

A man dedicated to wildlife

LIS DOBB talks to the warden at Sinamatella Rhino Intensive Protection Zone in Hwange National Park. Find out why he won't make a short cut through a riverine thicket again.



Warden Norman English with the apple of his eye, daughter Allison.

AT THE age of three Norman English knew that he wanted to be either a National Parks ranger or a farmer. His father was a forester stationed at Chimanimani and then Mtao forest near Mvuma, where Mr English went to primary school and progressed to Chaplin High School in Gweru.

He considered himself fortunate to be accepted into the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management in 1982 after leaving school. His first task was to measure and weigh all the tusks in the ivory store prior to an ivory auction.

A week later he left Harare for his first posting to Kyle in the Problem Animal Control (PAC) unit where catching crocodiles was his first task, and he relates how his feeling for them switched to a very healthy respect in a very short time.

After being transferred to a staff position he moved on to Chipinda Pools in Gonarezhou in 1983 and in 1985 he was transferred to Robins Camp, Hwange National Park. He was promoted to senior ranger and moved on again to Chete Safari Area in 1988, where he was promoted to warden. When the Rhino Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) was established in 1993 at Sinamatella, Hwange, he was posted there,

and has been there since.

This interview was conducted at the platform overlooking Masuma Pan, where Mr English was implementing the rehabilitation of an old borehole system to make available precious pumped water to the game. When he wasn't supervising the clearing of pipes clogged with elephant dung, we sat quietly in the hide and he answered a few questions:

Who has had the most influence over your life?

My Dad. He was born here in 1922, and loves the country. He's a keen naturalist who really knows his trees and birds, and I think I absorbed a lot of his feeling by osmosis as a boy while accompanying him in his job around the forest areas.

What was the best decision you ever made?

I'd have to say that it was marrying the woman I have. Penny was born in Australia, brought up in Canada, did lots of overland trips and was a nurse for almost 20 years, working as an emergency room nurse for most of that time. She came to Sinamatella to assist with a rhino research project, which is where we met. She's the ideal wife for me, and we now have a baby daughter, Allison, who is the apple of my eye.

What was the worst decision you've ever made?

Truthfully, I don't think there is one which is so major that I could class it as "the worst". I think that the worst one I could have made would have been to leave the Department in the early '80's when many of the staff were leaving. I'm always relieved that I didn't.

Living in wild, remote places means that you've had the opportunity to keep some really unusual pets...?

No! I really disagree with keeping wild animals as pets. It's tempting, when you see a young injured animal, to keep it, but if it isn't a "man made" injury, then nature should be left to take its course. If it is a man made injury, and it's treatable, then the animal should be treated and released. We do have a family of domestic ducks though, whose ancestors belonged to my father when he was a boy. That's about as "unusual" as we get.

What's the most dangerous situation you've ever been in?

There are a number and all involve lions. Two involved lions' natural curiosity, but all had dangerous potential. Once we were camped in the open and I woke up sensing that something was around. I heard a large animal coming through the grass, but as there was no moon, I wasn't too sure what it

was. When it stepped on to my sleeping bag I realised it was a lion. I sat up and yelled, the lion, luckily, decided not to contest the issue and ran off. Trouble was, he ran off through the area where the game scouts were sleeping. It was chaos. Scouts everywhere, shouting, swearing and throwing anything they could lay their hands on - shoes, pots, hats, stones. It was humorous after the event.

'The other close encounter of the curiosity kind happened when we were sleeping at the platform at Mandavu. A lioness jumped over the wall and landed at my feet. I again made noises, not of the Mickey Mouse kind, and she went back over the wall.'

Another potentially dangerous situation happened in Gonarezhou. We were collaring "Kabakwe" (the last giant tusker in the area) and the radio nicads ran flat, so I ran two k's to the vehicle, got fresh batteries and took a short-cut on the way back down a river course. I was running through the riverine bush when I heard a stick clatter ahead. I froze and looked up. A lioness burst out of the riverine thicket, running towards me.

She had blood on her face and was obviously on a kill. I did the best imitation of a tree that I've ever done. She hadn't actually seen me, but had just run towards the sound of my footsteps. She ran past me at full speed. I looked again, and there was another lioness in the thicket. I ducked down and beat a very hasty retreat sideways into the scrub on the other side of the river course... "Never use riverine thicker as a short cut", became my motto from then on.

What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?

There are two things from which I take equal satisfaction. One is that the IPZ has, so far, been a success story. We've had no known incursions since March 1994, and our rhino are doing well. We work on the assumption that there could be trouble every single day, and I have a fine team of men who manage this under fairly trying conditions.

The other thing that gives me immense satisfaction is the fact that we are able to sit, just as we are doing here at Masuma, and watch animals who obviously trust humans. I know that I'm doing my job, otherwise the animals would be wary and skittish, many only drinking after dark. This would indicate that there was a lot of poaching going on. So there would be something wrong with the way I was doing my job if that happened.

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