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Chizarira: the black rhino's last Eden

by David Buitron

A beautiful expanse of wild Africa, Zimbabwe's Chizarira National Park has been described as black rhino country par excellence. The Zimbabwe government's laudable anti-poaching strategies hold out every hope for keeping it that way.

Although there are many things about Zimbabwe that will surely impress any first-time visitor from East Africa, perhaps the most salient is the infrastructure underpinning its system of national parks. It's all in superb condition, from the state of repair of access roads and camping facilities, to the pride of office evident among park rangers and staff. For some, it might all seem almost too well organised.

Too developed indeed was my own initial reaction during my first visit to Zimbabwe in May 1987. Having come to value the comparatively undeveloped state of some of East Africa's larger parks, such as Serengeti or Tsavo (before parts of it were overrun by herdsmen), I soon found myself heading for a park called Chizarira.

Chizarira National Park is located about 200 kilometres north-east of Victoria Falls, and I'd come across a reference in a local guidebook wherein it was described as one of Zimbabwe's most remote, infrequently visited, and least developed national parks. It was also said to be 'black rhino country par excellence', and since rhinos were of special interest to me it sounded very good indeed.

Zimbabwe is one of the few countries in Africa that compares well with Kenya not only in abundance of wildlife but also in its variety of beautiful landscapes. The valley all along the Zambezi River, which forms the northern boundary of the country, is one area that has particular appeal to anyone who loves the African bush. It is an immense stretch of wild and rugged country with a dense cover of mixed mopane-terminalia woodland. The mopane tree is deciduous, and in May, at the start of the dry season, its leaves begin to turn colour before eventually dropping off. Thus, as I drove along the valley en route to Chizarira, the forest's developing shades of orange and red presented a beautiful spectacle reminiscent of a New England fall. Yet the landscape remained unmistakably African - dry and dusty, with scattered stands of acacia trees, huge baobabs, and the occasional thatch-hut villages of the BaTonga people.

Chizarira National Park, some 1,900 square kilometres in extent, is situated on a

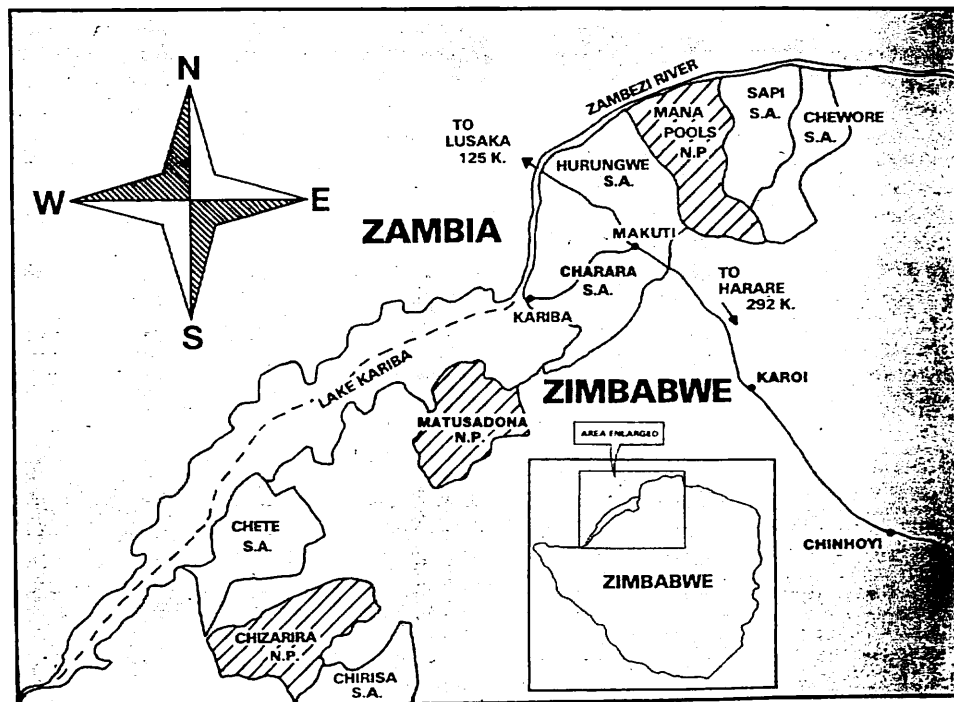
plateau overlooking the Zambezi Valley to the north. Its name comes from a corruption of the BaTonga word meaning 'barrier', and just how appropriate this is became clear as I neared the 300-metre-high escarpment that marks the northern limits of the park. The last few kilometres to the main gate are on a very rough and steep track that follows a narrow gorge cutting through the wall of the escarpment. In places it is overhung by thick foliage, and as I coaxed my car ever upwards I had the feeling of ascending into a 'lost world' of sorts.

From its inception as a national park in 1975 until my own first visit in 1987, Chizarira had received a scant 200 visitors, and this probably explains why I was greeted on my arrival at headquarters somewhat like a VIP. A cheerful junior officer collected my fees and directed me to a campsite six kilometres distant. He also offered to lead me on a 'trail' the next morning, and I eagerly accepted. (It may be useful here to point out that 'wilderness trails' hiking, with ranger escort, is an option routinely available to any interested visitor in most of

Zimbabwe's major parks.)

Chizarira proved to be exactly what I was looking for - a beautiful expanse of wild Africa which, for the time being anyway, I had all to myself. Its landscape varies from dense, rolling bush country interspersed with riverine forest, to open glades, rugged valleys, and deep, river-cut gorges. Wildlife is plentiful, with greater kudu, sable, and the 'big five', especially black rhino, all being common. During a four-hour hike with my ranger escort (who carried an FN G3 automatic rifle as well as a very functional walkie-talkie), we encountered a herd of 30 elephants, several groups of buffalo, kudu and impala, and two pairs of rhinos. The evidence of a large rhino population was, to me, little short of astounding. Rhino tracks and dung middens seemed to be everywhere we walked!

The fascination I have for rhinos has been with me ever since I was a boy, probably as a carry-over from the enthusiasm I then acquired for the dinosaurs and other great prehistoric beasts whose fossilised bones I saw in natural history museums.



... Chizarira

Perhaps because he's a survivor from that distant past, the incredible-looking rhino, with those great horns protruding from his snout, by his very existence helps keep alive in me those currents of vivid imagination that are one of the great joys of childhood. Whatever the reason, the near annihilation of Africa's rhinos which has occurred during the last 20 years has caused me a good deal of personal sorrow, anger, and frustration.

While employed as a guide for a Nairobi-based safari company in the mid-1980s, I personally led over two dozen four-day walking safaris along the Tsavo and Galana River. While we had many exciting experiences during three years of running this trip, there was only one encounter with a rhino the whole time. And this in a park which as recently as 1971 had an estimated 8,000 rhinos!

The picture is similar over much of Africa, for as most regular readers of *Swara* already know, when the demand for rhino horn in North Yemen skyrocketed in the 1970s, well-organised poaching followed with a vengeance, wiping out entire populations first in East Africa, then in the Central African Republic, and then in Zambia. By the end of the decade, two or three rhinos were being killed every day in Zambia's Luangwa Valley, reducing what was once a population of 2,000 to fewer than a hundred today.

In the early 1980s the poachers set their sights on the Zimbabwe side of the Zambezi. But here they met some stiff resistance. Zimbabwe's parks enjoy the advantage of a ranger force which has not only good training and equipment, but more importantly the high level of morale, dedication, and strong government support necessary to enable them to run an effective anti-poaching campaign. Thus, when rhino poaching incursions by Zambians crossing the river into Zimbabwe became serious in 1983, the response was equally so. Zimbabwe's park forces were given permission to shoot poachers on sight, which they did, and more and more Zambians began losing their lives. In addition, for anyone caught poaching rhinos a mandatory two-year gaol term was decreed, later to be extended to five years.

Zimbabwe has done other things right too. Largely because of the implementation of well-conceived programmes like Operation Campfire, locally based poaching by Zimbabweans has been reduced to an acceptable minimum. Under Operation Campfire (Communal Area Management

Programmes for Indigenous Resources), the people living in the areas around the national parks and safari areas (hunting blocks) benefit directly on the spot, often in cash, from the proceeds of elephant culling operations, hunting licences, etc. Poaching has thus been made to appear to be undermining the fair distribution of the economic benefits of a common resource – Zimbabwe's wildlife.

Even so, the job of interdicting the Zambian-based poachers is proving to be a hard one, especially as long as the Zambian government continues to refuse to take serious action to help stop it. Most of the country along the Zambezi is very dense bushland, difficult of access at the best of times. During the rains, trying to intercept poachers becomes almost a matter of luck. The Zambezi Valley east of Kariba consists of 12,000 square kilometres of such terrain with a river frontage of 230 kilometres, and this is the region which until now has been the main focus of poaching incursions. Most of this area falls within the boundaries of Mana Pools National Park and the Chewore, Sapi, Hurungwe and Charara Safari Areas, and may still contain Africa's last large, viable, and contiguous black rhino population.

As poaching in the area intensified in 1985, Zimbabwe responded with an all-out anti-poaching campaign called Operation Stronghold, and help from overseas began to arrive via the American based SAVE (Foundation to Save African Endangered Wildlife) and the World Wildlife Fund. Zimbabwe also began the Rhino Survival Campaign with the objective, similar to that of Kenya's Rhino Rescue programme, of translocating rhinos from the more exposed areas of the lower Zambezi to national parks and private ranches well removed from danger.

In September 1988, I returned to Chizarira with a small tour from the USA and Canada in hopes of showing them some truly wild rhinos in a peaceful and natural setting. As September is the very end of the dry season, some parts of the park had recently endured the grass fires which are an annual event in much of Africa, and much of the wildlife had thus dispersed into the adjacent Chirisa Safari Area. Nevertheless, fresh rhino sign was everywhere as before, and on our second day of hiking we succeeded in tracking and coming upon a magnificent pair of rhinos.

Led by an experienced professional hunter/guide, all six of us crept to within 15 metres of them before one caught our scent and began a charge. Fortunately, our guide was able to turn it by simply running directly at the rhino while waving his arms and yelling at the top of his lungs. Both rhinos ran off a few metres before turning to face us, snorting and sniffing the air. Only after several minutes of this did they finally move off into the bush. We were all quite thrilled, but the experience also brought home to us just how vulnerable these wonderful-looking animals are, how little deserved is their dangerous reputation, and how easy and cruel the killing of them is.

During my first visit to Chizarira I met the warden, Roger Perry, who told me the background leading up to Operation Stronghold. His real concern was that his areas of responsibility, which included both Chizarira and the Chete Safari Area in the valley below, might soon also become a target for rhino poachers. Roger Perry was absent during my visit in September, but while passing through Harare I spoke to a number of people involved with the World Wildlife Fund to get an update on the situation.

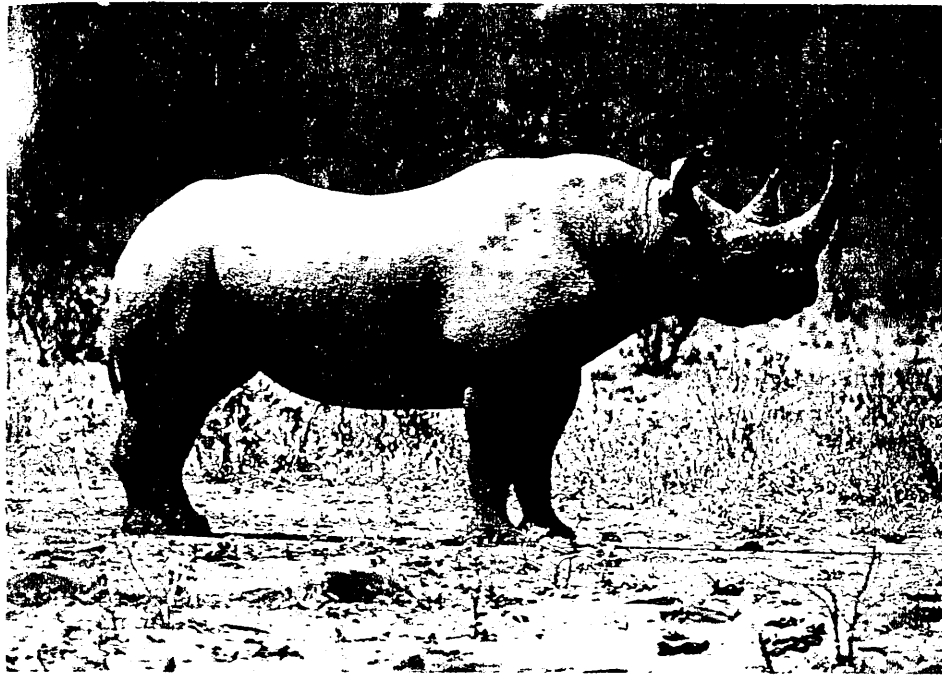
It is not certain exactly how many rhinos are now left in the Zambezi Valley. A 1987 estimate of 1,760 rhinos in the whole of Zimbabwe took into account the 300 already known to have been lost to Zambian poachers. By March 1988 a total of 403 rhinos were known to have been killed, while 37 Zambian poachers had been shot dead and another 30 captured. As this mini-war carried on, the poachers were reported to have begun using *muti*, a traditional herb medicine which will supposedly make them immune to bullets. If true, this serves to point out that the men who actually do the killing are victims themselves, mere pawns in a big-money game run by ruthless organisers who are somehow able to keep them supplied with plenty of automatic weapons and ammunition on the Zambian side.

It was encouraging to learn that the more seriously Zimbabwe has taken the anti-poaching effort, the more forthcoming has been assistance from abroad. The World Wildlife Fund is now financing the full-time deployment of a helicopter to assist in Operation Stronghold, which overall is costing US\$ 250,000 a year. The helicopter is mainly used for resupplying rangers in the field, and to position stop-groups to intercept intruders from Zambia once their presence is known. WWF is also currently employing a team led by David Cummings, former director of Zimbabwe's national parks, to monitor the situation in the lower Zambezi with a view to determining just what's left, and how effective Operation Stronghold has been.

Over US\$ 350,000 has now been contributed by SAVE in the form of equipment, including two light aircraft being used for surveillance, and a truck and trailer capable of carrying six rhinos at a time for the translocation programme. As of March, 233 rhinos had been moved out of the Zambezi Valley, and of these ten have been sent to zoos in America, and two to the Frankfurt Zoological Society to help in captive-breeding experiments using artificial insemination. The hope is that one day the progeny of these translocated rhinos will be safely reintroduced to their former homelands.

On a more ominous note, I learned that in the last few months there seems to have begun a westward shift in the activities of the poachers, perhaps calculated to force Zimbabwe to spread its anti-poaching efforts more thinly. The most recent rhino poaching incidents have been in the Chete Safari Area below Chizarira, and in several parks and reserves in the north-west of the

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David Bunton



David Bunton

Rhino photographed during a foot safari in Chizarira (top); a view of the Chizarira escarpment as you approach from the Zambezi (above left); and greater kudu (above right).

country near Victoria Falls.

With the exception of the two incidents in Chete, the 5,000 square kilometre protected area encompassed by Chizarira and the Chete and Chirisa Safari Areas has not yet been touched by rhino poaching. With a probable population of three or four hundred rhinos, it may in turn become truly the last stronghold of the rhino. The results of the monitoring project in the lower Zambezi will soon tell.

Conservationists concerned with the plight of the rhino are bravely trying to work out strategies that one day might allow black rhino numbers to be built up again to about 8,000 in four separate populations. But when incidents occur like the

recent butchering of the five white rhinos being guarded in the very heart of Kenya's Meru National Park, I'm willing only to hope that Zimbabwe will be able to hold its own against the corruption and greed that is allowing this kind of killing to take place. I have nothing but praise for Zimbabwe's efforts, and I wish its successes might lead to a reversal in the fortune of the black rhino, as well as other endangered wildlife, on the African continent. I still have some consolation in knowing that in Chizarira, at least, a place still exists in Africa where rhinos, as yet uninterfered with by man, continue to thrive the way they once did all over Africa. But it really is their last Garden of Eden.

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