

A permanent presence without a permanent base

Where I work is in some of the most beautiful country there is: expansive bushveld; massive granite outcrops; meandering rivers and, of course, lots of rhinos. The Zimbabwe Lowveld is very special country.

Natasha Anderson | Rhino Monitoring Coordinator, Lowveld Rhino Trust

The Bubiana and Save Valley conservancies in the Lowveld were established as custodian rhino populations in the early 1990s.

Rhino monitoring units were set up to monitor these populations and bases were constructed in each conservancy to provide the accommodation, storage and backup necessary when your area of operation is remote.

“My base was the homestead on the neighbouring property, which I periodically shared with a special branch of the police”

The Bubiana Conservancy base, known as Ladi Base, was a series of stone and thatch buildings set at the foot of a granite outcrop within view of a large dam. The Bubiana black rhino population grew

to 100 individuals by 2002 from a founder population of 37 in 1993. Unfortunately, by 2002 the fast-track land reform programme was in full swing and large areas of the Conservancy were being taken over for subsistence farming. This included our Ladi Base and half the house, the cottage and the huts were occupied by new farmers. An uneasy cohabitation was established. My base was the homestead on the neighbouring property, which I periodically shared with a special branch of the police deployed to control volatile situations. We managed to maintain our responsibility of monitoring our rhinos but political tensions escalated further around the 2008 elections and some of the new farmers became more determined to take rather than share.

Our rhinos had to endure the same process. Clearing of land for subsistence farming was dramatically reducing habitat availability and we had to translocate the bulk of the Bubiana population into Buby Valley Conservancy.

By 2009, targeted rhino poaching had escalated to such a level that it became necessary to completely destock Bubiana and so we all moved again. Rhinos and monitoring unit alike had to work through the process of establishing new bases. Buby has proven a positive move; with black rhino births for 2010 hitting 22 and poaching deaths down to three, the population is recovering.

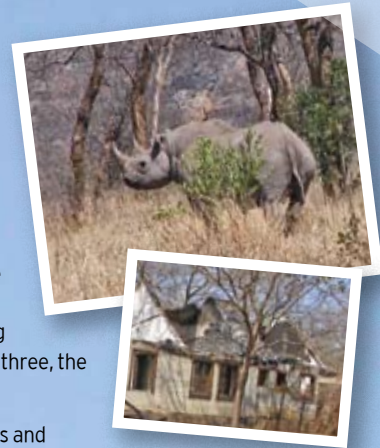
Save Valley Conservancy's rhinos and monitoring unit have endured similar trials. Though the monitors are still able to live in the established Levanga Base, ongoing conversion of land from bush to fields for crops presents a threat. Translocations in 2009 removed most of the rhinos from the heavily human-settled and poaching-vulnerable areas in the south of the conservancy. The monitors at Levanga Base have been forced to demonstrate their support of the new farmers by claiming land as well. The Senior Rhino Monitor has declared the Levanga Base airstrip his 'field' in an effort to satisfy these demands and be allowed to remain in his home.

All this jostling and moving of bases has left us behind in the development of adequate operational field bases, even though our monitoring units and the equipment needed to maintain our management inputs have all increased as the size of the rhino populations have grown. We lack covered garage space to house our valuable translocation trucks during the rainy off-season. We are without our own 'Ops Room,' which is so valuable for proper revision of field activities and strategic planning meetings. We have no storage rooms to secure equipment or supplies and have to make do with boxes stacked in any available space. It is like being in a permanent state of moving house.

With murmurs of elections again last year, pressure is mounting and it seems likely our base vulnerability will continue a bit longer. We all look forward to less stressful times when we and our rhinos can head out each day certain that when we return to our base, it will still be our base. We are confident that some day we will again enjoy the comfort, security and convenience of our own, organised space in this magnificent part of the world.

Thanks

Save the Rhino has just bought a night-vision monocular, which will be delivered to Natasha and the team in March, to help with rhino monitoring patrols. The Marjorie Coote Animal Charity Trust has also kindly provided a repeat grant of £1,000 to the work of LRT



ALL IMAGES LOWVELD RHINO TRUST

Approximately 80% of Zimbabwe's black rhino population and 55% of the white rhino population is found in the Lowveld