form of wildlife uitilisation on the estate, and will continue to be an important one, but the owners anticipate an increase in the importance of ecotourism, cropping for meat, and by-products like skins. The market for live animals (except for valuable, less common species) is declining now that restocking of Mashonaland farms is almost complete.

Iwaba is a 10 000-hectare wildlife estate in central Zimbabwe. Originally purchased as a cattle ranch in 1960, it has been converted into a self-sustaining wildlife operation over the past 30 years. Beginning with a 1 000-hectare game paddock in 1968, domestic stock were phased out until wildlife finally superseded the cattle in importance and Iwaba became a fully fledged wildlife enterprise in 1981.

Eight white rhino, four males and four females, were imported from Natal in 1974. Three died soon after translocation, leaving an unbalanced group of three males and two females. With only two breeding females, it was a long time before this small herd of white rhinos established itself as a successful breeding unit. The first calf, a female, was born in 1976, almost exactly 100 years after the last recorded shooting of a white rhino in this part of Zimbabwe in 1876!

With regard to the genetic diversity of the Iwaba herd, it is fortunate that of the two original surviving cows, one came from Hluhluwe and the other from Umfolozi.

Early in the 1980s there were indications of abnormal behaviour in the group. A subadult male was found dead, apparently battered to death by other rhino, and then a newly born male calf was found dead and there were indications that it might not have died a natural death. Permission was sought and granted to cull two males, in an attempt to give the group a more normal sex ratio. In 1984 two white rhino bulls were taken as trophies by safari clients, and since then the herd has increased steadily. Iwaba now has 20 white rhino.

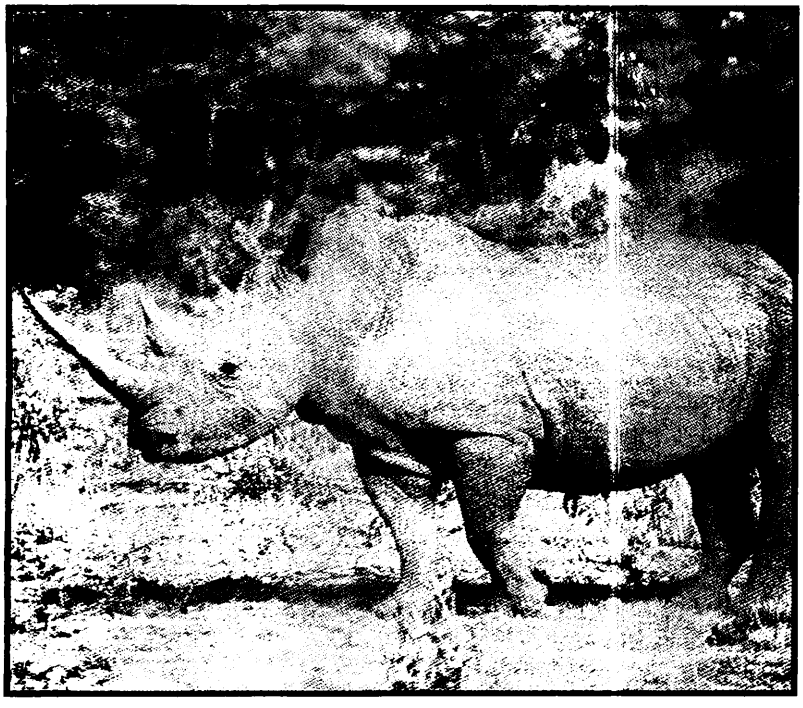

Photo: Justin Seymour-Smith

Over the past 20 years the estate has suffered severe bush encroachment. At some stage this may become an inhibiting factor as far as the white rhino are concerned. Successive years of below average rainfall have dried out many of the vleis, and open grassland has been invaded by a vigorous bush growth. We hope that some higher rainfall years may reverse this trend.

Black rhino were first introduced in 1986. A few private landowners were asked by the government if they would provide sanctuary for black rhino being translocated away from the poachers in the Zambezi Valley.

First to arrive were four bulls, the idea being that they would establish territories for themselves before any females were introduced. This plan worked well in the first instance, but proved fatal for all other male rhino brought in subsequently. Those first four bulls successfully defended their individual territories against all newcomers. One new arrival only escaped death by charging headlong through the electrified game fence onto the next ranch.

Twenty-five black rhino were brought in from the Zambezi Valley over a period of four years, 1986-1989. The sex composition of the black rhino sent to Iwaba was much better balanced than that of the white rhino. There were two females to every male, and despite the initial losses following the translocation, this ratio remained constant and the females began to breed almost immediately.

The greatest losses were amongst the pregnant females, followed by subadult males, which were harassed unmercifully by the dominant bulls. It took a long time for the black rhino to settle down in their new environment because as each successive group was released, the precarious relationship existing amongst the previous arrivals was upset and new social patterns had to be formed each time. At the end of this period of adjustment Iwaba's herd of black rhino consisted of the original four bulls and eight adult cows. The first calf was born in August 1989. Since then eleven black rhino have been born here and other calves are expected shortly to complete the second round of calving.

The black rhino are definitely proving more successful than the white and we attribute this to the marked degree of bush encroachment which favours the black rhino. Iwaba is approaching saturation point with its black rhino population, and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management has been advised that there will be three subadult black rhino available for relocation by mid-1993. Iwaba Estate is now part of the Munyati Black Rhino Conservancy and it is hoped that these surplus young rhino will be retained within this conservancy.

In retrospect, if one compares the percentage survival rate of the black rhino to that of the white, there is not such a significant difference. In both cases it was the older animals which succumbed to the trauma of translocation. This was our only criticism of the choice of white rhino sent to Iwaba: there was too high a percentage of old animals. The next group most at risk was the pregnant females, but this may also have been because many of them were in poor condition. The male rhino were lost in both cases as a result of dominance disputes.

The introduction of solar-powered electric fencing systems has transformed wildlife management and made it possible to confine dangerous wild animals on commercial properties with a relative amount of safety. For the record, it must be noted that not one of the white rhino brought onto Iwaba has ever escaped through our 13-strand game fence, thus fully justifying the Natal Parks Board system of training rhino to respect fences. When the first black rhino were introduced in 1986, Iwaba's boundary fence was not electrified and two cows escaped by wriggling their way out under the fence at a river crossing.

It was a happy coincidence that Mike Wright and John Hanks of the World Wildlife Fund were visiting Iwaba on the day that the first black rhino were released in 1986, because they were able to recommend that WWF provide assistance with the purchase of electrical equipment from New Zealand (Zimbabwe's exchange control regulations precluded us from doing this for ourselves). Iwaba received a grant of US $5 214 for this purpose, which made it possible to complete the electrification of the entire boundary fence in time for the arrival of the next batch of rhino in 1987. Initially only two strands of electric wire were added, in an off-set position on the inside of the existing game fence. This was later increased to three strands and the distance between the energizers reduced to give a higher voltage. Experience has proved this to be necessary for the control of thick-skinned animals like rhino and elephant.

Electrification of the boundary fence has proven to be a highly successful exercise controlling the movement of all those animals that previously either scrambled through or crawled under the fences – the exceptions being the primates, the cats and in many instances, the pigs. The cost of maintaining an electric fence is higher than was anticipated. Voltage levels need to be checked constantly and in summer vegetation must be cleared

away from the fence. On Iwaba the clearing is done manually, this method being the most practical and cost-efficient.

Security remains the principal consideration in the care of the rhino on Iwaba, closely followed by the need to provide the type of environment that ensures the continued well-being of both species.

At the moment there is much discussion about the merits of dehorning rhino and serious consideration is being given to this idea. However, in Zimbabwe there are reports that rhino are still being poached despite having had their horns removed, which is not very encouraging. Dehorning must be carried out at frequent intervals if it is to achieve its objective, but to date no research has been done on the effect of repeated doses of immobilising chemicals, especially on pregnant females or old animals. Further to this is the disturbance factor created by frequent capture operations

Photo: Justin Seymour-Smith

within a fenced area. As yet dehorning is not officially obligatory, but the wildlife manager who declines to have rhino dehorned faces a heavy moral responsibility if any rhino are subsequently poached. It seems to be a no-win situation.

The management on Iwaba takes great pride in the fact that the estate is a self-sustaining, viable wildlife enterprise. All income is derived from various forms of wildlife utilisation – there is no external source of funding. The profits from one form of utilisation provides the support for other wildlife projects, such as the care of endangered species like the rhino. However, as the rhino on Iwaba continue to multiply and the threat of poaching increases (a rhino was poached on a neighbouring ranch last December), it has become necessary to step up the number of anti-poaching patrols considerably.

Unable to afford this increased level of protection, Iwaba has been obliged to accept external assistance. We have been fortunate in obtaining the support of the Harare Sheraton Hotel which has agreed to pay the wages of six game rangers from money raised through its "Environmental Dollar" scheme. In the past Iwaba has maintained a low profile because of the presence of its rhino population, but this may change a little with the support of such a well-known organisation.

Both species of rhino are now breeding successfully and it is hoped that, in time, Iwaba's black and white rhinos will be able to make their contribution to the regeneration of Africa's depleted rhino population.