

ZIMBABWE

AT THE HEART OF BLACK RHINO CONSERVATION



Zimbabwe has been the front line of black rhino conservation in Africa for 20 years. AZA member zoos, working through the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), have been involved with this effort from the outset. Just 3,700 black rhinos live today in the wild, most in Southern Africa. Poaching and incidental snaring continue to be severe threats to their survival. One of the best conservation strategies is to reduce risk by distributing the rhino over as many habitats and countries as possible.



BY RAOUL DU TOIT

AZA institutions support IRF's involvement in the Southern African Rhino Range and Population Expansion Program of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to:

- Protect rhinos in private conservancies and national park Intensive Protected Zones (IPZs) by rescuing rhinos at high risk, performing triage and other veterinary care, and fund anti-poaching.
- Re-establish viable populations of black rhinos in protected wild habitat where the species was extirpated (like Botswana and Zambia) but which now seems secure for reintroduction – thereby expanding rhino ranges.
- Translocate rhinos from AZA facilities to a free-range sanctuary and propagation facility in the Shashe-Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area to produce rhinos specifically for reintroduction.
- Facilitate captive-to-wild introductions. For example, Tim, a male black rhino from White Oak Conservation Center, accompanied by Akura, a female from the Frankfurt Zoo, were successfully introduced to the wild near Marakele National Park in South Africa. They have produced two calves to date.

Because the 500 Black Rhinos in Zimbabwe now confront the greatest poaching pressure, IRF support is concentrated there.

About three-quarters of Zimbabwe's rhinos live on private conservancies and the rest mostly in IPZs within national parks. Their survival is severely threatened by land ownership changes within the country and loss of park staff capacity to protect wildlife.

In Zimbabwe, the private sector's strong role in conservation arose in the late 1980s when a rhino custodianship program allocated state-owned wildlife to private ranchers for breeding endangered species. The rhinos remain owned by the State. Custodians have no trading rights.

Since 2000, many private conservancies have been overrun by human settlements clearing land for subsistence farming. Perimeter game fencing around the conservancies has been dismantled and the fence wire has been used to produce thousands of wildlife snares to trap bushmeat. Rhinos are the incidental victims. Also, deliberate killing by commercial poaching for rhino horn is increasing rapidly.

In response, the international conservation community, led by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and IRF, has funded rhino rescue operations – a technique perfected over the past decade. Rhinos are fitted with telemetry devices for tracking, and when found injured by snares or poachers, treated, and translocated to safer areas as necessary. The veterinarians, pilots, and trackers involved in these operations act as the “Red Cross” for the rhinos, performing triage in the field then airlifting or trucking them out as necessary for recovery and security.

RHINO RESCUE OPERATION: GOURLAY'S RANCH

A 200 square km private reserve in Southern Zimbabwe, Gourlays Ranch was a productive rhino breeding area from the time it received 10 black rhinos from the Zambezi Valley in 1987. By 2000, the population had nearly quadrupled. But as encroaching subsistence farmers, gold panners, and poachers threatened the rhinos, a rescue operation was authorized in 2005. This is the story...

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

- A team of two experienced veterinarians (Drs. Chris Foggin and Pete Morkel) and WWF/IRF Rhino Conservancy Project staff assemble, joined by rhino trackers, expert in locating rhinos across Africa.
- Trackers set out in early morning to find fresh rhino tracks and dung.

- A small fixed-wing aircraft piloted by Project Executant Raoul du Toit is called in by radio to locate the rhinos and position back-up ground crews close to the area.
- The helicopter carrying the darting team is summoned.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

- Poor roads and dense thorn thickets challenge the rhino capture. The plane pilot instructs the helicopter where to hover with the best chance of drug-darting the rhino so it will collapse in open terrain. Three or four minutes later, the rhino is darted.
- The aircraft monitor the rhino until immobilization drugs take effect. The rhino is down.
- The veterinarians begin monitoring vital signs, cooling, and “processing” the rhino. They notch an ear with an identification mark, and insert a microchip transponder and radio-transmitter into its horn so it can be monitored remotely.
- The ground team arrives with the recovery truck, directed by spotter aircraft to the immobilized rhino.
- The rhino is revived and moved into a crate.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

- Of the 40 plus expected Black Rhinos on Gourlays Ranch, only 30 seem to have survived. Five rhino skulls are found, two with bullet holes, and all with nasal bones and horns chopped off.
- Over the next few weeks, all rhinos, including very young calves, are captured and moved out of the area – gruelling work during Zimbabwe's hot season. Intensive veterinary monitoring ensures rhinos are not heat-stressed after darting. The aircraft engine is kept from overheating.
- The 30 rhinos are immobilized and crated for transport – but not all at once. Only a few crates are available and just one truck able to move four rhinos at a time.
- Most rhinos receive horn transmitters in a first immobilization, enabling quick tracking by aircraft and are immobilized again when it is their turn to be crated.
- Some require immediate triage care. Wire cable snares are removed from five rhinos. One cow has lost its left back foot.
- The rhinos are immobilized a second time for crating and transported to their new home on Buby River Conservancy. Sometimes travelling all night, the trucks drive about 350 km per trip.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

- Upon arrival, bulls and young single cows are released into the wild. Cows and calves are held in pens first to settle down before release.
- Soon after translocation, four of the 30 rhinos die – all from injuries sustained before capture.

ENCORE

The 26 Gourlays rhinos are generating a valuable breeding group in a new area with major potential for population expansion. Buby River is one of several rhino conservancies in the Lowveld region of Zimbabwe where strong population growth rates (over 7 percent per annum) are still maintained through active management.

RAOUL DU TOIT IS PROJECT EXECUTANT,
WWF/IRF/BEIT TRUST RHINO CONSERVANCY PROJECT AND
TECHNICAL COORDINATOR FOR THE SOUTHERN AFRICA DEVELOPMENT
COMMUNITY REGIONAL PROGRAMME
FOR RHINO CONSERVATION