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NEWS REPORT • ZIMBABWE

Where have all the rhinos gone?

As the world awaits the outcome of Zimbabwe's fraught presidential election, **Stephen Mills** visited the country to find out how wildlife has fared amid the chaos.

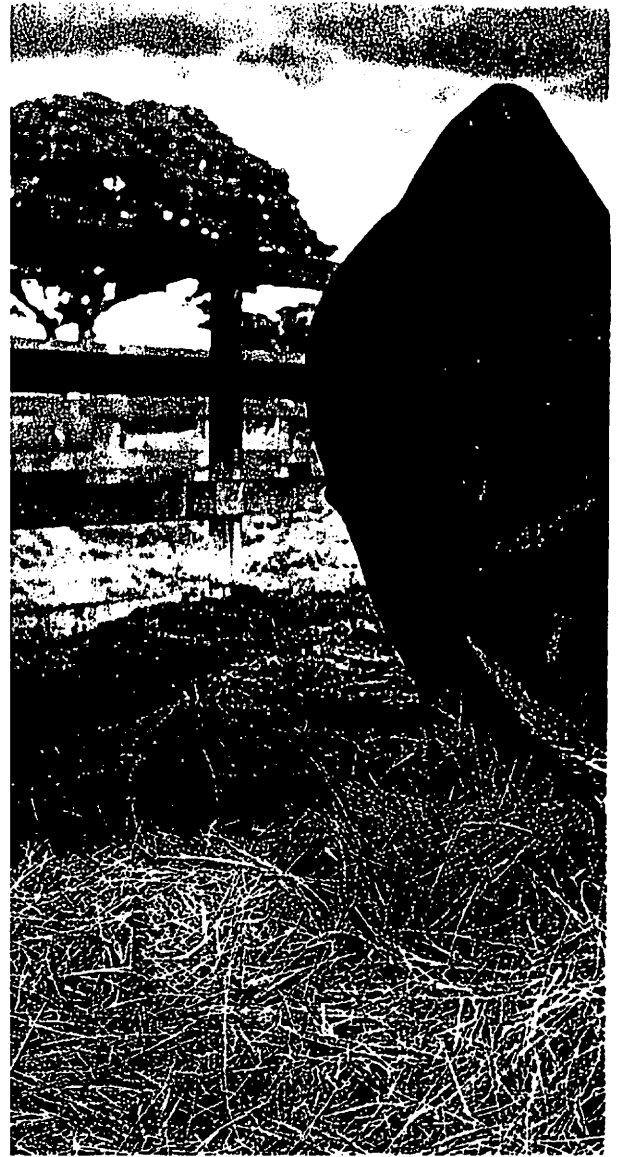
My first night in Zimbabwe: we are at Mana Pools National Park, in the VIP lodge overlooking the Zambezi River and the hills of Zambia a few hundred metres away on its northern bank. We have dragged our beds and mosquito nets onto the veranda and are lying listening to the cacophony of frogs in the water below. Hippos are grunting and splashing, and the groans of lions drift out from the woods behind us.

It's a wildlife tourist haven, yet there is no one but us to hear them. It's the rainy season, and the campgrounds and other lodges, usually flooded at this time of year, are deserted. We are lucky: it's been dry for a few days. Around the country, tourism is grinding to a halt. Very few people are travelling, and air travel is sporadic. We learn that about 85 per cent of the lodges in Hwange and Kariba have closed down. The roads are empty. The whole country is screwed up with tension, everyone – regardless of personal affiliations – hoping against hope that life will somehow begin anew after the apocalyptic election in March.

It has been a strange day. Warned of the overzealousness of customs officials, I stood in the red channel at the airport, waiting to declare a secondhand roll bar for our Land Rover and watching the luggage of my fellow passengers in the

green channel being enthusiastically frisked. I, meanwhile, was ushered out of the queue and invited to pass through without hindrance. In Harare, there was no sugar. At our first diesel stop, 100km down the road, the forecourt staff were sweeping up a huge pile of glass. The car in front of us, towing a flashy boat, had just had all its windows smashed. We later heard that the riot had spread to the local magistrates court, which was burnt down. Our windscreen was merely washed – meticulously. In Kariba, there was no mealie meal. This is the staple Zimbabwean food, and so when one shop received a delivery, it had to close its doors against looters. We were locked out.

My companion is Nicholas Duncan, Honorary President of SAVE Foundation of Australia, a small charity



of defence against poachers who boat across from Zambia toting AK47s. In Zimbabwe there is tight gun control, but in Zambia, weapons are easily accessible. Early on 23 December, a park patrol ran into a gang of poachers and a gunfight ensued. These were experienced scouts: in March 2000, several of them had stood up to a desperate gang whom they cleverly cornered in a ravine. They had recovered 27 elephant tusks.

This time, things did not go so well. The poachers escaped, and one of the park scouts, a wiry man called Dzvaka in his early forties, was hit in the leg. The team's solar-powered radio trans-

In a place of safety. A pair of rescued rhinos at Imire Game Ranch, which runs a captive-breeding programme and has had success with 10 calves. The female in the background lost her ears as a bait to poachers.

The Zimbabwe countryside is full of wire: cattle fencing, telegraph wires, railway and mining cables. Everywhere we went, snaring was rife

dedicated to funding black rhino conservation in Zimbabwe. We have come to Mana Pools a couple of weeks after a tragedy, to see how we can help. The following morning, the park staff tell us the story. Mana Pools is the first line

mitter didn't work in the dark, and so they lost valuable time. When they did contact HQ, they discovered that the park's helicopter was grounded because of an unpaid service bill, and the fixed-wing pilot didn't want to fly in the



fizzle. No one thought to tell the wife of the chief ecologist, who is a doctor and was on station. None of the scouts had first-aid training. Dzvaka should have been stabilised *in situ* with a drip. Instead, they tried to get him to hospital, hacking their way out of the bush, then driving the three hours to Kariba. Twenty minutes from town, Dzvaka died. The murderer, an armed poacher, is now once again safe in Zambia.

Zimbabwe and its National Park Service have much to be proud of. Some of Africa's rarest mammals are increasing here. Out of the world's total of roughly 10,000 painted hunting dogs, for instance, 700 survive in Zimbabwe, most of them under parks protection. Hwange National Park and its buffers cover over 21,000 square kilometres and support 45,000 elephants, the largest herd in Africa. The organised slaughter of black rhinos – which saw numbers plummet in Kenya from 20,000 to fewer than 400, and in Zambia from 10,000 to zero – was finally stemmed in Zimbabwe, where numbers are increasing by 11-12 per cent per annum from a low of 270 in 1993. Yet in every park

I visited, including the rhino IPZs (intensive protection zones) of Matusadona and Sinamatella, there was now a palpable lack of confidence, a paucity of equipment and a scarcity of senior officials in the field: the same sort of hesitancy of which the death of Dzvaka was so symptomatic. Without a fresh infusion of determined leadership – unlikely to occur unless the present wider political crisis is resolved – the national parks cannot be relied on to preserve Zimbabwe's wildlife in the future.

There is a second tier of official conservation in Zimbabwe, provided by the 'conservancies' – formal groupings of large, private farms which club together to share their wild animals and the costs of policing them. On our fourth day, we visited Bob Swift, chairman of the Midlands Conservancy, at his 7,500-hectare farm near the trouble-spot of Kwekwe. This is not the rich arable land of Harare district, which earns foreign exchange from tobacco, coffee and sugar cane. Instead it supports a thin grazing regime of just one cow per 8 hectares – and wildlife. When we arrived, Bob was distracted by a re-

The snare care bunch. An anti-poaching unit in the Gwayi Conservancy with a cache of wire snares removed from land where painted hunting dogs roam.

port of an injured female rhino. We followed her blood spore deep into the bush, where we were confronted by a huge, snorting male. Skirting him, we found a second, much older male protecting the female and her one-year-old calf. The mother had a deep gash in her inner thigh and vulva, almost certainly inflicted by the other male, an invader from another part of the conservancy, and when our guide tried to get a clearer view, the old male charged him and put him up a tree. We had seen enough to summon the government vet, who flew in two days later, darted and sedated the female, cleaned her 20cm deep wound and gave her a long-acting antibiotic.

That evening, Bob explained that one conservancy farm, Circle G, had recently been sold to the government and resettled with seven professional people. Though they have joined the conservancy, the farm had suffered a lot of poaching. One rhino had been shot, skinned and dehorned, and of the 15 previously on the farm, only five remained. The others had headed for safer land elsewhere in the conservancy, and this had upset the balance, resulting ►

Juliette Mills



in fights as the alien males pushed their way in. Overall, though, he said the Midlands Conservancy had been very successful. Its 12 farms originally received 33 rhinos when the decision was taken to relocate them from the danger areas around the Zambian border in the early 1990s. Including the rhinos on two other, contiguous farms, the population now exceeds 70.

But the days of the conservancies may be numbered. In the current economic and political climate, such huge farms can no longer be held in so few hands. Most of the farms we visited have either been gazetted for take-over or have received the notorious Section 8 notification, which gives a set date for eviction. Initially, there were clear criteria for take-overs: the first to go were farms contiguous to communal lands, those owned by foreign or absentee landlords and second properties. The presence of rhinos provided some protection for the owners. These criteria no longer apply. Of the four conservancies, the Save Valley and Bubiana have already been taken over by up to 6,000 war veterans. For them, struggling to earn an unfamiliar living off the land, the animals are free dinners. A spokesman for Bubiana claims that 30,000 animals have already been snared there.

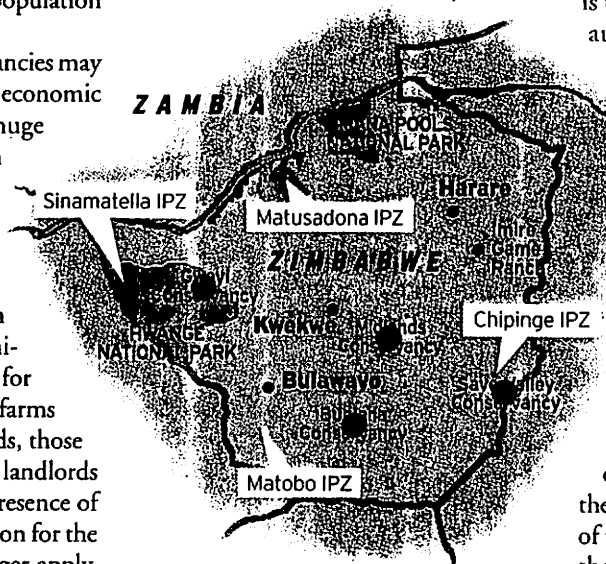
The Zimbabwe countryside is full of wire: cattle fencing, telegraph wires, rail-

way and mining cables. Everywhere we went, snaring was rife. One farmer we met on a farm north of Bulawayo had been invaded by 2,000 squatters and had grown so disconsolate at the level of poaching that he had switched off all his water pumps to disperse the animals. As a result, he has had no

servancy farmers, wildlife has always been an asset – to be paid for by tourists who want to see it or hunters who want to shoot it. For Peter Seymour-Smith, an outspoken farmer, the argument is simple: "At the first whiff of trouble, the tourists vanish, but the hunters still come. The only way to save the animals is to put a price tag on them. We could auction a single hunt for \$50,000 – that's a lot of money for conservation. Tell that to the greenies and the bleeding hearts. Otherwise, the rhinos are finished. If this land changes ownership – and I think it will – the new guys will need money for conservation. Wildlife cannot survive on charity for ever – sustainable utilisation is the way to ensure its future. A change of government won't reverse matters."

The conservation infrastructure of Zimbabwe is sound, but perhaps the ethos is not. Unless the management of the national parks can be revived and the conservancies be spared further, if justifiable, fragmentation, then, as the unplanted fields fail to produce and hunger bites, much of this nation's wildlife will end up as a last supper. ■

Find out more about conservation in Zimbabwe from: SAVE Foundation of Australia, 229 Oxford St, Leederville, West Australia 6007; e-mail: save@iinet.net.au



income for two years. Even around Hwange National Park, each patrol was finding an average of 100 snares every week, and 17 of the 360-odd elephants of the famous 'President's herd' there showed signs of trunk damage.

There are no saints here. The truth is that nearly everyone in Zimbabwe wants to hunt the animals. To the con-

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