

From pensions to pachyderms



The word Sabbatical shares a root with Sabbath and hence connotes 'one year in seven' set aside for learning, growing and sharing. In practice, having worked 21 years straight, ours was perhaps more of a demi-Vigintiunustical. But the concept was the same—throw yourself into a different idiom with the intention of both lending our skills and also improving them.

Kenneth Donaldson

And so we headed off to Africa. Our destination was firstly Namibia, for a four-month stint with Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), and then two months in Zimbabwe, with Dambari Wildlife Trust (DWT).

Being, as I am, a be-spectacled, bald actuary, more familiar with pension funds than pachyderms, it seemed to me highly likely that my beloved spouse (the 10-year Director of SRI) would have rather more to contribute to our host organisations than me. Indeed, the aspect of the trip that caused most nervousness was the prospect of being demoted from 'boss' to 'wife's underling'.

Fortunately, both in Nam and Zim, there was plenty of different stuff for us to crack on with. The spousal division of labour fell fairly naturally into help with fundraising (my darling wife) and work on policy, strategy and procedure (the balding one).

My actuarial skills, a qualification for which I sweated blood, turned out to be of very little assistance for the most part.

The exception was a nice

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little piece of population modelling to work out how a set of financial incentives directly linked to rhino-calving success might pan out over the next generation or two. The concept is deceptively simple. Tell the local communities that surround a rhino reserve they can have a share in any rhinos born within the conservancy. Payment will be in terms of investment in schools (but could just as well be a cash dividend).

The local communities now have a very strong incentive to see the rhinos alive, well and breeding rapidly. But the devil's in the detail, and once you get your head into the basic idea, you begin to see that there are a number of different ways of allocating shares in rhinos. For example, you could just link payments to calf numbers. But then communities might benefit even while poaching of sub-adults or post-reproductive males continued unabated.

So perhaps you could link payout to total population size. But what happens if overall population size drops—do you take a school away again? Finding something that's fair and

simple—that's not so easy. So I had lots of actuarial fun (no, really) projecting different systems forward to see how they might pan out in practice, allowing for different rates of poaching and calving and natural mortality. Actuary heaven! In the end I liked a 'share of calves with hurdle' model, the hurdle simply being overall population growth had to be positive. This seemed to me to meet most needs, and wasn't too hard to explain.

As I said, my actuarial skills were seldom called on. But more general business skills—well, this is more often where I was able to contribute something to the cause.

A good example of this might be the **Zimbabwe National Rhino Strategy**. The current strategy dated from 1997. Since then:

- Mugabe's 'fast track land reforms' had sledge-hammered the breadbasket of Africa, as Zimbabwe was known, with land invaders taking over tracts of National Parks and private reserves for grazing and rampant game poaching
- Pandering to 'war vets' had fuelled hyperinflation. ZW\$1 billion wouldn't buy you a loaf of bread, assuming you could find one to buy
- The country had become a pariah state with zero tourism revenues making life even harder for the incredible folk that hung on in there and tried to protect their hugely important black rhino population—a massive proportion of the world's population

Today the country has made an astonishing start on the road to recovery, but nonetheless a lot had happened since 1997, and the strategy was long overdue a re-vamp. Several attempts had been made but for various reasons had gone nowhere. Now SRI had got USFWS funding, via the extraordinary Michelle Gadd, and this time we were going to crack it.

So it was that ma belle femme and I ended up producing powerpoints, 'facilitating' breakout groups, minuting proceedings and, ultimately, drafting the new Zimbabwe Rhino Policy and Management Plan 2011-16.

And you know what? It's really not unlike running any business, in principle (if you ignore the land-grabs, guns, politics, abysmal pay, unbelievable working conditions...).

For example, the strategy has five limbs. These are as follows, firstly in rhino language and secondly in my language:

Rhino-speak	Business-speak
1 Effective protection and law enforcement	Operational efficiency
2 Biological monitoring and management	Operational efficiency
3 Socio-economic sustainability	Finance
4 Building conservation capacity	Human Resources
5 Coordination, collaboration and programme management	Governance

Now, I am being somewhat disingenuous here. The challenges faced by rhino people are immense. You can't really compare running a business in the UK to dealing with all the issues they face, but there is sufficient overlap at the strategic planning level that actually we were able to grasp the overall picture at a high level and had the experience and nous to be able to translate it into a workable plan. Indeed, one of the key challenges we faced was to KISS. Keep It Simple, Stupid!

The workshops that USFWS had funded and that SRI, together with Verity and Nicky at Dambari, had organised were brimful of enthusiasm and ideas for how to measure and manage the performance of the rhinos and the people charged with looking after them. Our key challenge was to get from literally hundreds of excellent suggestions, to something workable in practice. I believe that, in the end, we have a plan that can work. So how long will Zimbabwe manage to hold back the tide of well-funded, high-tech, callous, wealthy poaching gangs who don't hesitate to shoot first? Well, if we didn't make a plan we'd have no chance at all.

And so it went. We help draft this, that, and the other; from facilitating a security workshop for Namibia's desert-adapted rhino population, to looking at budgeting issues, to drafting a Standard Operating Procedure for use

of private firearms on duty (!!!), to drafting a Volunteer Programme and an Adoption Scheme for Dambari, see www.dambari.com We've mucked in and helped out. And overall, what?

Well, overall, I believe we have been able to help. It's not that the people we've worked with in Namibia and in Zimbabwe couldn't do what we did. Of course not. It's just that they are so stretched, so pushed for time, that a helping hand gave them the space to get on with the hard graft while we helped move the planning and paperwork along.

Our reward? It's impossible to know where to start. We've had experiences and access that are granted to the very few. But the real reward has been the trust, the enduring friendships, the warmth, and the knowledge that even balding, bespectacled actuaries can sometimes do something good.



Tickling tame duikers at lunchtime is an excellent stress-buster



Thanks

Our very grateful thanks to the wonderful people at SRT, MET, DWT and LRT for hosting us during the sabbatical, and for sharing the pains and pleasures of rhino conservation – a series of insights we will never forget.

And thanks to USFWS RTCF for its grant of \$20,460 to fund a series of workshops to inform the production of the new Rhino Policy and Management Plan 2011-16 for Zimbabwe, and to DWT for all the organisational and logistical assistance.

The people tasked with delivering Zimbabwe's new Rhino Policy and Management Plan



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