

A setback in North Luangwa

The threats facing rhino are all too many where small populations exist. The incredibly sad loss of six rhinos in North Luangwa National Park in 2011, to causes other than poaching, has caused deep upset and concern, and also brought reflection upon the varied challenges facing rhino conservation in an ever-changing environment.

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Rhino poaching across the world has reached alarming scales not seen since the early 1980s. Zambia suffered in those dark days and the black rhino was declared nationally extinct in 1998. The country was once home to an estimated 12,000 rhinos and about a third of those resided in the Luangwa Valley. To have so comprehensively wiped out every last standing rhino was an astonishing feat of total decimation by poachers.

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In 2003, an ambitious programme was launched to re-establish black rhinos in North Luangwa National Park. Wildlife agencies across South Africa donated 25 individuals and, by 2010, all animals had been released into a sanctuary network in the centre of an Intensive Protection Zone. Six calves had been born, all but one to the first females that arrived in 2003. So it was

with great joy that monitoring rhino officers discovered that three of the females that had been translocated in subsequent years had calved in mid-2011. Two of those females had arrived in 2006, indicating that it had taken them five long years to feel settled enough to reproduce – a prolonged period by any standards.

However, our joy was short lived and, in a tragic period at the end of the dry season in October to November 2011, the first of what was to be six rhino deaths was discovered. It is with sad irony that the year in which South Africa lost 448 rhinos

to poaching, Zambia lost 20% of its population and none of them was poached. And the saddest part of all? One of the 2006 females, Buntungwa, had produced her first calf in 2011, but when we found her carcass we could only assume that her 3-month old calf had died too.

A panel of experts was called to North Luangwa to carry out a thorough investigation of underlying causes that led to so many deaths in such a short time, and to critically assess past, current and future issues relating to the conservation of the Park's rhino population. Their findings are still pending as this issue of *The Horn* goes to press, but complex interactions between dry-season browse availability, intra-specific competition and adaptation to a new environment, all compounded by the sanctuary's restricted area, were contributory factors. Frankfurt Zoological Society is committed to ensuring that lessons are learned, shared and carried forward in an effort to safeguard North Luangwa's remaining rhino population in both the short and the long term.

Grants

Save the Rhino has made \$2,000 available to NLCP for work to react to these deaths, in addition to \$5,000 sent in December 2011 to be used for scout rations or towards vehicle costs.