TEXT STEFAN BECHTEL | PHOTOGRAPHY JIM BRANDENBURG, MITSUAKI IWAGO

1998

BECHTEL

The Rhino Wars of Zimbabwe

ABOVE Rhino horns grow back at a rate of three inches per year. RIGHT Black rhino bulls may weigh up to a ton and a half and can charge at thirty miles an hour.

For the past four hours, we've been tracking a pair of black rhino bulls over the rocky, russet-colored bushvelt of Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park. Now we're so close that the five of us have stopped even whispering.

Somewhere up ahead, in a tangled thicket that looks like an overgrown peach orchard, they're laying up in the shade. Rhinos are shambling, prehistoric beasts with bad eyesight and two wicked-looking horns shaped like gigantic can openers. Though black rhino bulls may weigh up to a ton and a half, they can charge at thirty miles an hour and turn on a dime. There is a case on record of a black rhino actually derailing a train.

We know we're uncomfortably close, because a few years back both these animals were shot with tranquilizer darts and then fitted with radio collars that transmit a tiny beep, like a heartbeat, that we've picked up on our mobile scanner. The beep has been getting steadily louder; now we're so close that the signal sounds as if it's coming from all around us. Since we scarcely can see a thing in this doggone thicket, there's no way of knowing whether the rhinos are ahead, behind or all around us.

Suffice to say that we're all feeling a trifle apprehensive at the moment.

"It's a bit of a dodgey situation," whispers zoologist Zoe Jewell in her cheerful British way, motioning toward a nearby mopane tree—a scrubby little thing that's supposed to be our escape ladder if the bulls come charging out of the bush at us like a couple of freight trains.

Jewell and her husband, University of London zoologist Sky Alibhai, are accustomed to dodgey situations. They've spent the past several years in Zimbabwe working in cooperation with local officials in the national parks department, trying to expand basic scientific knowledge about these amazing, elusive animals. This routinely requires getting close enough to observe black rhinos without getting stomped. I'm here with Earthwatch, a Boston-based organization that matches foolish volunteers with scientific researchers.

Jewell and Alibhai also are helping to save the black rhino from extinction. After all, it's fairly pointless to learn the biology of an animal if the animal then disappears—and though it's hard to believe at this moment in the thicket, the black rhinoceros of Africa is one of the most endangered large mammals on earth. Its slide toward oblivion has been breathtaking. In 1970, there were an estimated 65,000 black rhinos widely dispersed across Africa; the rhinos were so common they were considered a nuisance because of their penchant for charging safari trucks. By 1980, the numbers had dropped to less than 15,000. Today there are thought to be less than 2,000 animals left.

The reason: Rhino horn is worth more than gold, either ground into powder and sold as medicine (mainly for reducing fevers) in Asian shops or used for making ceremonial dagger handles in the Arab world. In poor African countries like Zimbabwe, where the per capita income is around

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A POACHER CAN SELL A SINGLE RHINO HORN FOR AS MUCH AS $30,000

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Zoologist Zoe Jewell listens through headphones for the faint "bleep" of a radio-collared rhino.

Rhino horn is worth more than gold, either ground into powder and sold as medicine in Asian shops or used for making ceremonial dagger handles in the Arab world.

$500 a year, a substance that retails for $7,000 or more a pound has had the same corrupting influence as drugs in Western countries. Rhino horn is the cocaine of wildlife products. The poachers themselves probably only make a couple of hundred dollars for killing a rhino, but even that much for one night's work is virtually irresistible.

The situation has grown so dire that it has degenerated into what is in effect all-out war—a bona fide rhino war. Game scouts armed with fully automatic AK-47s now roam the national parks of Zimbabwe in anti-poaching patrols, with orders to shoot to kill any unauthorized person carrying a weapon. Over the past ten years 178 poachers have been killed by scouts, and seven scouts have been killed by poachers. Elsewhere in the world, this exchange of human life for animal life may arouse a sense of profound ethical uneasiness—but here, in the war zone, it's simply a part of a last-ditch attempt to save a species before it's too late.

Allegedly most of the poachers come into Zimbabwe from nearby countries like Zambia or Botswana, then slip back over the border with their cache of horn, selling it into a shadowy international black market. Some observers also believe that middlemen are stockpiling horns in anticipation of the black rhino's extinction—when the price will go sky-high.

African governments also have been willing to resort to extreme measures to save the rhino. One of these is the dehorning program pioneered in Namibia in 1990 and adopted by Zimbabwe in 1992. The basic idea is this: If rhinos are being killed simply for their horns, why not just cut off the horn without killing the animal, thus rendering it valueless to poachers?

Even dehorning advocates don't claim that it is an ideal solution—and it remains controversial. One study in Namibia suggested that dehorned mothers are unable to defend their calves against predators (though Alibhai and Jewell have not found this to be true in Zimbabwe). Dehorning also is very expensive. It costs about $1,400 to dehorn a single rhino, and since the horn grows back at a rate of around three inches a year, the operation has to be repeated regularly.

Of everything that's been tried to protect black rhino populations so far, what appears to work best is perhaps the lowest-tech solution: keeping game scouts on the ground, in anti-poaching patrols. Inside the heavily patrolled Sinamatella section of Hwange National Park (where we are now) there's been no poaching at all for the past two years. In a country where unemployment is high and labor is cheap, patrolling is a solution that also makes sense.

Maybe it's possible to hold the line against extinction. For the moment, though, peering through the dense thicket for a big animal that could kill me, the extinction I'm most interested in avoiding is my own.

Stewart Towindo, a Zimbabwean who is our group's scientific advisor and armed guard, motions for us to wait while he walks ahead into the thicket. He's carrying an AK-47 with thirty bullets in the clip—a great comfort to all of us.

In the heat of the African afternoon, there's no sound but the sleepy "ca-coooo-coo, ca-coooo-coo" of turtle doves and the distant, mocking clatter of red-billed wood hoopoes, the crows of the bushvelt. Suddenly Towindo jabs his rifle into the air, pointing directly in front of him. And there are the rhinos, no more than forty yards away—standing up, facing us, motionless. From where I'm standing, all I can see through an opening in the bushes is one great gray flank, a pair of ears swiveling around like mad and a massive horn pointed in my direction. For a moment my heart seems to stop beating completely. I begin mentally measuring the steps to the nearest tree. Then the animal gives an incredibly loud snort, almost a pneumatic blast, and the whole group—there appear to be three or four of them—go plunging down over the hill and out of sight. They sound like a convoy of runaway trucks.

At least for today, the black rhinos are safe. And, thank my lucky stars, so are we.

GET INVOLVED

Earthwatch offers trips for tourists to work alongside anti-poaching teams. The tax-deductible cost is $2,395. Trips run May to September. Contact Earthwatch at ☎ (800) 776-0188.

The International Rhino Foundation has an extensive website on all different species of rhinos: **www.rhinos-irf.org.**

Two foundations in the United States work exclusively to save rhinos: **The Rhino Trust** ☎ (503) 288-3521, 4045 N. Massachusetts Ave., Portland, Oregon 97227. **International Rhino Foundation**, irhinof@aol.com, IRF, Tom Foose 20 Pen Mar St., Waynesboro, PA 17268.

✽ RHINOS EYES ARE ON THE SIDES OF THEIR HEAD, SO IN ORDER TO SEE THEY HAVE TO LOOK FIRST WITH ONE EYE AND THEN THE OTHER

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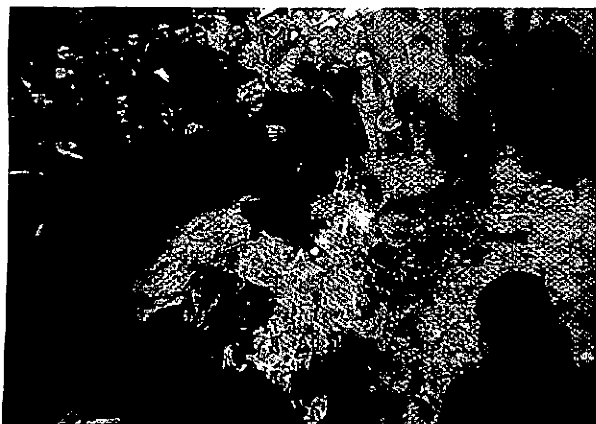

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text Stefan Bechtel

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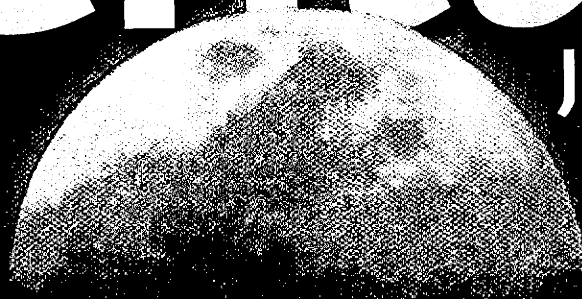

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