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The Nature of ZIMBABWE

A GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Nature of Zimbabwe is the third volume in a series of information books about conservation and development issues around the world. Called The Nature of . . . series, it is not a profit-making venture, but forms part of the education and awareness work of IUCN's Field Operations Division. This edition was produced in partnership with the IUCN Regional Office for Southern Africa.

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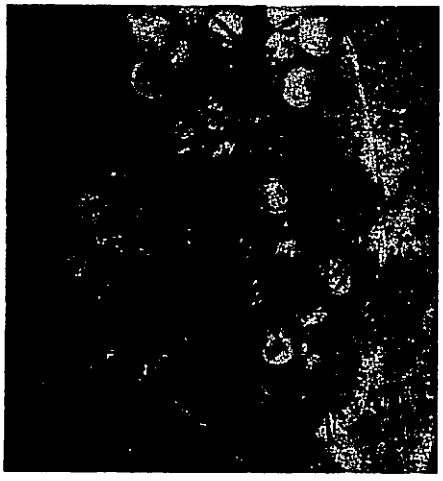
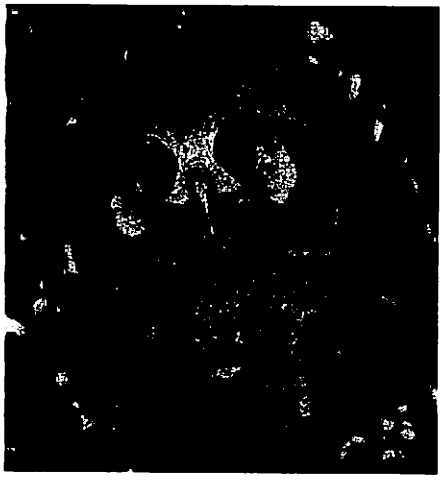




Top and above:
Zimbabwe has a rich variety of wildlife, including this beautiful white-faced owl, photographed near Harare, and the minute hatching bugs. (DH)

because of past persecution and because of its present economic value. At one time, it had been virtually exterminated across much of Zimbabwe. But the development of crocodile farms to supply hides to luxury fashion markets is helping to ensure the survival of the species. Crocodile farmers were formerly obliged by law to return a percentage of their hatchlings to suitable areas in the wild, where populations had decreased or been eliminated. Today, however, the Zimbabwean shore of Lake Kariba is thought to have a population of over 30,000 crocs, in some areas at a density of one mature animal for every 200 metres of shoreline. Major rivers such as the Zambezi, Save, Runde and Mwenezi also have good crocodile populations.

The more conspicuous snakes, such as the Egyptian cobra, black mamba, puff adder and boomslang, are inevitably a focal point of interest. They all pose a potential threat to unwary people, and often occur near human habitation. Zimbabwe's most spectacular snake, the python, is currently included on the Specially Protected Species list, because of past demand for its skin. Nevertheless, it is fairly numerous today, both inside and outside protected areas.

Animals on the Specially Protected Species list are excluded from the general provision of the 1975 Parks and Wildlife Act giving landowners jurisdiction over wildlife on their land. The python is the only reptile on the list – but a number of mammals and birds have been included. They are not necessarily all threatened species; some are there for cultural reasons, others as a precautionary measure until more is known of their status and distribution.

Wildlife legislation here is both unusual and enlightened, with two dominant features. Firstly, the 1975 Parks and Wildlife Act gives landowners control over the use of wildlife on their land, through such activities as ranching, tourism and safari hunting; this provides an incentive to manage wildlife populations carefully. Secondly, all visitors to protected areas administered by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management are carefully controlled.

These two factors, coupled with the high level of awareness, within central Government, of the value of the Department (and a consequent full measure of support for its activities) augur well for the continued effectiveness of wildlife legislation in the years ahead.

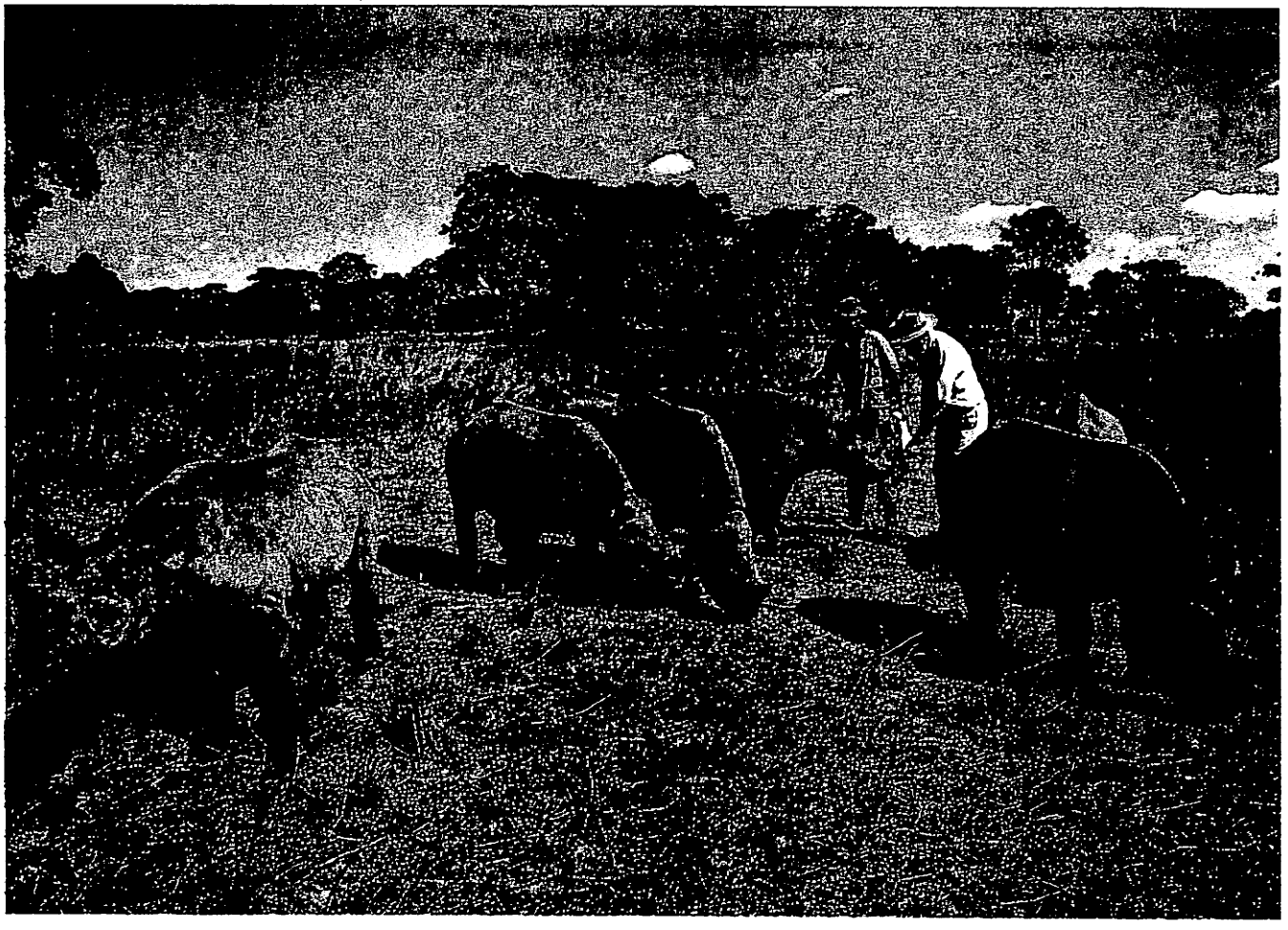
Rhinos and Elephants

With such tremendous public appeal,these two larger-than-life animals have assumed 'flagship' roles for wildlife conservation in Africa. Both rhinos and elephants carry valuable products and are therefore highly valued themselves. But in Zimbabwe, they present sharply contrasting management problems – too many elephants which have to be reduced (very profitably) from time to time; and among the last significant black rhino population on the continent, requiring intense protection against the onslaught of well-armed poachers.

At the turn of the century, black rhinos were widely distributed in Zimbabwe. But with expanding human populations and agricultural development their range was gradually reduced until, by the 1920s, they had disappeared altogether from the western parts of the country; over the next 30 years, they disappeared from other areas as well.

By 1960, their refuge was the Zambezi Valley, though a few animals still survived in the Chipinge area close to the Mozambique border. Following the filling of Lake Kariba in the same year, some of the Zambezi animals were reintroduced to Hwange National Park and, in 1972, the Chipinge population was moved south to Gonarezhou National Park. Capture operations during the mid-1960s, and from 1972 to 1976, also resulted in the relocation of animals, from communal lands into Hwange, Matetsi, Chirisa and Gonarezhou.

During the 1960s, rhinos were poached for meat. At the time, there was little evidence of poaching for horn. A decade later, however, the price of horn rose rapidly – largely due to oil price rises and thus the growing wealth of men in North Yemen, where the horns are fashioned into dagger handles. Nevertheless, military activities during the civil war



The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management is mounting a very professional campaign against rhino poaching. Nevertheless, hundreds of rhinos are still being slaughtered – leaving young orphans which do not yet possess the prized horn. The Department carefully selects farms to act as rhino 'orphanages'. Here, Norman Travers and Godfrey Charakupa of Imire Game Park feed baby black rhinos which have been fostered. White rhinos were once widely distributed in Zimbabwe, but were hunted out by 1934. Following their reintroduction in 1960, they are now restricted to Hwange, Matopos, Lake Kyle and Lake McIlwaine National Parks and a few private farms.

dissuaded attempts at poaching in Zimbabwe. Besides, there were larger numbers of more accessible rhinos in other African countries.

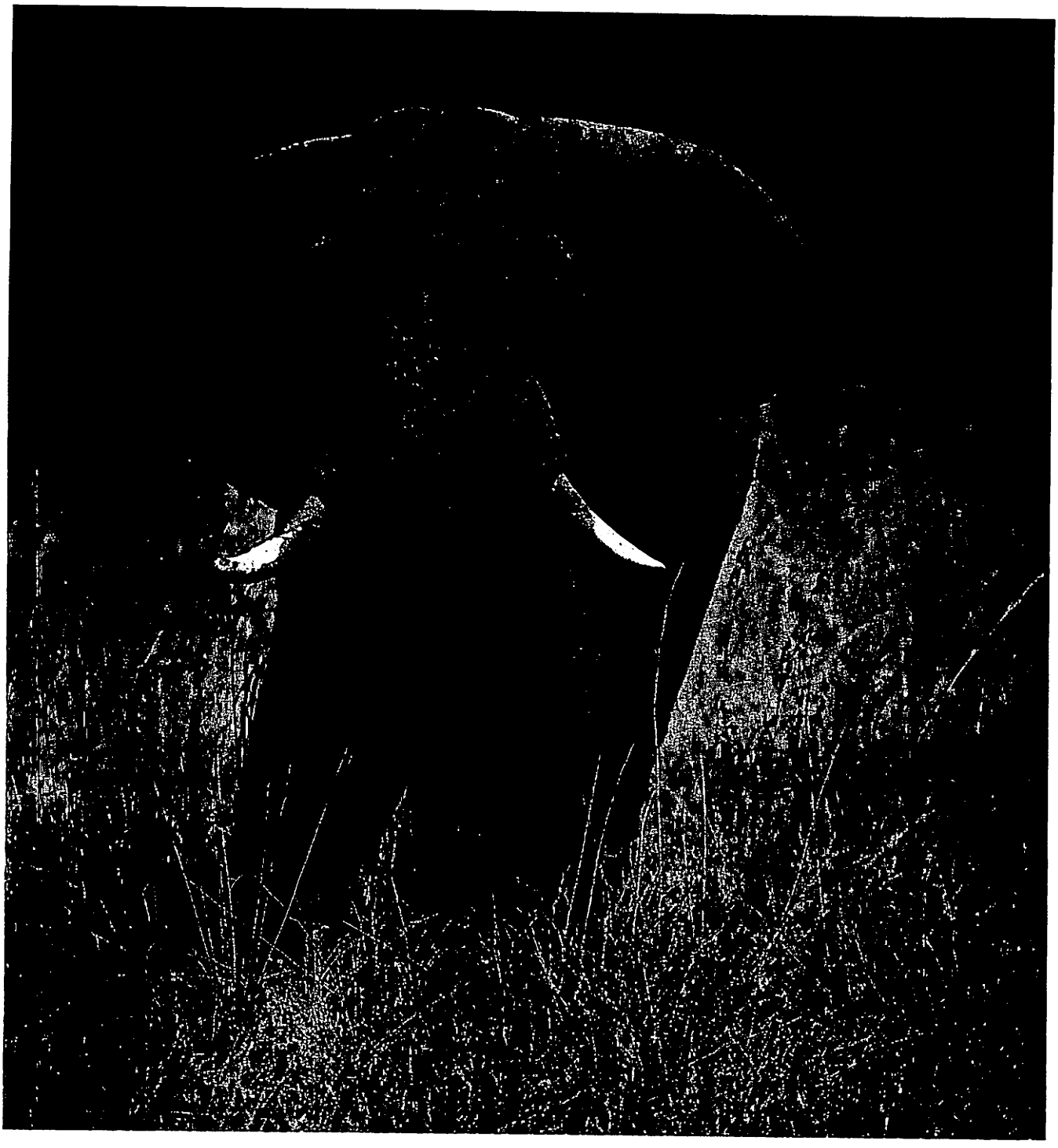
But by 1983, the once-thriving black rhino population in the Luangwa Valley in Zambia had been greatly depleted. All attention was suddenly focused on Zimbabwe – there was no longer a civil war and its black rhino population was still a healthy 1,700.

The inevitable onslaught from across the Zambian border began in December 1984. In response, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management quickly launched a survival programme for the animals. Many international organisations, in particular USAID, SAVE and WWF, have since rallied in support; and the Zimbabwe Rhino Survival Campaign was specially set up, under the auspices of the Zimbabwe National Conservation Trust. The help from all these sources has included a sophisticated (and highly effective) radio network for the valley, the provision of vehicles and staff housing, a helicopter patrol and many items of equipment.

'Operation Stronghold' is the name given to these efforts to protect black rhinos in the Zambezi Valley. The name is appropriate. Zimbabwe really is one of the last strongholds for the black rhino in the wild in Africa. The species has declined in numbers from 65,000 in 1970 to less than 4,500 today. Zimbabwe holds about half of all these animals – and the Zambezi Valley has the only contiguous population of more than 500 on the continent.

There, in the heat and thick bush, a concerted last-ditch stand is being made against the operations of the Mafia-like poaching organisations. Armed with hunting rifles to kill the rhinos and automatic assault rifles to resist capture, the poachers are determined. Their job is to feed an insatiable and misguided demand for rhino horn, notably from North Yemen, where it is used to make dagger handles and from east Asia, where it retains a reputation as a medication.

But most of the profits – which are enormous – go to middle-men and the main organisers of the poaching operations. For comparatively paltry rewards the poacher on the ground risks his life – and often loses it. More than 30 poachers were killed (and nearly as many captured) by Zimbabwean anti-poaching units between the beginning of 1985 and the



Zimbabwe's thriving elephant population – of around 40,000 – has been built up by good management. In the early days of British colonisation, excessive hunting had reduced the population to fewer than 4,000.

end of 1987. In the same three-year period, the poachers slaughtered about 380 rhinos.

As the day-to-day confrontations continue in the Valley, longer-term strategies to safeguard the animals are being developed. These include establishing breeding units in other protected areas – more than 120 Zambezi animals have so far been relocated in Hwange National Park, for example – and on some of the larger ranches in the country; some animals will also be kept in intensive captive breeding centres, both in Zimbabwe and in North America.

Some argue that captive breeding programmes and anti-poaching patrols, while necessary, are not getting to the core of the problem. The ultimate solution really lies in controlling the worldwide corruption that makes illegal international trade in rhino horn possible.

It is precisely the same approach that will be required to control elephant poaching. Unlike in rhino products, a certain amount of trade in ivory is allowed on the world marketplace. But of 100,000 tusks which

appeared in the international trade in 1986, no less than 75,000 lacked legal documentation.

Africa's elephant population currently stands at about 750,000. Largely due to poaching, it is declining at the rate of about ten per cent every year. Elephant poaching is less serious in Zimbabwe than in other parts of Africa but, even here, it is sometimes intensive in the south-western corner of Hwange National Park and in Gonarezhou National Park. The poachers are mainly from neighbouring countries.

In some countries, elephants are seriously threatened but the irony is that, in others, they are almost over-abundant. In Zimbabwe, for example, elephants are a real asset – and a prime example of the sustainable utilisation of a natural resource. Their value is fully recognised and this abundance is largely thanks to careful management of the elephants as an exploitable natural resource.

But they must 'earn their keep' in return for this enlightened form of conservation. They bring in considerable foreign exchange from safari hunting and tourism; their ivory and hides fetch good prices at government auctions, following control operations; they provide large quantities of meat; and they put development money back into the local communities.

About 100 bulls are placed on a quota each year for safari hunters and communal area hunting concessions. Each animal is worth about Z$10,000 in ivory, hide and meat. On top of this, there is a trophy fee of Z$5,000 and, since an elephant can be hunted only on a fifteen-day or 21-day safari, a significant income from other aspects of the trip.

The records of Portuguese trading posts on the Mozambique coast show that ivory has been harvested from this part of Africa for at least five centuries. The precise effect on the elephant population is not clear. In Zimbabwe, there were probably fewer than 4,000 left at the turn of the century. But very strict controls on hunting allowed the population to recover and, by 1960, it had increased once again to more than 30,000.

There was, however, an adverse result of this increase, particularly in the national parks. The elephants were doing serious damage to their woodland homes. By the mid-1960s the authorities were sufficiently concerned to recommend that some elephant populations be reduced. Recent studies have now shown that densities of over one elephant per square kilometre are likely to lead to accelerated woodland damage. In some cases, where elephant densities have been high, a tree mortality of more than 20 per cent a year has been recorded.

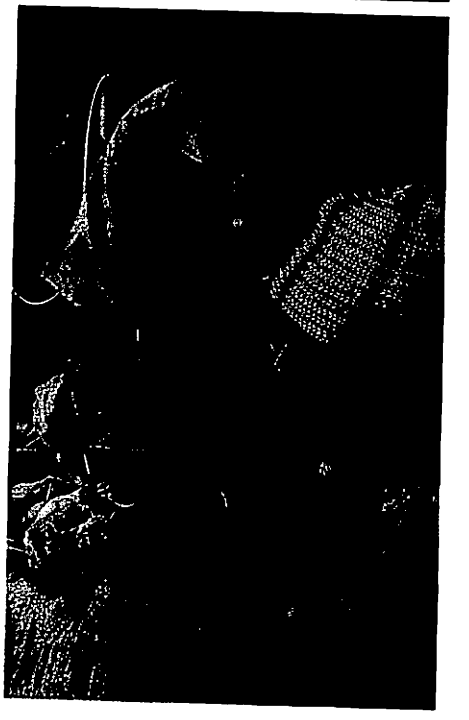
Outside the parks, there has been a continuing expansion of human settlement – with increasing conflict between villagers and elephants. This has both reduced the range available to the animals and led to the killing of large numbers for crop protection and for tsetse fly control.

For all these reasons – from sports hunting to disease control – in the 20-year period from 1960 to 1980, about 18,000 elephants were killed. Yet their numbers continued to rise and topped 50,000 by 1982.

Over the past few years attempts have been made to reduce overall elephant densities to less than 0.8 animals per square kilometre within protected areas. This would result in an elephant population of about 34,000 within these areas. The total is still more than 40,000 – and the annual growth rate in Zimbabwe is currently about five per cent.

Zimbabwe's healthy elephant state is the result of good management over many years. An important component of this management is a keen knowledge of the animals themselves. There have been many detailed studies over the years – for example, on their patterns of movement both within and outside protected areas. In particular, for the past two decades, elephant populations have been regularly counted using aerial surveys conducted by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management. Such population data is also used in computer-based models, which are an important tool in balancing elephant numbers with the availability of natural resources.

These data are crucial in successful elephant population management, particularly in the setting of quotas for the sustained yield of high quality trophy bulls, which is so important to the safari industry. But it is nevertheless a fine balance which has been so carefully achieved – and must be maintained in the long term – between elephant abundance and destruction of the woodland that supports them.



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An essential part of elephant management is population control. With elephants confined to limited areas, a general maximum of one animal per 1.25 square kilometres must be ensured. Otherwise, elephants begin to destroy their own habitat. A useful byproduct of culling is the meat, hide and ivory – one elephant could be worth up to US$5000 in raw materials alone. (HC)

Above:
The Zimbabwean Government ensures that the country receives the maximum benefit from legitimate ivory, by selling raw ivory through a well-organised auction system. Highly skilled artists, such as Patrick Mavros and his assistants, add great value to the raw product by fashioning exquisite carvings.