

Imire Game Park, pioneered by Norman Travers, has found a sustainable use for elephants - that of guarding rhinos. Zimbabwe Wildlife Editor, Stephen Mavuto Karindawaro, witnessed this revolutionary consumptive utilisation of the jumbos.

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Elephant used to guard rhino

ASK any game scout and he will tell you that being able to tell a black rhino when it is covered in tall savanna grass is like finding a needle in a haystack. Ecological experts call it the rhino "camouflage trick", a trick that many a poacher has found hard to beat.

But in certain circumstances - more so considering the fact that the rhino are an endangered species under around-the-clock protection in the country - this can be a disadvantage, especially to the guard on foot.

A rhino is a little shorter than the average man and tall grass obviously completely engulfs it making it invisible. Most guards literally bump into them in frantic searches. But not at Imire Game Park, equidistant between Marondera and Hwedza.

Imire has beaten nature with nature - they use elephant to guard rhino. Perched high up like a woodpecker atop a baobab tree, they can see a poacher from afar and pounce on him before he kills the rhino for its horn that fetches huge sums in the Far East.

The tall grass and rhododendron bushes are no match for the 3 metre or more long frame of the African elephant. And by using them the game park, pioneered by Norman Travers, has found a sustainable way to con-

serve the rhino.

Instead of just ground patrols, the game park which has seven rhino, now has elephant patrols where four guards armed with a loaded FN assault rifle, patrol the hundreds of hectares in search of poachers with one brief - to shoot and then ask questions later.

"We have a four-team elephant patrol twice everyday, in the mornings and evenings. It is supported by a four-team ground patrol just to make sure and not leave things to chance. This has proved very effective," said head guard, Peter Musavhaya.

When perched on the jumbo, the guards will give commands, tell it to turn left, pick up "my rifle" or even a saddle or bag of ammunition and the specially trained elephant will obey. We witnessed one elephant, Nyasha, being told to pick up a guard's fallen cap.

But you do not wake up one bright summer morning and decide to mount an elephant or give it instructions. You should undertake a rigorous training programme under the watchful expertise of ecologists who have obviously extensive knowledge in the training of wildlife.

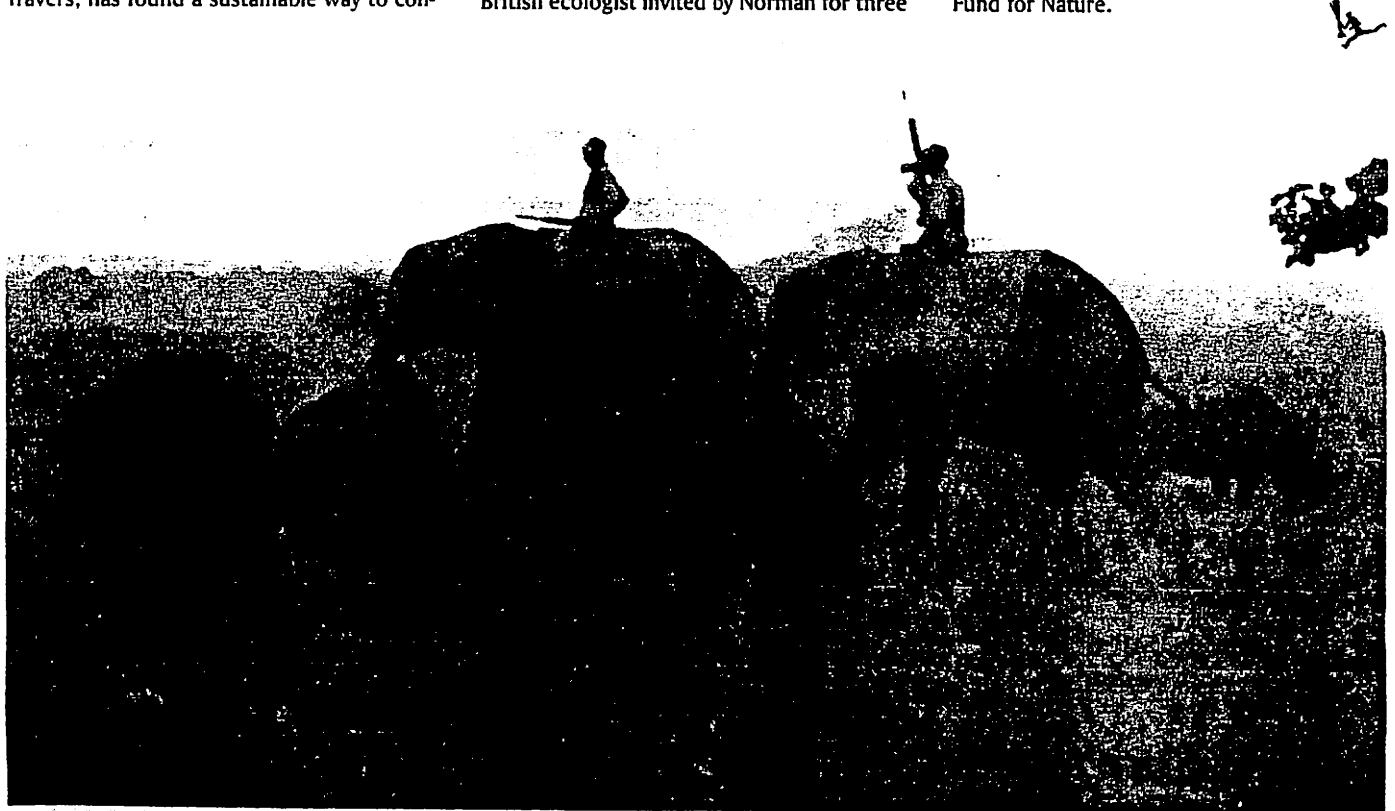
"They received their initial training from a British ecologist invited by Norman for three

months. All we are doing now is perfecting it to include these tasks. Elephant are highly intelligent mammals, they can think," Peter said.

Although specially trained and now able to understand commands, Imire elephant will not listen to anybody else except the few who know the "codes" and are apparently also known to the elephant. This kind of rapport was developed over a long period of time. It does, however, disprove the long held belief that the *Loxidonta Africana*, as African elephant are known scientifically, are difficult to train.

The same elephant can be used for such chores as ploughing of fields, levelling of roads or even cultivation. This is quite a revolutionary precedent by Imire which calls for maybe a full scale research and finance programme for a large scale or even national project. How about taking up the challenge, CITES conference delegates?

"This is an excellent example of consumptive use of wildlife or natural resources but several questions must be answered before such a programme becomes national or regional," said an official with the World Wide Fund for Nature.



Poacher beware ... Imire Game Park guards armed with FN rifles guarding some rhino amidst a light shower.