

ZIMBABWE'S LAST STAND

*In an operation resembling guerrilla warfare rather than nature conservation, the Zimbabwean government has thrown its weight behind the armed protection of its remaining black rhino. But all is not well at the Matusadona Intensive Protection Zones, reports **ANGUS BEGG**. Photography by **RICK MATTHEWS***

The tent flaps open and a man crawls out, wearing nothing but bright red underpants. He yawns, scratches his stomach and utters a few words in Shona to a group of men in camouflage uniform, sitting on a fallen log. Red underpants is a lieutenant in the Zimbabwean army, and the men, now posing for a photograph, are soldiers under his command. In a manner of speaking, they are at war, locked into a seemingly endless conflict with people who want to kill every rhino in Africa, hack off their horns and send them to the Far East.

I chanced upon these men on a recent visit to the Kariba region of Zimbabwe, in the shade of a jackalberry tree, within throwing distance of the waters of the great lake in Matusadona National Park. They represent the face of the most unusual military struggle ever, waged by this tiny southern African country, in which the fight against rhino poachers on the Zambian border is being taken to the most unlikely extremes.

In what is widely regarded as a political message to the international donor community, the Zimbabwean government has done what would have been unthinkable a few years ago and thrown its full weight behind conservation authorities' efforts to save their share: 250 of the last 2 500 black rhino on the planet.

Bolstered by this new-found assistance, local conservation officials have turned to high technology for help. Besides speedboats, helicopters and top-flight 4x4s, the tools of conservation have been broadened to include the latest in tracking devices and automatic weapons. This novel form of 'wildlife' activity can be found in Zimbabwe's Intensive Protection Zones (IPZs).

The IPZs were first created in 1992/93 in response to the stepped-up butchering of black rhino. In a macabre twist, they were not being killed for their horns, as most of the black rhino had already been dehorned.

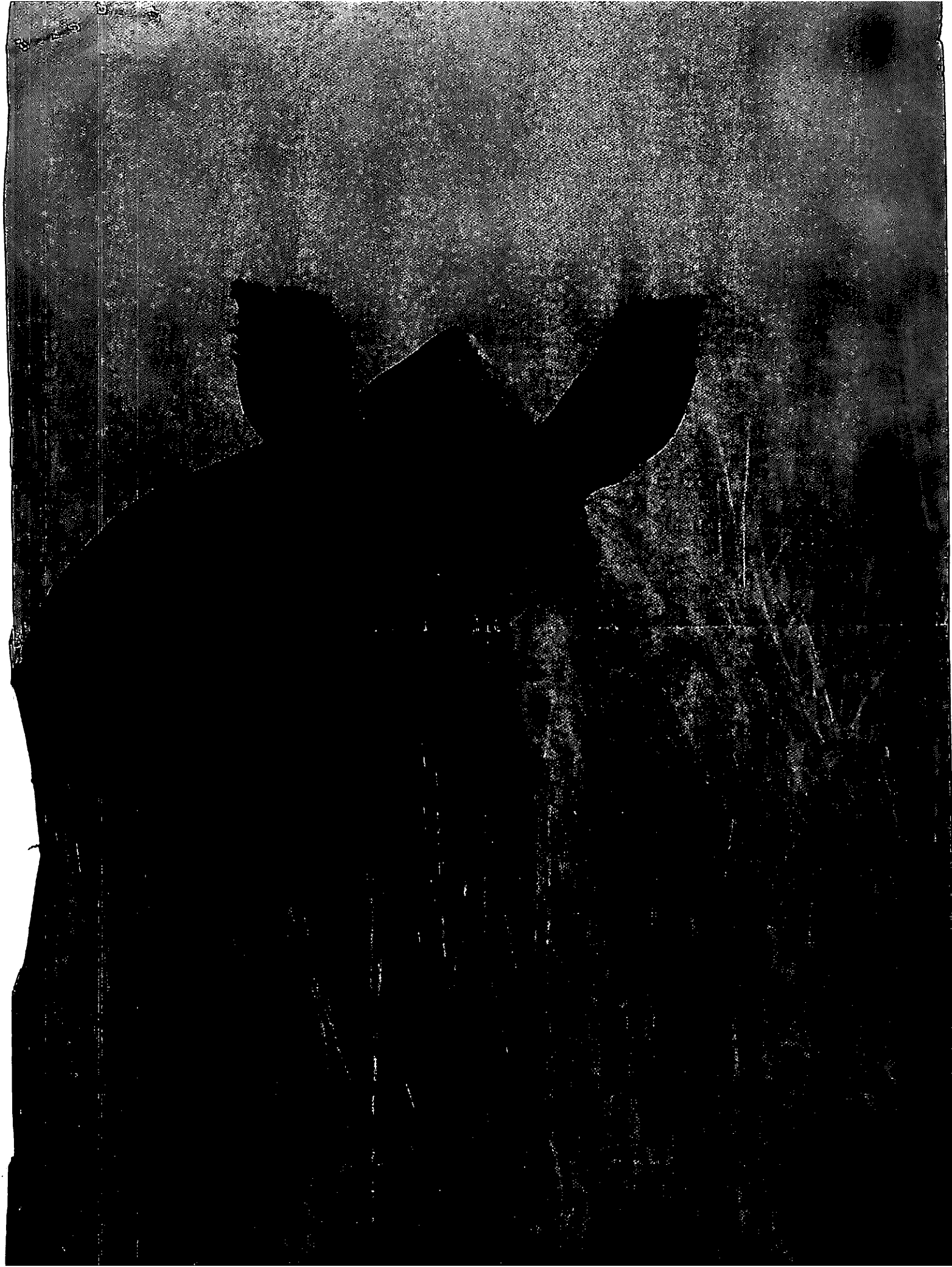
The poaching syndicates' thinking seemed to be that the horn

they had in stock would rise in value if the number of remaining black rhino were to decrease dramatically, ie, to put an end to production in the 'rhino factory'. So the poachers began to slaughter the animals whether they had horns or not; or maybe the fragment of the horn in the skull was worth the trouble. It was decided to move the country's remaining black rhino into concentrated areas within existing national parks, making it easier to protect them.

One of the IPZs created was here in Matusadona National Park, on the southern shore of Lake Kariba. Given the lake on one side, and the Ume and Sinyati rivers on the other, it was considered to be a relatively easy area to protect. Besides this, the 'safe zone' on the valley floor is bounded on the southern side by the Zambezi escarpment.

But natural barriers are not all the poachers have to deal with; the IPZ is enforced by soldiers, police, and armed national parks rangers, who follow a policy of 'shoot to kill' when dealing with poachers. Those protecting the rhino become part of a game where the players need more than bushcraft to stand a chance of winning. They need to be equipped with the latest technology.

According to senior ranger Gary Douglas, all the animals are fitted with radio collars in a network costing about half a million Zimbabwean dollars (about R200 000). Each animal has its own



frequency, which means it can be tracked on the sophisticated global navigational network known as GPS (the Global Positioning System).

To make tracking easier, Douglas and an assistant take the GPS up in a light aircraft from which they plot the individual co-ordinates of each rhino. After having heard the 'beep ... beep' of each animal, they land for a visual identification, as merely hearing the transmitter is not enough in the thick riverine bush.

Enter Matusadona's ecologist, using 'biotelemetry' (the biological tracking of animals) as a weapon in the fight to save this threatened creature. This discipline allows him to get a close look at individual animals and assemble valuable information that used to be found only in books, information about their home ranges and their legendary irascible, solitary behaviour.

An added bonus in the struggle has been the introduction of specialised military equipment which has speeded up the reaction time of the military and the parks personnel when news of poachers comes in. Helicopters, self-loading rifles (as opposed to the vintage .303), Unimogs (large 4x4s), the latest Land Rovers and speedboats all help to cut down response time. This is regarded as vital, because the longer the poachers are on the ground, the more animals they can kill.

The idea behind all this is to maintain a 'factory' of black rhino in Matusadona, an area which Douglas says used to be 'thick with black rhino, about 150 of them'; an area where they feel safe and therefore happy to breed in. If a female finds a mate she can produce between eight to 10 calves in 40 years, giving birth every three years. That's the ideal. But to breed successfully, it's important that the rhino is free of stress. And it's equally important to find a healthy genetic pool; the experts say there must be a minimum of between 30 and 50 animals to prevent genetic isolation. Matusadona's rhino population numbers somewhere around 30.

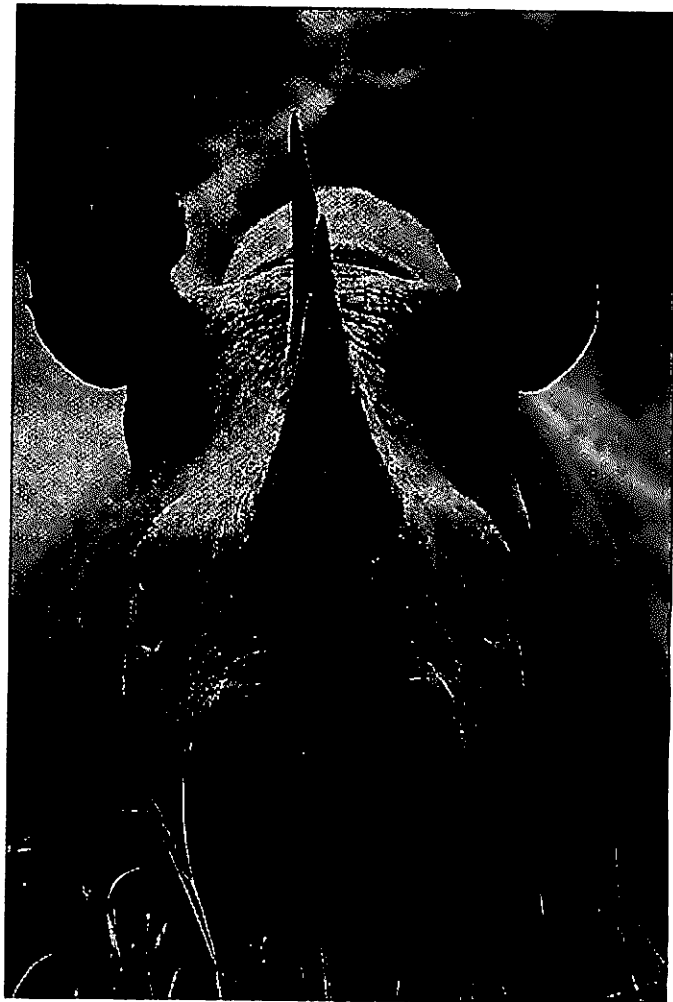
Despite the introduction of military personnel and sophisticated technical equipment, Zambian poachers still manage to make the long trek to Matusadona, usually crossing the lake on kapenta fishing boats and making their way through villages to the park. Which only reminds one that the rhino is not guaranteed protection in Matusadona. The IPZ covers some 500 square kilometres, but there are another 900 square kilometres of unprotected and unsurveyed hills beyond it into which the animals may stray and be poached.

This is precisely why the government has launched Operation Safeguard Heritage, in terms of which a number of airforce and army personnel have been brought in to help fight the poachers. The poachers know they'll be shot, and Douglas (who co-ordinates the various armed personnel) says there hasn't been an armed contact in the past 20 months.

"It's part of a strategy of open deterrence," he says. Pamphlets are dropped from aircraft on to villages in the area, stating that the remaining rhino in the park have been dehorned, that armed guards are patrolling the IPZ around the clock, and that the rangers and soldiers are prepared to use heavy weapons in their fight to protect this persecuted creature. So there are no secrets, no hidden rhino to tempt the desperate poacher into an act of folly.

Operation Safeguard Heritage is not cheap, with the average cost of bringing each black rhino into Matusadona from nearby vulnerable reserves estimated at about 3 000 Zimbabwean dollars (about R1 200). On top of this, Douglas reckons the technical and military costs add up to about Z\$1 million (R400 000). And with about 30 known rhino in the park, the costs escalate further, especially when you consider that it takes three reconnaissance flights a day just to locate the animals, followed by rangers carrying out visual identification missions on the ground.

"We rely on NGOs for funds," says Douglas, "because the gov-



ernment knows conservation organisations are good at begging for money."

From discussions with conservation authorities in the area, it appeared that the central government would not release any money to help run the operation.

In fact, a number of international organisations based in New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have lent a friendly hand and donated the necessary cash.

Add to this the substantial efforts of a number of local voluntary workers, and you have Gary Douglas's reasons why Operation Safeguard Heritage is still running.

A worrying factor, though, is that Douglas does not feel secure in his job at Matusadona, one that no one else seems qualified to fill. Word has it in the conservation world around Kariba that somebody wants him out.

If this were to happen, and Douglas is fast approaching the disillusioned stage, Matusadona's black rhino will be left to the mercy of poachers and a few corrupt National Parks officials, in the ruthless world of bullets and bribes. ■

Horns of a dilemma: poaching syndicates think their stocks of rhino horn will increase in value if the number of live rhinos drops.

UPDATE

Just before going to print, it was learned that the number of black rhino at Matusadona had increased to 38. This included three calves born in the reserve. Besides this, Douglas had cancelled a month's deep-sea fishing in Cape Town as he feared the poachers would step up their activity during the summer rains.