

LIWONDE BLACK RHINO PROJECT

Coordinator: Wikus Swanepoel

Within the Liwonde National Park is a fenced 4000ha sanctuary area used as a breeding refuge for rare species, including a small population of black rhino. The founder population was introduced in 1993 and at the time was the only such population in Malawi. The intention was to allow this species to establish itself and thrive here, ultimately contributing to establishing other nuclei in the country as time and circumstance allowed and thus contribute to its conservation in Malawi. This has indeed been the case with one other breeding population established relatively recently and the two now managed as Malawi's meta-population. While this has been a fantastic success, the limited capacity of both populations for growth has brought its own challenges. Black rhino social dynamics allow for only one dominant reproductive male within limited space of these intensively protected sanctuaries.

In 2009, the birth of a new calf in the Liwonde Sanctuary resulted in the enforced independence of an existing sub-adult, known as 'Sausage.' Without the protection of his mother, Sausage was targeted by the dominant male and, shortly after separating from his mother, was found in very poor condition, with the typical inguinal wounds associated with this kind of conflict in black rhino. Condition of this young animal was such that without intervention the wounds would

have been fatal. As a result the rhino was darted and its wounds treated over an extended period in a purpose-built boma.

Having apparently recovered under the care and observation devoted to him, it was decided by all stakeholders in the project (Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife; Endangered Species of Malawi) to release the bull into the greater Liwonde National Park rather than the Sanctuary from which he had been removed. This decision was taken to prevent any contact with the dominant male who had caused his wounds and also to pursue the next stage in black rhino re-establishment in Malawi's national parks. To this end a radio transmitter, funded by the Trust, was implanted into his horn prior to release to enable park authorities to monitor his movements and ensure his security. Sadly, while the operation was performed successfully and the animal released into Liwonde, the young rhino was located a few days after release, having died as a result of an infection picked up at some point during the boma recovery period.

The incident, the first of its kind in the history of the sanctuary, has resulted in a strategic review of the Liwonde Sanctuary and the Malawi black rhino meta-population management.

