

Chete Black Rhino Expedition to Zimbabwe

Abstract

The aim of our expedition was to discover the number of black rhino within Chete. We intended to cover this large area in a short time with relatively little manpower. Individual identification of all rhino in a given area has been done successfully, but this takes a long time and is only suitable for small areas. We therefore decided to walk straight line transects and record all rhino spoor (footprints), middens (communal dung heaps) and sightings.

Members

RICHARD JOHNSON Leader; BA in Veterinary Medicine; Jesus College ; age 21.
NICHOLA DOWARD Food Officer; 3rd year Modern Linguist; Jesus College; age 21.
WILLIAM DUCKETT Equipment Officer; BA in Engineering; Pembroke College; age 23.
NICHOLAS BEARE Medical Officer; 2nd year medic; Fitzwilliam College; age 21.

Patron

PROFESSOR COLIN RENFREW, ScD, FBA

Introduction

The Black Rhino is one of Africa's most threatened large mammals. Its numbers have been reduced from 100,000 to less than 4,000 in the last 30 years, largely due to illegal poaching for its horn. The horn commands high prices in the Far East for traditional medicines.

Zimbabwe has over half the world's remaining black rhinos. Numbers taken from aerial surveys are very inaccurate, as the rhino tend to rest during the day in dense bush. Therefore Zimbabwe's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management required a ground-based survey of the rhino population of Chete Safari Area. This is a remote, 1080 km² wilderness, in northern Zimbabwe, bordering on Lake Kariba.

Aims

We did not expect to make many sightings, but predicted that we would be able to make a population estimate from measuring the width of the spoor encountered. The spoor measurements would enable us to distinguish between different rhinos in the same area. The spoor and midden data would also be used to show the distribution of rhinos. Since this method was "low-tech" it was hoped that it could be developed for future use.

Parallel transects were chosen to follow a bearing roughly perpendicular to the lake and cutting the main game paths. These covered the whole area at 2km intervals. Each one would be walked by two members of the expedition, along with a National Parks Game Scout. During this time the other two expedition members,

accompanied by a scout, would move the base camp along the lake shore, using a Canadian canoe.

The Expedition

We were very lucky to have the support of the Dorward family (parents of Nicky), whose cars and 50 ft motor boat, the Chessa, provided luxurious transport to Chete. After two days motor-ing we reached our destination. The first sightings of it were daunting, rocky cliffs and incredibly thick bush. We landed at Chete Gorge, the main camp of the area, housing most of the 19 scouts and the Senior Ranger, Norman English. We spent two days finalising our preparations, and discussing our plans with Norman. We had liaised extensively with National Parks, but had had no contact with Norman. In fact he had not heard of our impending arrival until just before we arrived, a typical example of the efficiency of African communications.

Once we started walking the transects, we soon learnt the hard way how thick the vegetation was. Ironically we had started in an area of very thick jesse bush. After a days walking we would find all exposed parts of skin scratched to bits. It was also the driest area of the park, and therefore we had to carry all our water, up to seven litres each. Though on some of the transects Norman was able to help by dropping off water supplies ahead, which he tied up trees. Navigation by compass was not straightforward, with few landmarks and thick bush. On some occasions it was not easy to find these water supplies. On the first transect we were encouraged to see plenty of evidence of

rhino even though we did not see any.

On returning to the lake shore we soon learnt the pleasures of getting ourselves and our clothes clean again. The time by the lake was always a time for relaxing, and enjoying the beautiful wilderness of the Zambezi valley. It was necessary to move the base about 5km along the lake shore, but this only took two trips and a day to complete. Though on some occasions

lakeside. There was a mother with a young bull, teaching the youngster the ways of the elephant world. As the mother raised her trunk above her, smelling the air for danger, the young bull did the same. After a while the elephant disappeared behind a thick area of bushes. Lackson, one of the National Parks scouts, whom had been assigned to guide us for the first couple of weeks, suggested we circle



this became a tricky operation, as August and September are the windiest months on Lake Kariba.

The greatest pleasure was going for game walks with a scout in the evening. One of the most memorable walks occurred towards the beginning of the expedition. We set off late in the afternoon, and we were soon lucky enough to be watching three elephants down by the

round through the bushes to get a better view of the elephant. Eagerly we followed, moving briskly through the thick bush. As we emerged from the undergrowth the three elephants came into sight.

Then suddenly we noticed two other large animals drinking down by the lake shore. They were black rhino. This was the first time we had seen black rhino, and it was with tremen-

dous excitement that we were able to watch these rare and strange animals. At this point we knew all the planning for the expedition had been worth it.

After a number of minutes the elephant made a sudden movement, probably because they had smelt us. This alerted the rhino, who immediately charged for the bush. Unfortunately this was the bush we were standing before. Nick and I had to withstrain every instinct to run for our lives, as Lackson alternated from shouting at us not to move, and at the rhino. This did little to persuade the rhino to change course and it continued to thunder towards us. Even the warning of Lackson's rifle had little effect. Then Lackson picked up a stick and threw it towards the rhino. The rhino's poor eyesight saw the dust as the stick landed and veered to one side to avoid it, and carried on into the bush within ten yards of us. We returned to camp that evening with a little extra adrenalin in our blood.

As the transects in the north of Chete progressed, we discovered a high density of rhino spoor. During the first two weeks the four of us sighted ten rhino, either on transect or while we were on the lake shore. Then as we worked our way further south there was a sudden lack of rhino spoor, and we saw no more rhino in the southern part of Chete. This was due to the fact that the southern area had experienced the majority of the poaching by Zambians.

After five weeks Nicky's parents returned to Chete on the Chessa. They arrived with a large resupply of food, and gave us the opportunity to send postcards to our sponsors. It was also a wonderful taste of civilisation, after so long in the bush. There was sumptuous food and a large supply of beer. After three days of luxury, the walking transects started again, as the Chessa returned to Kariba.

We continued our straight line transects as before. by now the temperatures were definitely getting much hotter, with the sun hot on our faces by 8.30am. Generally we would walk from 6.30am, stopping for a long siesta during the hottest part of the day. We set up camp between 5.30 and 6pm, (dusk falls early and quickly) depending on when we reached safe ground or a target spring. In this part of Chete it was not necessary to carry as much water, as there were a number of springs and pools; this did rely on the scouts knowledge of the area,

which was generally good. However, it certainly became frustrating when we had to make large detours to find water.

The water we found was often the small muddy remains of last year's rivers and water holes, and were never very appetising; filled with animal droppings and urine. At first we thought it safer to purify the water, but the time this exercise required, using a PWP water filter, combined with the fact that the scouts always drank the water straight, eventually persuaded us to follow their examples. None of us were ever actually ill, amazingly enough!

As we moved further south, we encountered more open areas, and as we gained in fitness we covered the ground more quickly. What had appeared a daunting task at the beginning of the expedition, was efficiently accomplished. Our final transect proved to be the most tense. The four of us set up a base camp well inland from the lake. Unknown to us, sometime during the night, two Zambian poachers passed within half a mile of our camp. These poachers were returning from a poaching trip in Chizarira, the neighbouring National Park, where they had had a gun battle with some National Parks scouts in Chizarira. The next day we discovered their spoor crossing our own from the day before. It certainly made us all nervous as we quickly returned to the lake shore. Before we left Chete there was another group of poachers discovered in Chizarira. We felt more safe with our exterritorist scouts!

On our final day in Chete, 6 Zambians were seen in the Cwizilukulu Gorge of the Chizarira escarpment shooting at a herd of elephants. (About 50km from Chete Gorge). No Chizarira scouts were available, so the Chete scouts were immediately dispatched, and drove by Landrover to Chizarira. Out of the group of 6 they shot 4 dead, wounded one, who was presumed dead and the final poacher was later captured by Zimbabwean police. This group of poachers had shot 13 rhino dead, as well as a number of elephants.

That night, at 11pm, the Senior Ranger drove us in his motor boat to meet the Kariba ferry in the middle of the lake, and so our fieldwork was complete. We were all extremely sorry to leave, having without exception found the project an enriching and educative experience. But before long we found ourselves shooting the rapids below Victoria Falls, and had other

things on our mind!

Conclusion

Between the four of us we walked 554km of transect in a period of 8 weeks. During the expedition we saw 13 rhinos, but only 5 sightings of rhino were made on the transects. From the spoor data which we collected, we estimated a minimum population of 74. This was very encouraging, as the previous estimate for the area had been 53.

It is proposed by the National Black Rhino Conservation Strategy to concentrate in-situ protection in ten designated areas in Zimbabwe. Chete is not designated a rhino stronghold, and therefore the rhino will be translocated from Chete to safer areas. The translocation started last September just after we left Chete. We were able to help the translocation team by giving grid references of rhinos and their spoor. As the translocation is completed, an accurate estimate of the rhino population will be made. It is then hoped that we will be able to show the accuracy of our "low-tech" counting method, which can then be developed for future use.

We are pleased to be able to report that there was no poaching during 1990 in the Chete Safari Area. This was due to the fact that the scouts were well trained and efficiently led by the Senior Ranger, Norman English. It was also a result of the fact that there were easier pickings in neighbouring areas, where the scouts were less proficient. Rhino poaching had started in Chete in 1986 and increased significantly in 1988 when 40 rhinos were killed in two months. From 1986 to 1989 the Chete scouts identified 65 carcasses of rhino, which had been poached. Over our transects we found 3 previously unknown carcasses. During the on-slaught in 1988 a large number of the rhino poached were taken from an area close to the main camp. This illustrates the fact that as the rhino populations diminish in "easier" poaching areas, and the poachers return to Chete, it would be next to impossible, with the present manpower and equipment, to protect the rhino in Chete.

The most recent estimates place 1700 black rhino in Zimbabwe, this is probably over half the world's population. Therefore it is essen-

tial that the Rhino in Zimbabwe are given the best possible protection.

The expedition had been a great success. The scientific content of the report was well received by the ecologists in Zimbabwe and the fundraising had been extremely successful. This was partly due to the increased public awareness of endangered animals, and partly due to the tremendous amount of research Richard had done on the subject. The latter placed us in a better position to persuade Trust Funds to part with their money. In fact we had money left over, after the expedition had finished. This was used to buy 14 Karrimor rucksacks and 3 Zeiss binoculars for the Chete scouts, and even night optics equipment, which makes the scouts policy of 'shoot-to-kill' Zambian poachers more effective. The scouts have to put their lives on the line for only £15 per week in what is almost a war zone.

Further Expeditions

National Parks in Zimbabwe have said they would welcome another expedition to Zimbabwe, and the Senior Ranger in Chete would also be happy to have another group in the area. It would be useful to follow up on our population estimates for all large animals that we sighted on transect.

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