

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The only thing between Zimbabwe's black rhinos and extinction is an armed game scout... and a team of Earthwatch volunteers.

The black rhinoceros is the most rapidly disappearing large animal on Earth. In just the past 20 years, its numbers have dropped more than 97 percent because of poaching for its horn. In Zimbabwe, which had the largest black rhino population in 1990, the number of rhinos dropped from 1,800 animals to hardly more than 200 in the space of 5 years. Then Earthwatch teams arrived to work with zoologists Dr. Sky Alibhai and Zoë Jewell in developing a new, noninvasive method of tracking rhinos. The tracking was a critical part of the government's antipoaching program. Since the Earthwatch teams arrived and the program began in 1993, not a single rhino has been killed. (See page 71.)

PHOTO BY LA UNIVERSITA' DI TORINO

Earthwatch Institute's Biodiversity Program is supported by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, through the award of more than 300 fellowships for New Jersey teacher participation on Earthwatch rainforest projects worldwide.

Formidable as a locomotive, the black rhino may be stopped in its tracks if poachers have their way. Earthwatch crews are racing to test a new rhino-tracking method, which wildlife managers can then use to monitor this critically endangered species.

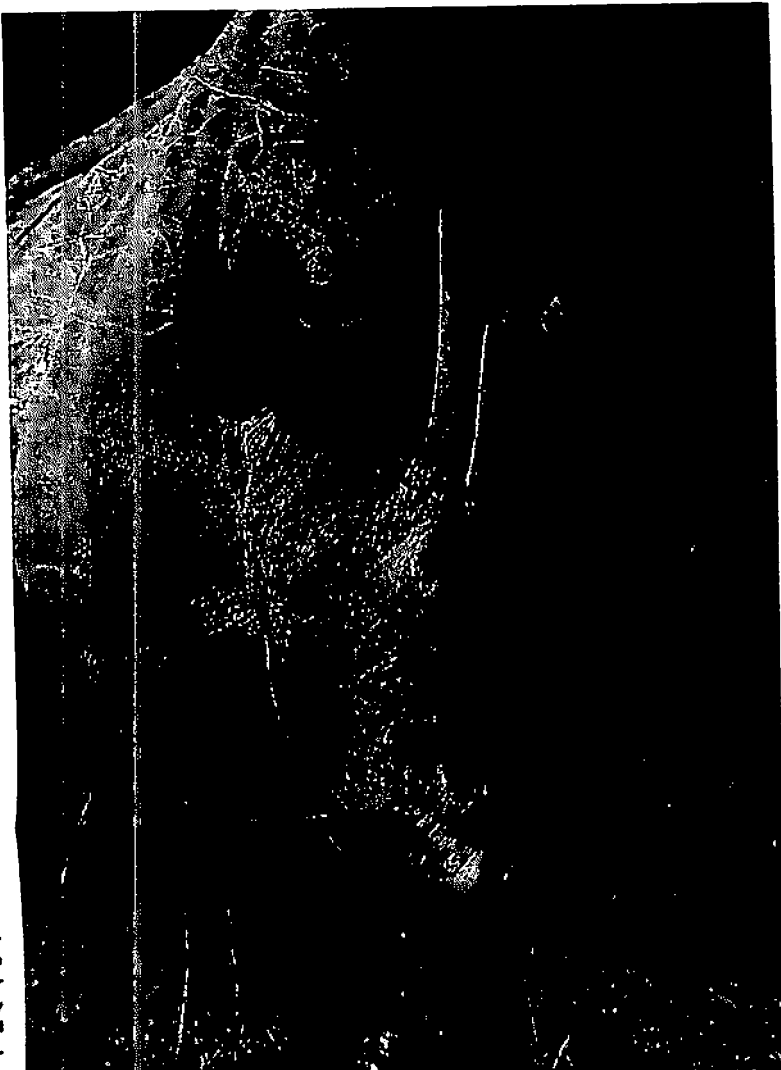


PHOTO BY LAURENCE BROWN FOR EARTHWATCH

You are here in Hwange National Park working with Alibhai (University of London) and his wife Zoë Jewell and with members of the Zimbabwe Department of Parks and Wildlife to help reverse this decline and save the rhino. This part of Hwange is a special reserve for black rhinos, intensely protected, wooded and hilly, with flat river bottoms punctuated by table mountains and ridges. Your job is to pioneer a new technique for tracking rhinos: using their footprints as unique signatures. One of the project's ultimate goals is to eliminate the need for expensive (and even dangerous) radio collars.

You'll get up each morning early and head out in trucks to find rhinos. You'll work in small teams with specific animals to track or areas to search. Using either radio signals or following footprints, you'll hike cross-country to find your rhino, sometimes over broken terrain. Once you find a rhino, you'll observe it, record all of its behavior, and trace and photograph any footprints. Back at camp, you'll fill in data forms, plot rhino locations on maps, and download your notes. The footprint tracings and photographs will be scanned into a computer and analyzed, so they can be added to the database of tracks. Your data on the whereabouts of rhinos is given each night to the parks department to assign game scouts the next day, and in the long term your work will help save the lives of the animals now lost to the anesthetic used in radio-collaring.

The camp is located on a mountaintop overlooking a broad plain where elephants, wildebeest, antelope, lions, giraffes, and cape buffalo congregate. There are hot showers and baths, and wonderful food cooked by the camp cook. Up the road is a restaurant and bar with a thatched veranda overlooking the park. It's a view you'll enjoy all the more knowing that you've made a concrete contribution to the existence of these magnificent creatures. ■

BLACK RHINO

TASKS: Hike through scrub bushland to observe rhinos, record behavior, and trace footprints to test a novel rhino-tracking method

SETTING: Classic African bush country in Hwange National Park, northwestern Zimbabwe

LOGISTICS: Camp on mountaintop overlooking wildlife-rich plain; a cook prepares big meals

BLACK RHINO

Saving the world's last black rhinoceri



Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe—You're creeping slowly through the trees, placing each foot in the sand just so, avoiding any twig or dried leaf. You're so focused on your task that you don't even

feel the heat. Even the elephants and lions nearby seem unimportant. You can hear the soft beep of the radio receiver, coming from Dr. Sky Alibhai's headphones, louder now, indicating that your quarry is

very, very close. Then, suddenly, Alibhai crouches down, freezes, peering ahead, and points slowly to a bushy thicket. At first you don't see anything, then you make him out behind the thicket: a huge male black rhino, as tall as you at the shoulder, massively built, and weighing perhaps 1,500 kilograms.

Black rhinos like this one are the fastest-disappearing large animals on the planet, killed for their horns, which are used in traditional medicine in Asia. Their worldwide population has dropped 97 percent in just the past 10 years. In 1991, Zimbabwe had an estimated 1,700 black rhinos; today it has 324.



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