

Environmental Review 1999

The 1998/99 summer was extremely wet with 58mm in January and 121mm in February alone. But the 1999/2000 season has got off to a slow start with just 175mm from 11 September until 21 December, compared to 384mm in an equivalent period during the previous season.

Two fires were of significance to the property in 1999, the first a controlled burn of approximately 7000ha and the second an unintentional fire from the east. The latter burnt a large part of the neighbouring area of the Kruger National Park (KNP) and, while crossing into the Timbavati further north, was prevented from entering Ngala by 'back-burning' and the existence of a wide firebreak. The controlled burn was part of the habitat restoration programme aimed at reducing the invasive woody component on the black turf soils in the south of the property.

Over the course of 1999 a small area in the centre of the property was manually cleared in a labour intensive community involvement project. Encroacher species were cut by hand and the stumps then removed with the aid of a tractor. Two main areas were thinned in 1999, the first a strip along a seep-line where mainly *Combretum* were cleared. The second area was thinned in conjunction with the re-routing of a road around a sodic area and then around one of the limited marshy areas on Ngala. An Environmental Impact Assessment for the siting of an underground power supply along an existing cutline has also been conducted and approved. Both fire and bush thinning have been used in restorative habitat maintenance and the root of the problem, namely artificial water provision, is also aimed at being reduced in the future. As part of this plan, several borrow pits have been breached and controllable water points rotated to reduce utilisation. The effect of this on the concentration of water-dependent species such as Impala has already been apparent.

After the good rains of the 1998/99 season, an outbreak of anthrax was experienced in the central KNP and Ngala. Six Buffalo and about 20 Greater Kudu were known to have died of the disease on Ngala between June and August. The management approach was to let this natural population-regulation disease run its course and no inoculations were undertaken, nor were carcasses burnt or buried. Several predators were seen to feed on infected carcasses but none were seen to develop symptoms of the disease. Bovine Tuberculosis (BTB), on the other hand, has had a negative impact on the Lion population at Ngala with eight individuals testing positive for BTB and having to be euthenased. Several of these Lion - seen in the progressively emaciated condition that characterises the final stages of the disease - turned to killing cattle in the community on the southern boundary. One of the herds of Buffalo that utilises the property tested positive for BTB and since this species serves as the major reservoir it can be assumed to be the source on the property.

An annual aerial census was again carried out at Ngala, and indicated an increase in White Rhino numbers, a trend that has been in evidence for the last few years. The highlight of the year, however, was the appearance of a young Black Rhino bull on the property. Soon after this animal had returned to the KNP, the tracks of a cow and calf were also seen crossing into Ngala. In November an adult Black Rhino bull was released in the central KNP to help foster the re-colonisation of this endangered species in the region.

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