

Radio rhino

Communication is something that we are all very used to and take for granted in our everyday lives. The need and dependency for communication in a national park is of extreme importance and Matusadona National Park in Zimbabwe is an example where the primary form of communication in the field is done by shortwave handheld radios.

Duncan Purchase
Director
Zambezi Society

We ran our second annual rhino waterhole count in Matusadona in the middle of August. Although we were obviously looking for rhino and rhino signs, it also provided a good opportunity to witness field radio communications at firsthand.

When we arrived at Vulunduli Subcamp, one of our volunteer groups had not yet arrived, although I had expected them to arrive before us. This was a slight worry. We continued to Jenji Springs, our designated waterhole, dropping one group at Gubu River on the way. When we arrived at our base camp, Douglas, the Parks Ranger, radioed Tashinga (Park Headquarters, our central command), to report that we had arrived at our destination and gave them our 'locstat' (our GPS location). The importance of this report back meant that a centralised command knew where we were if there was any emergency. I asked Douglas to raise 'Victor' (the call sign for Vulunduli Subcamp), to ask if the missing group had arrived. Victor responded, 'Negative'.

The next morning Douglas raised HQ to indicate that we were about to leave camp and walk in a westerly direction on local patrol, to let them know the general area of our movements. They could inform us of anyone else in the area, as well as inform other patrols of our intentions. In an Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) where contact with a group of poachers can sometimes come down to who shoots first, we need to know if there are other patrols in our area, and vice versa. I asked Douglas to raise 'Victor' again to enquire about the missing group, but he said it was not possible this early in the morning, as their radio set relied on solar power and the sun was not high enough in the sky.

When we returned to base camp at lunchtime we raised Victor again, and they confirmed that the missing group had arrived safely and were deployed to their waterhole. This was a great weight off my mind.

We were operating in a wild and rugged area with the possibility of encountering numerous dangerous animals. We saw the fresh spoor (footprints) of rhino, elephant, leopard, lion and buffalo. If we had had any medical emergency we could have raised HQ to request support. Likewise, if we had experienced any mechanical problem with the vehicle in this remote wilderness, we could have alerted HQ.

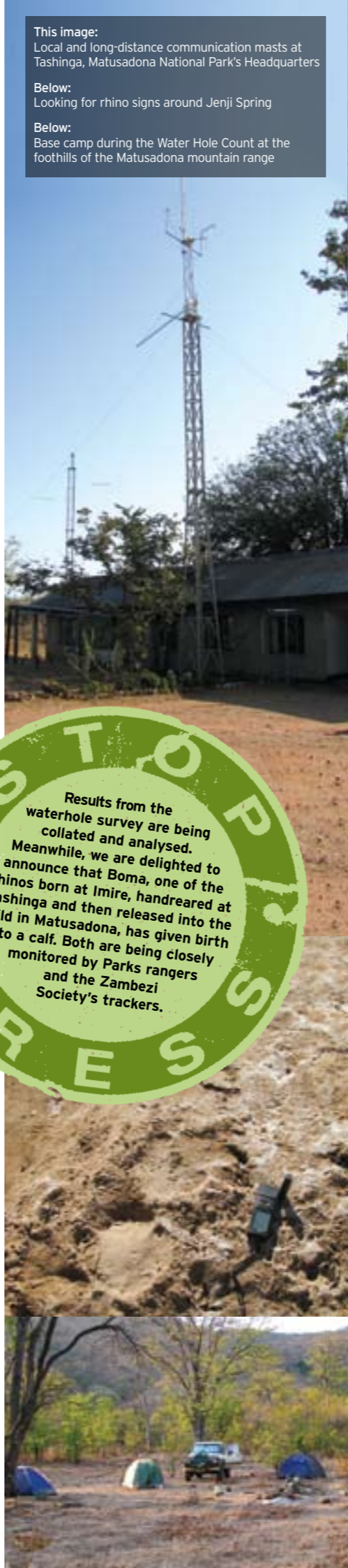
On one patrol, we came across a partial shoe footprint that we did not expect to see. This was a real concern. On closer inspection, our expert tracker Bekithemba dated the spoor to the last rainy season, six months earlier. We found another spoor, and then Douglas remembered that there was a Parks patrol in this area at that time. We were all very relieved. If the spoor had been more recent then we would have raised HQ and called for reinforcements. In a full-scale response to a poaching incident, then radio communications for coordination is one of the biggest weapons in the Parks arsenal.

For the morale and safety of the rangers in the field while they are protecting wildlife, it is essential to have a good communication facility in place. Unfortunately it is not always the case that there are enough radio handsets available, and sometimes rangers have to go into a potentially hostile environment, with absolutely no outside communication.

This image:
Local and long-distance communication masts at Tashinga, Matusadona National Park's Headquarters

Below:
Looking for rhino signs around Jenji Spring

Below:
Base camp during the Water Hole Count at the foothills of the Matusadona mountain range



STOP PRESS

Results from the waterhole survey are being collated and analysed. Meanwhile, we are delighted to announce that Boma, one of the rhinos born at Imire, handreared at Tashinga and then released into the wild in Matusadona, has given birth to a calf. Both are being closely monitored by Parks rangers and the Zambezi Society's trackers.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY DUNCAN PURCHASE



ALL PHOTOGRAPHY LOWVELD RHINO PROJECT



Below:
Loading a rhino into a crate, the truck/crane was partly funded by an EAZA donation via SRI

Left:
Carla-Sit! The rescued calf poses for the camera

Reading beyond the headlines

The rhinos of Lowveld Conservancies were due to be featured in a BBC Radio 4 Charity Appeal back in May.

Raoul du Toit
Project Executant, Lowveld Rhino Project

The appeal was to try to highlight the need for support while the current political and economic circumstances of Zimbabwe are impacting on rhino populations, through dramatically increased poaching activity and habitat destruction. With weak law enforcement, poaching is now more of a threat in the Lowveld region than it has ever been. Unfortunately, the appeal was postponed, as the BBC felt the timing was inappropriate, given the extent of the humanitarian problems in Zimbabwe at the moment and its inability to report from the country.

During times of national crisis, conservation efforts are rarely the priority, but it's during these times that environmental projects need more help than ever. It may sound wrong to be raising funds for rhinos when people are suffering, but it's vital that we protect a nation's wildlife resources and ecosystems because the loss of environmental stability will cause further socio-economic decay, and will delay a nation's recovery. Years of hard work in conserving valuable species and national natural resources can be destroyed in a blink of an eye. Long-term approaches such as the Lowveld Rhino Project can provide a degree of stability in ways that go beyond species conservation alone - they help to maintain teamwork and hope amongst a range of stakeholders who are trying to maintain sustainable land-use options, with rhinos as the flagship species.

Despite the economic decline and adverse social impacts, successful rhino conservation is still going on in Zimbabwe and is certainly not a lost cause. Over the past year, we have seen an alarming upsurge in rhino poaching, but there has still been net growth in the Lowveld's rhino population. The Lowveld conservancies, including Malilangwe, now hold about 400 black rhinos (up from 370 in mid 2007), as well as 140 white rhinos, despite the loss to poaching of at least 24 rhinos of both species over the past year. By mid 2008, the conservancies contained at least 74% of Zimbabwe's remaining black rhino population and 48% of the national white rhino population.

The main activities required to maintain the Lowveld as Zimbabwe's primary rhino breeding area have been as follows: a high level of monitoring primarily through ground-tracking and individual recognition of ear-notched rhinos, supplemented by radio-tracking; "hands-on" rhino conservation implemented on an intensive basis, with well over 100 drug-darting of black rhinos undertaken with project staff, equipment and funding over the past year for various security-related and management-related reasons. Project staff members have also been involved in several investigations of rhino poaching cases, and the ongoing expansion of illegal horn-trading syndicates with South African and Asian linkages will unfortunately demand more of this effort.

Despite the economic decline and adverse social impacts, successful rhino conservation is still going on in Zimbabwe...

Community incentives for rhino breeding also need urgent implementation so that there is a carrot as well as a stick to encourage rhino conservation in the Lowveld.

Of particular significance was the translocation in October 2007 of nine black rhinos from Chiredzi River Conservancy, necessitated by the deteriorating security that had resulted in at least seven black rhinos being poached in peripheral sections of the Conservancy. The translocated rhinos were released within the more secure Buby River Conservancy. In addition, two black rhino calves were rescued for hand-rearing after poaching incidents in Chiredzi River Conservancy and are now undergoing a phased programme of release into free-range conditions in Buby River Conservancy.

Despite the current situation, some major foreign investors have seen this as an opportune time to develop shareholdings in wildlife operations in the Lowveld, and are likely to support rhino conservation. So, like these shrewd investors, read beyond the headlines and see there is still hope for the rhinos of Lowveld Conservancies.

Grants

We are delighted to be able to announce that we were able to award £10,000 from our own core funds to the Lowveld Rhino Project, and very much hope that we might be able to reschedule the BBC Radio 4 Charity Appeal before too long.