

Definitely possible in Matusadona

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My wife Sally and I made a familiarisation trip to Tashinga, the IPZ headquarters, in January 2010. Before that, though, we had already spent a lot of time visiting Park stations in other parts of the Zambezi region, and been discomfited by what we found. The recent loss of a significant proportion of Zimbabwe's black rhinos has been well publicised. Less well-known, however, is the severe poaching of elephant and other species now taking place in the Zambezi Valley and elsewhere.

It seems that the sense of *fin de siècle* created by the country's shaky - and hopefully temporary - political arrangement has sparked a massive onslaught on the nation's wildlife resource. There's a sense of 'grab while the going's good' - possibly because the country's elite knows, in its heart of hearts, that a return to law and order is inevitable.

Proof - as ever - is hard to come by, but few doubt that this elite is behind the current poaching onslaught, albeit sometimes working through surrogates and a handful of unethical hunters. Meanwhile, Parks Authority's capacity to react to poaching is often virtually nil.

It says a lot for Duncan Purchase's industriousness that the Zambezi Society had to appoint a six-person Task Force to carry his work forward when he resigned as Society director in December 2009. It fell to me, as a member of this Task Force, to pick up on the black rhino monitoring work that Duncan had been doing since 2003 in the Matusadona black rhino Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ), on the southern shore of Zimbabwe's Lake Kariba.

When we reached the Matusadona IPZ in January - prime poaching time, as rain washes out spoor and dense vegetation makes follow-ups difficult - we found four Parks Authority Land Rovers, two Cruisers and an ancient Humvee, all in various degrees of terminal collapse. The only serviceable vehicle on the station, apart from the Zambezi Society's project Land Rover, was a tipper truck that consumed vast quantities of fuel that the station didn't have and that was wildly unsuited to deploying patrols across 40km of sandrivers and rain gullies.

Duncan had already briefed me on the black rhino scenario within the IPZ, where two Zambezi Society trackers work with Park Authority staff to locate and photograph the area's black rhinos. His postulated population was 14 'definites', with five 'possibles' in the difficult escarpment terrain south of the main IPZ. At Tashinga, the latest photography and location data held by Paul Chirombe, the station ecologist, showed a recently confirmed total of thirteen animals, with a slight doubt over the fourteenth, which was located in an area in which monitoring coverage had been erratic due to deployment difficulties.

This is fewer than we would like, but it is still a great deal better than uninformed speculation about the Matusadona population would have us believe, including the flat statement by some sources, who ought to know better, that there are 'no rhinos left in the Matusadona.' Meanwhile, we also hope to confirm - or otherwise - the 'possibles' during the 2010 dry season.

However, it has to be said that - even discounting the Parks Authority's hugely over-optimistic estimate of 60 animals in 2001 (reached by their time-honoured means of taking a dubious initial figure, adding five percent per annum and deducting known mortalities) - there have certainly been significant rhino losses in the Matusadona since then. In 1996, before the Parks Authority (and, shortly afterwards, the entire country) imploded due to political manoeuvring, I was personally radio-tracking 24 black rhino in the Matusadona.

It also has to be said that today's surviving population is hugely vulnerable because of the Park's desperate shortage of resources. The Zambezi Society is doing what it can to provide the fuel, fix the vehicles and source the equipment needed to help the Parks Authority carry out effective anti-poaching activities, but it falls a long way short of what is really needed.

Save the Rhino has continued to provide support when almost all other overseas donors have shunned Zimbabwe for political reasons. We now need either a swift resolution of Zimbabwe's political problems or more donors who believe that the survival of irreplaceable wildlife transcends temporary political differences.

Some of the definites: Mvura and Murume (left), Boma (centre), Cleopatra (right).



Grant

Save the Rhino awarded £3,570 to the Zambezi Society in December, with another £3,750 due in July 2010, subject to satisfactory reporting, for its black rhino monitoring work in Matusadona.

IMAGES: ZAMBEZI SOCIETY