

Environment



A black rhinoceros cow trailed by a calf; Zimbabwean rangers struggle to load a tranquilized rhino onto a truck bound for a wildlife sanctuary

A War to Save the Black Rhino

In Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley, poachers are shot on sight

It might have been a scene from one of Africa's guerrilla wars: four men wearing green fatigues and packing FN assault rifles fanned out across a wooded ridge. The bush crackled under a punishing afternoon sun as the government patrol scoured the hillside for enemy tracks. Then they heard it: the low murmur of voices drawing closer. Below them, a file of four men—three carrying AK-47 rifles—slowly advanced through a yellow sea of elephant grass. Without warning, the government patrol opened fire, gunning down all four in 40 seconds. When the bodies were searched, they recovered 278 rounds of ammunition, two ivory tusks and the horns of a black rhinoceros.

This recent skirmish in Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley was no military operation. The government patrol consisted of game rangers from the country's Department of National Parks and Wild Life Management. The enemy was a gang of poachers that had crossed the border from neighboring Zambia to plunder one of Zimbabwe's most treasured resources—the last great population of black rhinos living in the wild.

The rhinoceros is one of earth's oldest creatures, dating from the Eocene epoch, when horses were the size of dogs, some 55 million years ago. There are five surviving rhino species—black, white, Sumatran, Indian and Javan—all of them endangered because of poachers who kill them for their horns. Africa's black, or hooked-lipped, rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) is the latest to land on the endangered list. In 1970 there were 65,000 of the beasts roaming the rough bush country of east,

central and southern Africa. Today there are fewer than 4,000, half of them in Zimbabwe. The Zambezi Valley, with more than 500 animals, now holds the world's last viable breeding herd. To defend them, the country has launched a controversial shoot-on-sight war against poachers, who are killing the rhinos at a rate of one a day. "We have an obligation to the rest of the world to save our rhinos," declares Willie K. Nduku, Zimbabwe's director of national parks. "We won't spare our ammunition."

Operation Stronghold, as the policy is known, was approved by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe in mid-1985, when less violent attempts to arrest poachers proved ineffective. Most of the rhino hunters cross the border from Zambia. Rangers try to stop them without bloodshed, insists Blondie Leathem, 29, who coordinates the Zambezi Valley patrols, but "trying to arrest a man with an AK-47 is like trying to grab a lion with your bare hands. We must often shoot first to protect our lives."

Supplied in part by American donations, the gunslinging rangers have so far captured 21 poachers and killed 29. But the gangs keep coming, and parks officials admit that they are in a losing battle. Their only hope is to slow down illegal hunting in order to buy time for two other efforts to save the rhinos. One is



Out of harm's way, young calves are fed a milk preparation

capturing and moving as many of the animals as possible away from the Zambezi Valley to safer sanctuaries. The other involves an international campaign of diplomacy and media pressure to shut down the trade in rhino horn.

Rhino horn is not actually horn but densely compacted fibers of keratin, a protein found in hair and fingernails. Importing it is illegal in most countries, but an illicit \$3 million-a-year trade flourishes in the Middle East and eastern Asia, where dealers pay \$450 per lb. wholesale for the stuff. (One large animal can yield 10 lbs. of horn.) It is a myth that the horn is used as an aphrodisiac. In the Far East it is ground into traditional medicines that supposedly reduce fever and stop nosebleeds. It is also coveted in North Yemen, where it is carved into dagger handles that sell for \$500 to \$12,000 or more.

To close down these markets, Zimbabwe has been working with the World Wildlife Fund and the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species to pressure countries to ban trade in rhino horn or to enforce existing laws. Experts say that most Zimbabwean horn is smuggled through Zambia and on to distributors in Burundi and the United Arab Emirates. These countries have become targets for conservationists. "We need to expose and destroy the Zambian syndicate that deals in rhino horn," says Glenn Tatham, Zimbabwe's chief warden. "We need to hit the whole trade with an H-bomb, so to speak, of international outrage."

Meanwhile, Zimbabwean rangers have been capturing Zambezi Valley rhinos and moving them away from the war zone. Since 1984 the teams have relocated nearly 240 animals to safer game reserves and fenced-in ranches. On one recent morning, Warden Clem Coetsee, head of the capture unit, set out with his men to bag their 75th rhino of the three-month dry-weather capturing season. Armed with a heavy darting rifle loaded with nerve-blocking tranquilizer, he spotted a rhino cow, moved into range and took careful aim. The dart hit the beast's shoulder with a *thwack*. She snorted in alarm, thundered off and collapsed twelve minutes later.

The captured animals, which weigh up to 2,900 lbs., are rolled onto sleds, hoisted with ropes into a truck and transferred into stockade-like holding pens. Sometimes they revive unexpectedly; last year Coetsee was gored in the leg. But most can be hand fed in the holding pens within a few days. And rhino calves, Coetsee reports, like to be tickled.

What if the Zambezi Valley proves to be the rhino's Little Big Horn? Conservationists fear that more is at stake than the possible extinction of a fascinating relic of animal antiquity. "The rhino is a symbol of all endangered wildlife," says Chief Warden Tatham. "If we lose the rhino, will the elephant be next? And after the elephants are gone, will we lose the rest of the game? This is a war we simply must win." —*By Maryanne Vollers/Zambezi Valley*