

Rhinos in Matusadona: down to critical numbers?

The Matusadona National Park covers roughly 1,400km². Two-thirds of it is a rugged, mountainous escarpment separating the Zambezi River valley from the agricultural highlands to the south. The remaining third consists of a plateau, referred to as the Zambezi valley 'floor', stretching from the base of the escarpment to the shore of Lake Kariba.

Peter Musto | Operations Co-ordinator, The Zambezi Society

This area, bounded by the Ume River to the west and the Sanyati River to the east, is designated as an Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) for black rhino. Rhino do venture into the escarpment hills, but are more generally concentrated on the valley floor. While patrols cover the entire Park, their intensive protection is focused within the IPZ.

The Zambezi Society's role in Matusadona is to assist the Parks and Wildlife Authority in monitoring the black rhino population in

the IPZ. Although the Authority is ultimately responsible for their protection, we provide advice and direction where appropriate, and

logistical support and planning is a big part of our role. We work closely with SRI and SAVE Foundation (Australia) and rely heavily on their support in order to carry out our work.

Until recently, we had two rhino monitors based in Matusadona, whose role was to spend time in the field with Parks

deployments, recording all rhino sightings. They were, effectively, our eyes and ears on the ground. Their positions were made possible thanks to SRI. Unfortunately, both retired recently, one from ill health and

the other due to old age. We are currently trying to find suitable replacements. Thanks to SAVE Foundation, Parks staff have vehicles to carry out their duties, but this is a remote Park with a limited road network, and maintaining a fleet and keeping rangers deployed is an ongoing challenge. Both SRI and SAVE are involved in other rhino conservation efforts around the country, and further afield, and so they provide a useful forum for exchanging ideas. The Zambezi Society also has a seat on the National Rhino Steering Committee, which guides Zimbabwe's rhino conservation policies. The opportunity, through this forum, to exchange experience and ideas on rhino security with people working in other IPZs and conservancies is obviously very important.

Locally, we are in close contact with both the Tashinga Initiative and the AWARE Trust. The Tashinga Initiative focuses mainly on staff welfare and communications within the Park, among other projects. The AWARE Trust is run by veterinarians who have carried out a number of rhino de-horning/ear-notching exercises around the country and they were involved in the recent de-horning exercise in Matusadona in July 2011.

Although Parks rangers have always been armed, their role until now could best be described as one of passive monitoring. However, with the recent upsurge in threats to rhino populations in Southern Africa, the feeling is that Parks rangers need to play a far more aggressive anti-poaching role. This requires specialist training. To this end, Pete and Bryce Clemence have been engaged to conduct the first phase training of 21 rangers. This will be followed up by an intermediate course and an advanced course. The possibility of using telemetry to track and monitor every rhino in the Park is also being discussed. This will need more rangers on the ground, more training and a long-term commitment from donors. Also being discussed is information gathering through a well-managed informer network, so that we are able to stay ahead of the game. Crucial to this will be the Parks Authority having the capacity to react when information comes in. The current ranger-training programme will go a long way towards providing that capacity. The black rhinos in the Matusadona National Park IPZ are down to critical numbers and are severely threatened. We need to act swiftly, as time is not on our side.

The July rhino ops in Matusadona found just five rhino



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