

The Tri-Nations fixture

One of the aspects I most enjoy about working at SRI is our ability – funding permitting – to bring people together to work on common issues. Sometimes this means working with another charity on a joint fundraising event, other times it means organising the annual Rhino Mayday at the Zoological Society of London. This time, it meant organising a group of five Namibians and six Kenyans to meet up with a lot of Zimbabweans in Save Valley Conservancy in the Lowveld. We Brits (my husband Kenneth and I) were the eager spectators at this event.

Cathy Dean | Director

Last summer, Michelle Gadd at US Fish and Wildlife Services Skyped me to say that she'd been thinking about all those unsung heroes, the rhino trackers who sweat their way through the bush, day after day, in search of rhinos. The trackers' punishing regime would test the toughest, so perhaps some of the rugby internationals heading to the World Cup in New Zealand in October might care to give it a go. Michelle suggested I work up a proposal to send trackers from Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe to visit each other.

I hesitate to push this analogy too far, but this is the kind of line-up you'd want on your side in any match. For example, Pietie would be a great prop forward, Edward a flanker or impact wing, and Raoul the fly-half to bring home the trophy.

The Lowveld team had sorted a classy timetable for the visitors. Five days of rhino ops (dehorning and ear notching), a day of presentations from everyone on aspects of rhino security and monitoring, and visits to Gonarezhou National Park, where plans are afoot to re-introduce black rhinos, and to Malilangwe Trust. By the time we joined, the team had already darted and dealt with 20 animals. Ops in Save Valley are different from ops in Etosha. For one thing, in the Lowveld they start with a list of target animals. Trackers set out before it gets light, look for spoor, follow it, and only once they've confirmed it's the animal they want do they call in the spotter plane and then the chopper. Which, luxuriously for us, meant breakfast at 7.30 and hitting the road at 8am. In Etosha, the chances of spotting an animal that has already been 'done' are so low that you can probably dart the first animal you see, so we'd be bouncing around in the back of a vehicle by 6am latest.

For the guys from the Chyulus in particular, seeing the Zimbabwean trackers at work was a revelation. Not just their skill at finding spoor (admittedly, unseasonal rain made this easier than usual), but their ability to get close enough to identify the animal without spooking it. In Chyulus, really thick thicket allows four metres' visibility maximum. By the time you've seen a rhino, it's seen you too, and then it's a race to climb the nearest tree. Practising how to mark rhinos will have given them great experience to take back to Kenya. And – let's not forget – some of the guys had never laid hands on a rhino before, as darting is not an automatic part of rhino husbandry. OK, the rhino's unconscious, but hands on a live rhino still counts as an experience of a lifetime.

The formal and informal discussions were very useful. Save Valley Conservancy (SVC) and Malilangwe have survived better than



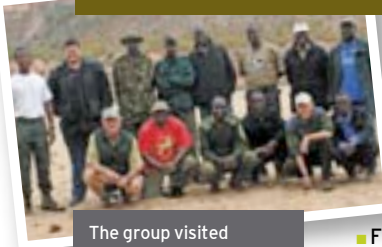
PAULUS ASHILI

By the time you've seen one of the Chyulus rhino, it's seen you, and then it's a race to climb the nearest tree

I duly consulted, drafted, budgeted and submitted, and the review committee smiled upon the proposal. They agreed that these trackers are competent and dedicated, but are often geographically isolated, do not usually benefit from national wildlife department training and career paths, and seldom, if ever, have the opportunity to visit other rhino programmes to learn from their experience. In fact, many of them don't even have a passport. International tours just aren't on the normal radar.

After a lot of emails, the dates were fixed, the itinerary sorted and the team selected:

- **From Namibia, all from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism:** Piet Beytell, Paulus Ashili, Bonny Samattii, Hans Swaartboi and Johannes Kapner
- **From Kenya, the Maasailand Preservation Trust in the Chyulus:** Richard Bonham, Wilson Mancha and Joseph Katoke
- **Also from Kenya:** Moses Mugambi (KWS), Stephen Elimlim (Ol Pejeta Conservancy) and Edward Ndiritu (Lewa Wildlife Conservancy)
- **From Zimbabwe, all from the Lowveld Rhino Trust:** Raoul du Toit, Lovemore Mungwashu, Natasha Anderson, Chap Masterson, Jackson Kamwi and the rest of the trackers
- **And also from Zimbabwe, a whole bench-full:** Chris Foggin, Graham Connear, Martin Henriksen, Mark Brightman, Daniel Sithole, Hugo van der Westhuizen, Bruce and Sarah Clegg, Mike Ball and Mark Saunders



The group visited Gonarezhou National Park, where black rhinos went extinct – twice

Thanks

Our grateful thanks to USFWS RTCF, which provided a grant of \$23,451 to pay for the costs of the visits; to L.J. Campbell and Nicky and Duke at Save Valley Conservancy for hosting us, and to the Lowveld Rhino Trust team for making all the arrangements.

many areas in Zimbabwe, but they've still had to deal with more poaching cases than you can bear. In fact, one rhino was dehorned on Sunday and dead by Wednesday. Fortunately, the poachers hadn't got the horns: he'd been shot but ran and they never caught up with him. Unfortunately that means they'd have stayed in the area to try to bag another. It's hard to express just how angry you feel when something like this happens.

But Mark Brightman at SVC and Mike Ball at Malilangwe fight back. They talked of changes to patrol deployments, the intelligence and informer reward systems, the Rapid Reaction Force; always trying to stay a step or two ahead of the poachers. Good intelligence is essential - it's probably responsible for 85% of interceptions. Edward told us about the regime at Lewa: teams out on patrol for two months at a time, routes only sent to them two hours before they move, weekly re-supply, no vehicles, no tents, lots of night work. It's a punishing regime. How do you persuade people to stay, when the discipline is so tough, we asked. It's all about leadership from the front, giving the guys great kit, good rations, giving them Special Forces training for a month each year.

Richard Bonham excited us with his description of MPT's use of bloodhounds in the Chyulus. Hearing how they train the dogs, how the dogs actually work when following a trail, and how they use the dogs for a bit of valuable PR in the community (finding a stolen mobile phone or radio) was great firsthand information from someone who's been working with tracker dogs for four or five years now. There was a lot of interest in dogs at the African Rhino Specialist Group meeting back in March, and I will circulate Richard's advice.

There was also interest in the hotline launched in Namibia this year - a free SMS service that allows people to submit information about suspected poaching cases confidentially. With the number of rhino poaching cases on the rise in Kenya, such a scheme might substantially increase the number of leads. We will need to fundraise to pay out rewards for information that leads to arrests and successful prosecutions.

Overall, a result. Men motivated, trained and - perhaps particularly in Namibia's case - more prepared for the scrum. The return match in Kenya will be in November. If only looking after rhinos just needed 80 minutes once a week.

Skilled teamwork around an anaesthetised rhino