

Dehorning rhinos in the Lowveld

In 1987 there were an estimated 1,775 black rhinos in Zimbabwe. By 1995 poaching had reduced this number to 315.

**Raoul du Toit and
Natasha Anderson**
Lowveld Rhino Project

Through a collaborative effort between the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority and WWF, with major funding provided by the Beit Trust, the Lowveld Rhino Conservancy Project (LRCP) was started. This project established the main Lowveld populations in the early 1990s in an effort to protect some of what was left of Zimbabwe's black rhinos. Under this project, groups of predominantly cattle farmers were encouraged to remove the fences separating their properties to form large conservancies where black rhino populations could be founded.

The creation of these conservancies was the catalyst for a number of property owners to convert completely to wildlife. By providing a focus for support and joint action by landowners, black rhino conservation has contributed significantly to maintaining and improving biodiversity in these areas and the populations of many other species such as buffalo, elephant, wildebeest and leopard have improved. Other critically endangered species such as painted wild dog have also made significant recoveries in these 'black rhino' conservancies.

With ample land available and safe from rhino poachers, these Lowveld black rhino populations have achieved some of the highest growth rates ever recorded. Two of the LRCP's established populations have already grown past the 100 mark and today Zimbabwe's Lowveld region is home to 375 black rhinos - nearly 10% of the world's wild population.

LOWVELD RHINO PROJECT



A rhino is immobilised prior to the dehorning operation



Dehorned mother with calf in the Lowveld

LOWVELD RHINO PROJECT

Until recently the main threat to rhino survival in the Lowveld was wire snaring. Snaring has increased significantly since large portions of the conservancies were converted to peasant farming under the Fast Track Land Reform Programme. Snares generally do not trap and kill rhinos - instead the wire becomes imbedded in the flesh creating a debilitating wound. Young calves are particularly vulnerable and so females with calves are checked regularly so that snare injuries can be detected and treated as quickly as possible. To make regular monitoring easier, female rhinos are often fitted with horn radio-transmitters.

The worsening economic and political situation in Zimbabwe has created an environment ripe for poaching activity. When a rhino was shot in Save Valley Conservancy early last year it was decided to dehorn the male rhinos and leave the females with their horn transmitters so that monitoring for snares could continue. Tragically the poaching activity intensified and a further five rhinos have been shot in Save Valley, all females - the poachers did not shoot any of the already-dehorned males.

Lowveld rhino operations are now concentrated on ear-notching of subadult rhinos for monitoring purposes, and dehorning of all adult rhinos (male and female) in areas of high poaching risk. Some argue against dehorning rhinos, claiming it 'condemns them to death' by reducing their ability to defend themselves against other rhinos or predators. In the Lowveld conservancies, over 100 black rhinos have been dehorned at one time or another and only one dehorned rhino has ever been recorded injured or killed through fighting - in this case, killed by another dehorned rhino during post-release sparring for territories. In environments where

poachers are dehorning rhinos with lead bullets and axes, it is far preferable that wildlife management units beat them to the job with immobilising drugs and saws.

Meanwhile, longer-term community-based approaches are also being implemented, including a schools awareness programme that has been supported by Save the Rhino, and a pilot 'community endowment scheme' which gives an economic stake in rhinos to the Save Valley Community Trust. Other community projects are in the pipeline but require careful handling because of the current sensitivities over the ownership and management of rural land in Zimbabwe.

NATASHA ANDERSON



A happy Lowveld rhino monitor receives his new Save the Rhino cap

Grant

The EAZA Rhino Campaign has just given €22,600 to the LRCP to buy a new vehicle for its rhino monitoring units. This will greatly increase mobility and, we hope, help Raoul and Natasha to prevent further poaching.