



# Black Rhinoceros Conservation

By Dick Pitman

Contrary to many media reports, Zimbabwe still has thriving wildlife populations and a well-managed network of National Parks and safari areas.

However, the Parks Authority depends on its income from tourism and hunting to manage these areas. But ordinary tourists have mostly decided – against a lot of evidence to the contrary – that Zimbabwe is far too dangerous a place to visit. Hunters seem to be a different breed. While the tourists stay away, the hunters still come, pay their money, enjoy their sport and go safely home again.

Sadly, though, the earnings from sport hunting still aren't enough to protect an eighth of the country – which is what the Authority controls – and its wildlife. Species sought after by poachers, such as elephant and rhino, are particularly vulnerable. I know this only too well, because I've managed a Zimbabwe conservation agency, *The Zambezi Society*, for a quarter of a century, and much of our work involves helping the Parks Authority to combat poaching and conserve endangered species.

We were founded in 1982 and, shortly afterwards, rhino poaching hit Zimbabwe in a big way. We set up a campaign to buy the field equipment – boots, packs, mosquito nets, radios – that Park rangers needed to go out and combat the poachers. The fundraising campaign itself was hugely successful, but – in spite of our best efforts – by 1990 Zimbabwe only had 300 or so rhinos left.

The next step was to dehorn these survivors – a controversial measure, but much less terminal than a bullet from an AK-47 – and to move them into four Intensive Protection Zones, or IPZs. Here again, the Zambezi Society helped by sourcing funds and equipment for the dehorning and translocations and, in the field, by providing and flying its spotter aeroplane.

The establishment of these IPZs meant that the Society had to decide, very carefully, how it should make best use of its resources. It was impossible for us to give meaningful support to all four IPZs, so we decided to focus on one area and make a good job of it. As we are the Zambezi Society, we felt this area ought to be somewhere in the Zambezi Valley, so we chose the IPZ that was set up in the Matusadona National Park, on Lake Kariba.

The Matusadona Black Rhinoceros IPZ has a good population of black rhinos, with – and this may prove important



*Hand-reared rhino being weighed at Tashinga, in the Matusadona Intensive Protection Zone.*

in the future, when it comes to reintroducing rhinos into other Zambezi Valley wildlife areas – some inherent immunity against trypanosomiasis, the animal version of sleeping sickness. We began by providing the day-to-day equipment needed by the IPZ anti-poaching force; then diversified into a rhino calf-rearing programme.

Young black rhinos, born on Imire Ranch, were moved into bomas in the Matusadona and reared by hand until they were old enough to release into the Park. Ten young animals went through this programme, and two of them have already had calves since they were released.

By the time this project ended, we felt that the Matusadona

population should be able to survive and breed without more introductions, so we moved on to a Park-wide project designed to monitor the rhinos, keep track of their numbers and distribution, and flag any early signs of trouble, such as renewed poaching. We did this by employing three highly experienced rhino trackers, recruited from conservancies affected by Zimbabwe's land reform programme, and a young and enthusiastic project manager.

This project is still continuing, and we now hope to expand it into a broader support programme to assist with overall IPZ management. Meanwhile, we're still supplying fuel and equipment to help the Matusadona anti-poaching force to do its job. The black rhino population is growing, we've only had one rhino killed by poachers in the Matusadona since 2000, and here, too, we were able to help by paying a network of informers that led to the arrest of the gang responsible.

Our ultimate dream is to reintroduce black rhino into the great Middle Zambezi parks and safari areas – Mana Pools, Sapi and Chewore – where they were totally wiped out during the 1980s and early 90s. But this all costs a lot of money. Since 1984, the Zambezi Society has raised and spent millions of dollars on rhino conservation. We keep our offices and staff small and cost effective. We get into the field so that we know what the real problems are, and we put our money into practical, hard-headed, on-the-ground conservation projects.

Recently, though, a lot of our "traditional" sources of cash have dried up, for much the same reasons that the tourists aren't coming. In Europe and the USA, wildlife success stories like the black rhino have been swamped by the doom-and-gloom beloved of the international media. Here in Zimbabwe, it's much the same story – except for one outstanding example: Chisipite Junior School for Girls.



Girls from Chisipite Junior School with a black rhino calf at Tashina, in the Matusadona Intensive Protection Zone

Every year, for the past ten years, girls in Chisipite's two senior classes have gone out and raised money for the Zambezi Society's rhino projects. Every December I am invited to their end-of-term assembly. Every year they give us a cheque that always astonishes me with its generosity. It has always been enough to keep several young rhino calves fed, or the anti-poaching rangers provided with boots and backpacks, or at least one of our rhino trackers paid for a year.

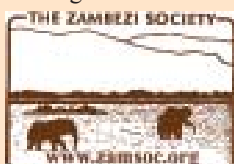
These days, with Zimbabwe's rampant inflation, the cheque runs to millions of local dollars. But it isn't huge in "real" terms, and we have to spend it as soon as possible, before inflation makes it worthless. Every year, too, I've tried to shame the local embassies into matching Chisipite's donation. And every year I get polite letters "regretting that our project doesn't fit our current funding strategy."

Some countries are already offering black rhinos – old male animals usually, nearing the end of their lives – to sport hunters. We can't do this – yet. But if, one day, we can start moving rhino back into the Zambezi Valley safari areas, then who knows?

You could help us make this dream come true. Go to our website - [www.zamsoc.org](http://www.zamsoc.org) - either direct or via the link from [www.african-hunter.com](http://www.african-hunter.com) and click the "Donate" button for secure, online credit card and direct debit facilities. We're audited every year by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and we'll send you regular updates on our rhino work, and on the other things we do as well.

Next time, I'll talk about our work with cheetah, another endangered species that the Zambezi Society's been working with during the past ten years. 🌿

**About the Author** - Dick Pitman is a life long conservationist and founding member of the Zambezi Society, a registered Non Governmental Organisation and Charity constituted to monitor and protect the Zambezi Basin across southern Africa. Over the last 23 years, ZAMSOC has carried out extensive research in all eight riparian states which share the Basin, working closely with relevant governments and agencies to identify natural resources and their exploitation, assist in wildlife management strategies to safeguard the Zambezi Basin's vast biodiversity, and educate all beneficiaries. Indeed, the Zambezi Basin can be considered the most significant natural wildlife reserve in central/southern Africa and is largely the mechanism which sustains utilization of wildlife for sport hunting and non-consumptive use alike. Simply put, if the Zambezi Basin was compromised, real wildlife and hunting as we know it in southern Africa would collapse.

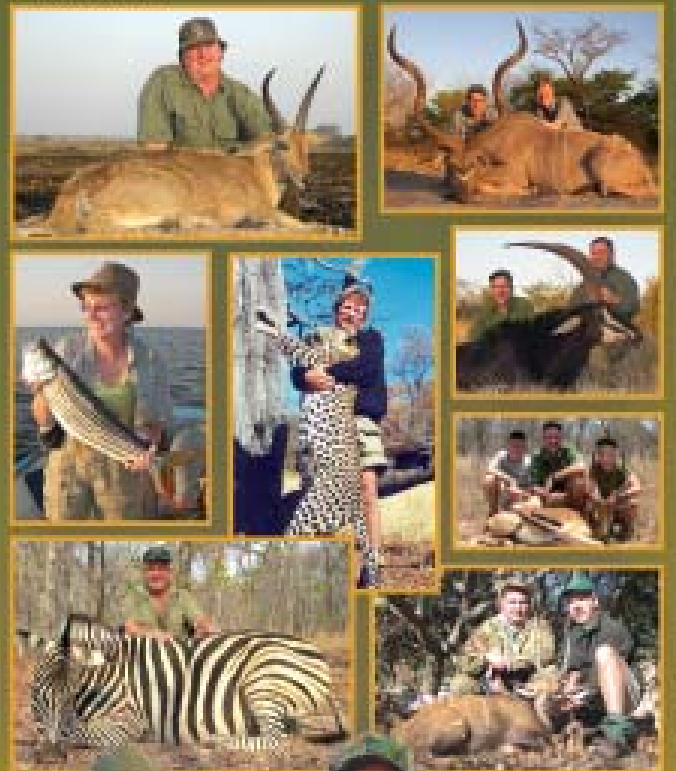


Secure on-line donations by credit or debit card

To donate, please go to  
<http://WWW.ZAMSOC.ORG>

# ROLLING RIVER SAFARIS Zimbabwe

Situated in the heart of Zimbabwe Rolling River Safaris, a family-run hunting business, offers some of the best available trophy or all-inclusive packaged rifle and bow hunts. With over 25 different species, including Cape Buffalo, Sable, Cheetah, Leopard and Crocodile to choose from, Rolling River offers a unique and totally African experience.



FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: PHILLIP OOSTHUYSEN,  
P.O. BOX 388, KWEKWE, ZIMBABWE  
TEL: +263-55-70287 FAX: +263-55-70186 CELL: +263-11-805 754  
WEB: [www.trophyhunt.com](http://www.trophyhunt.com)  
E-MAIL: [rolling@mweb.co.zw](mailto:rolling@mweb.co.zw)