

## The keystones

When masons build archways, they appreciate the need for a single, supporting stone placed in the centre of the archway: the keystone. It supports the archway and indirectly supports all the stones on either side.

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**W**ithin the world of conservation, we also talk about keystone species. These are species that, either directly or indirectly, support other wildlife species and biodiversity. Ecosystems and surrounding human communities can also benefit from conservation efforts targeted towards these keystone species.

When a species is identified as endangered, there is an obvious obligation to prevent its extinction. In most cases of *insitu* conservation (meaning that the species is conserved in its natural environment in the wild) this means setting aside large areas of suitable habitat, especially when dealing with larger herbivores like black rhino or carnivores like the charismatic cheetah. Other wildlife species occurring in the same area benefit from the protection given to the keystone species. The vegetation and wilderness also benefits, as this is the very habitat in which the key species exists, so it needs protecting from negative impacts like resource exploitation and human encroachment. The surrounding communities also have an opportunity to benefit through increased tourism that the keystone species will naturally attract, as well as education initiatives informing the communities of the importance of the species.

### The archway

Matusadona National Park has a number of keystone species, to the benefit of all wildlife and biodiversity in the Park and also some of the surrounding community. Not only are there black rhino here, but

also wild dog, cheetah, lion, leopard and the largest keystone of all, elephant. Each species offers its own unique support to the 'archway'. Black rhino require protection, so MNP is designated an Intensive Protection Zone, with increased human resources. Elephant require large tracts of vegetation to sustain the large herds, and are in fact 'tolerated' in the surrounding community as part of a sustainable utilisation programme (to the benefit of the community). The carnivore guild, made up of all the large carnivores, requires prey species to survive, and so there is an abundance of various smaller herbivores. All the key species attract tourists, which promotes tourism, and in turn draws employment from the surrounding community.

### Rhino and cheetah

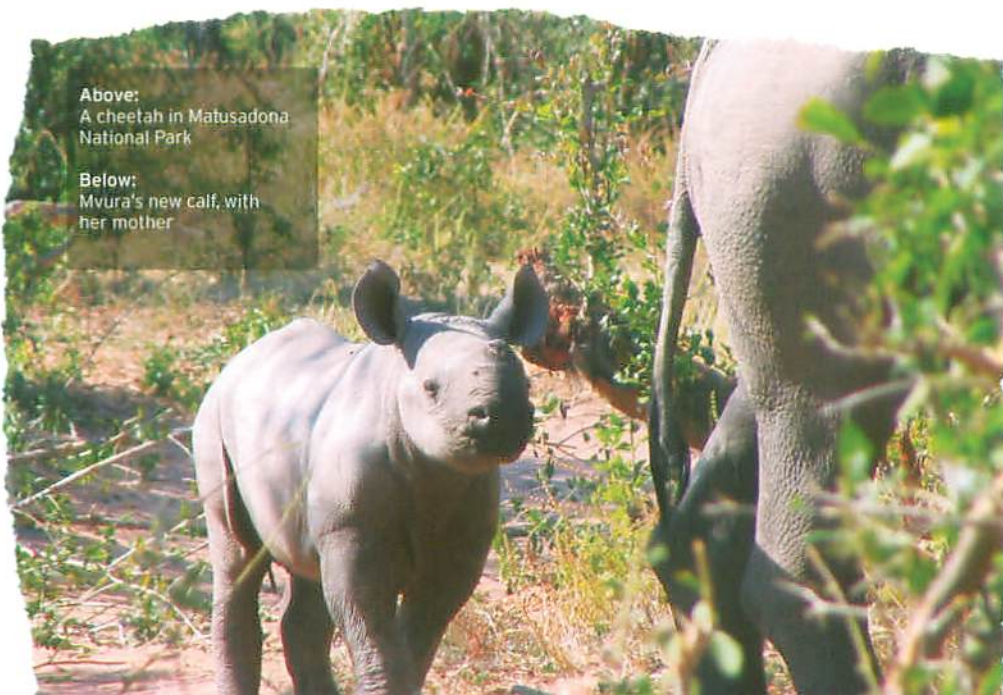
Ongoing monitoring and research are important for the continued survival of these key species. The Zambezi Society, with support from Save the Rhino International, assists the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority in MNP continually

to monitor their black rhino population. It is through this intensive monitoring that we can report the birth of two new rhino this year. Cleopatra has had her second calf, while Mvura has had her first. This is fantastic news as it continues to show how successful the reintroduction of hand-reared rhino into MNP has been.

The Zambezi Society, with support from Fauna and Flora International, has also carried out research on the introduced cheetah population, the most recent of a string of research projects on this cheetah population spanning a ten-year period. The most recent results show that the population is still surviving and, more importantly, a survey of the surrounding community indicated that the cheetah were not seen as problem animals. It was also shown that when a community came into contact with cheetah, they had a more positive attitude towards the species than those who did not come into contact with cheetah. These are important results that will assist with cheetah conservation in MNP and beyond.



IMAGES: JENNY NOBES



**Above:**  
A cheetah in Matusadona National Park

**Below:**  
Mvura's new calf, with her mother