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NEWS

OF THE EARTH



Road to nowhere. The black rhino, a conservation priority in the past decade, is suffering from the impact of Zimbabwe's political unrest.

The spoils of Africa's land wars

ZIMBABWE Mugabe's election ploy takes its toll on rare species such as black rhino.

Zimbabwe's political crisis, which has led to the deaths of more than 30 people over the past five months, is now having a severe effect on the country's wildlife. Thousands of wild animals, including elephants, giraffes and the endangered painted hunting (or African wild) dog have been killed by 'occupiers,' who have been squatting on more than 1,500 white-owned farms and wildlife reserves since February. The poaching is also threatening the critically endangered black rhino.

The land invasions were begun by President Robert Mugabe's war veteran supporters, as part of his

strategy for the elections earlier this year. But villagers have taken advantage of the 'free-for-all,' and large areas of land have been turned into minefields of snares.

Three black rhinos have already been caught in snares and two had to be drug-darted to be freed. According to Raoul du Toit of WWF's Southern African Regional Programme, "the breakdown in management systems in the area is making what is already a difficult job near impossible."

Poaching decimated Zimbabwe's black rhino population in the 1980s, and by 1992, it was left with just 260. But numbers have almost doubled over the past five years, due largely to the creation of rhino conservancies consisting of amalgamated private ranches –

where the animals are now at risk – and several 'Intensive Protection Zones' within national parks.

The wild dog population has also been affected. Gregory Rasmussen, who runs the Painted Dog Research Project, has had 11 dogs snared from two study packs. Protective collars and intervention saved six dogs, but one pack has been reduced to a mother and injured yearling bringing up 10 pups.

The effect on the country's wildlife is severe because much of it is concentrated on private white-owned land, such as commercial farms and conservancies, where people have realised the ecological and economic advantages in conserving it – land that is now being invaded and officially seized for the resettlement of hundreds ►

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► of thousands of people.

About 70 per cent of Zimbabwe's black rhinos live on private land, and some species, such as the cheetah, are dependent on commercial farmland for survival. The situation is set to worsen as the 'official' resettlement programme has begun moving families onto 3,000 out of the 4,500 white-owned properties the government plans to seize.

"White-owned commercial farmland in Zimbabwe supports a very significant proportion of that country's biodiversity," said Johan du Toit, director of the Mammal Research Institute at Pretoria University. "It will be severely impacted if this land is thrown over to subsistence agriculture.

"Dumping impoverished people on geometrically-plotted patches of virgin, non-arable land without any infrastructure, tillage equipment, venture capital, housing, water supplies or training, will result quite simply in an ecological disaster."

The reserves of the south-eastern Lowveld have been hit by poaching. The Save Valley Conservancy, Africa's largest private wildlife reserve, has been teeming with occupiers since March. They have laid a carpet of snares, and it's feared that some black rhinos will have been killed, as 20 or so are known to be concentrated in one of the 'no-go' areas imposed by squatters.

At Save, Bubiana and the Chiredzi River Conservancies, large sections of perimeter fences have been used to make snares. As a result, four elephants moved out of Save in July and were shot on adjacent land. And, according to Rob Style of Buffalo Range, which forms part of the Chiredzi River Conservancy, deforestation has

been devastating.

Animals living within national parks aren't safe. Gonarezhou National Park, for instance, had squatters before the current crisis blew up, rendering the option of translocating wildlife from the nearby conservancies inadvisable.

People being resettled are poor, have more pressing concerns than preserving wildlife and are poaching mostly to feed themselves, though some are learning that it can be a lucrative trade. Some are being settled unaware that the land they are taking over is useless – such as two sections of Save Conservancy gazetted for acquisition, which were previously declared unsuitable for agriculture.

The political problems have dented the country's tourism industry, which until now has been the fastest-growing sector of its economy. Hotel bookings are said to be 80 per cent down on last year.

Conservationists agree there is no simple answer to the crisis, which is linked to land issues, poverty and politics. But a more rational land-reform scheme and a return to law and order are needed or Zimbabwe – which has earned international respect for its conservation achievements over the past decade – may bring about its own ecological disaster.

JULIETTE MILLS

Action

Donations to:

- **Save the Rhino International**, 16 Winchester Walk, London SE1 9AQ. E-mail: save@rhinos.demon.co.uk
- **The Save Valley Conservancy Trust** E-mail: svc@savalcon.icon.co.zw
- **Sebakwe Black Rhino Trust**, Manor Farm, Ascott-under-Wychwood, Oxon OX7 6AL. E-mail: johngrippervet@compuserve.com