

Return to Zimbabwe

When I last visited this country seven years ago it was in its heyday. The economy was strong, it was as politically and socially stable as it could be and its conservation credentials were second to none.

David Stirling, Project Advisor

In a relatively short period of time this has all reversed and Zimbabwe, in short, is in a state of crisis. The land reform bill, which meant the compulsory purchase of all white farmers land, has left the country in economic turmoil and the country's wildlife has suffered. I was here to visit, on behalf of Save the Rhino, three rhino projects that, in the light of the current political situation, were suffering and in need of emergency funding. As a Brit visiting this country I wasn't expecting much of a welcome and with my head filled with western

"but make no mistake, this land appropriation is entirely the right thing to do and you just wait and see - Mugabe will turn out to be the country's saviour!" At Bulawayo airport I left this incongruous pair promising that I would visit their estates soon and was picked up by Verity Bowman of the Marwell Trust of Zimbabwe.

The Marwell Trust is one of a few NGOs in Zimbabwe who act as administrators for funds from outside the country. Its remit with concern to rhinos is in Matopos

should be sought. In addition, a look at the conservation management of this population is in need, as a de-stocking operation in this Park might mean there would be no need for another fence in the future.

The next leg of my journey was to the other end of the country to the Zambezi Valley, famous for its abundance of wildlife. Far-sighted conservationists, seeing the political climate change at the end of the last century, made the decision to de-stock

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propaganda I warily entered the country through Harare International airport. It was less than an hour before the bank teller with whom I'd changed some money was offering me a lift into town. He was probably taking pity on this poor fool who actually changed money at a bank!

A few hours later I was back on an Air Zimbabwe flight to Bulawayo where I was to visit the Matopos National Park. My first encounter with Zimbabwe's new landowners was on that flight and consisted of two smartly dressed businesswomen who sat next to me. Having recently acquired a cattle ranch they were finding it difficult to sustain it and recently had to start killing some of the plains game to feed their labourers. "Times are hard here," she said,

and Hwange National Parks. The Trust's dedication is unquestionable. We went to the Matopos Park to look at the fence, which was in desperate need of replacement. Recently, a white rhino had been poached in the area and with the Park's new neighbours, settlers from the recent land reform; the wildlife was particularly vulnerable due to an increase in snaring. One of the problems with this rhino population (55 whites and 20 blacks) is the competition for space - some of the less dominant animals here are being pushed out onto communal lands where wholesale snaring is becoming a real threat. Fencing programmes are very expensive and I felt that, before anyone is approached for financing, a study by a rhino sanctuary advisor on the feasibility of a new fence line

rhinos from areas such as Chete, Chiredzi and Chewore and relocate them all into Matusadona where an IPZ (Intensive Protection Zone) was set up to look after them. Recently, we had provided fuel for the vehicles at Matusadona, but I couldn't believe the difficulties that entailed procuring and distributing it to the park. My host this time was a very affable Zimbabwean called Duncan Purchase who drove me across the country to Lake Kariba. There we met Rob Brett of SADC (Southern African Development Corp), who was helping to fund new rhino monitoring techniques in the Park involving database software and simple-to-use GPSs (Global Positioning System). In areas like Matusadona you are not likely to make daily sightings of rhinos, so obtaining information



of rhino densities and determining the optimum number of scouts necessary to guard each rhino is very valuable. There are up to 55-60 black rhinos here and we agreed to support this rhino programme with more fuel, car tyres and batteries for radios.

Next stop was back to Harare where we met Raoul du Toit of WWF. That afternoon we flew south in Raoul's plane to Bubiana Conservancy in the Lowveld. Bubiana is one of four conservancies that were set up by private landowners to conserve wildlife through sustainable commercial activities, such as hunting and photographic safaris. The conservancies were given custodianship of a population of the country's black rhinos and over the past few years their population has seen a record rise in newborn calves. Unfortunately, land invasions have deposited squatters (3,500 families) onto Bubiana's northern boundary where the greatest densities of the conservancy's 100 black rhinos are. The people are hungry and confused, and with little or no hope of living off the land have resorted to snaring to feed themselves. Rhino are getting caught in these snares and therefore must be relocated to other parts of the conservancy. These operations cost money and so far have been financed by WWF, but the lack of income from hunting and photographic safaris has taken its toll on the conservancies and its members. Bubiana is under a lot of pressure with possible fragmentation in the future. We had no time to visit any other conservancies but, just to prove that snaring was real, while we were there, one of the relocated rhinos had to undergo emergency surgery to remove a wire snare from her leg. We saw her in the rhino bomas at Bubiana and I was surprised to see that she had a young calf with her. The wire snare was embedded deeply into her swollen leg yet she had managed to give birth - a true testament to the rhino's resilience.

I might have only been in the country a week but I got the impression that,

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although these were undoubtedly tough times, the Zimbabweans both white and black who were staying on were going to see it out, and that the corner that the country needs to turn isn't that far away. Raoul made an interesting point when he said that one of the country's most important issues - when that corner is turned - is that it is ready to handle the influx of aid that it will inevitably receive when there is a change of Government. Conservation will also reap some benefits and it must also be ready to manage those funds for the conservation of this country's rich wildlife resource. In the meantime it is up to NGOs like us and Save Foundation (Australia) to help support the tireless conservation work that organisations like WWF, SADC, Marwell Trust and The Zambezi Society do in Zimbabwe.

In December 2003, Save the Rhino's Trustees agreed to make the following grants:

- + £2,000 for darts and microchips for the Wildlife Veterinary Unit
- + £1,580 for darting equipment, uniforms and equipment for the WWF Rhino Conservancy Project, which covers Bubiana and Bubye River, Save and Chiredzi River
- + £1,000 pounds via the Zambezi Society UK for fuel and / or tyres for Matusadona and Sinamatella
- + £500 towards a Rhino Cards school education project, and we will try to fundraise for the remaining £7,830 required