

# Zimbabwe:

ALL IMAGES: CATHY DEAN



**Left:** Natasha trying to pick up a signal  
**Far left:** Natasha, Israel Ngaria and two trackers monitor

## On patrol with the rhino monitors in the Lowveld

**Cathy Dean**  
Director

Female number 2215 was leading us round in circles. Dave Stirling, Save the Rhino's Project Advisor, and I were out with Israel Ngaria, Senior Rhino Monitor, two trackers, an armed ranger from the Buby River Conservancy, and Natasha Anderson and Raoul du Toit from WWF-SARPO. The Communications Specialist receiver was beeping merrily away, but this rhino was moving, and not in a straight line.

Sirtrak transmitters (a little bigger than a AA battery) have been implanted in the horns of many of Buby River's black rhinos. Each transmitter has its own frequency, and by typing an 8-digit code into the receiver, Israel can then scan the area using a Telonics antenna to try to pick

up a signal. The transmitters are set to come on for several hours a day and have a range of about six kilometres.

We find a hillock and stop. Israel stands in the back of the Toyota Hilux, holding up the antenna and rotating it slowly, while Natasha keys in the codes of the rhinos known to be in that area. As the antenna turns, it picks up a signal - one sound if the rhino is moving, and another if it is stationary. The louder the signal, the nearer the rhino. The range is initially quite wide, but by detuning the receiver slightly and rotating the antenna again, Israel narrows down the rhino's location.

We continue on in the vehicle, to get downwind of number 2215, before hopping out to go in search of her on foot. It has been an unusually wet January and February in Zimbabwe and the bush is thick and green. There is water everywhere and the game has dispersed widely. It's hard to imagine what the landscape must look like in the hot, dry, dusty months that will follow.

The wind shifts around continually, and it seems that this female has detected our presence. Israel and Natasha continually stop to take readings and for a while we get close, not enough to see her, but certainly close enough for us to check around for climbable trees. 2215 keeps moving, fast,

faster than we can walk, and eventually we have to concede defeat and return to the plane before it gets too dark to fly.

In more open bush that same morning, Israel and his team of three trackers had picked up the spoor of two rhinos and managed to get sightings of both. Seeing each rhino regularly is vital, as there are a lot of snares around, not all intended for rhino but which can inflict serious damage. If detected and removed quickly, rhinos can recover well from snare wounds, but a snare left for six months can cause slow death, as the rhino loses its ability to move and to browse.

That evening we discuss funding needs with Raoul and Natasha. Their priorities include a radio repeater station, so that Natasha can communicate with the team based in Buby River, and for additional rhino monitors, both in Buby and in Save Valley. Natasha would like to deploy three teams of two in each conservancy, putting an experienced man with each new recruit. Israel will rotate between each team in Buby, while Jackson Kamwe will do the same in Save Valley. Without this intensive monitoring effort, not only would snares be left to fester, but any poaching would also go unnoticed.

### £10,000

We came away very impressed with the work being done in the Lowveld. There are very good relationships between the independent rhino monitoring teams and the rangers employed by each ranch in the conservancies, both on the ground and at management level. This kind of partnership and cooperation is key to rhino conservation in Zimbabwe, particularly when resources are so stretched. We have awarded £10,000 to the rhino monitoring programme in the Lowveld.

**Right:** 2215 was moving faster than we could

