

Dublin Zoo's support for **the Lowveld's rhinos**

This May I was very fortunate to have the backing of Dublin Zoo to visit the Lowveld Rhino Trust in Zimbabwe, a programme the zoo has supported since 2009.

Ken Mackey | Rhino Keeper, Dublin Zoo

As a rhino keeper, we try to make the zoo habitats simulate the wild environment as much as possible. I had worked with white rhinos for just under 20 years and had never been to Africa, so I was excited to see rhinos in their natural environment and experience their habitat for myself.

The Lowveld region of southern Zimbabwe is over 1.3 million acres and holds Key 1 populations of black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis minor*) and Southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*), one of the largest in sub-Saharan Africa.

I was based in Save Valley Conservancy (SVC) and was privileged to work with an amazing team of rhino specialists at the Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT), led by director Raoul du Toit. I participated in four rhino procedures where rhinos were sedated, dehorned, micro-chipped, ear-notched and transmitters fitted. I was really impressed with the cohesiveness of the LRT crew; it was really important that each person knew exactly what to do and ensure the animal was sedated for the least time possible.

Head Rhino Monitor, Jackson Kamwi, and his team of trackers really impressed me with their skill in spotting rhino spoor when driving down a dirt track at speed. Their ability to pick out the tiniest detail seemed to surmount human ability! This meant individual rhinos could be located and procedures completed. The trackers could recognise rhino species from their tracks (black and white rhino spoor are different), allowing the team to monitor the rhinos on their home ranges.

I experienced the harsh reality facing rhinos. Just prior to arriving in SVC, two rhino were killed by poachers and had their horns hacked off. One female had a week-old calf that luckily survived the ordeal, was rescued by the rangers and is now being hand-raised. The female killed was one of the founding rhinos translocated to Save Valley. I was involved with microchipping and ear-notching her granddaughter.

The sheer scale of rhino poaching hit home when we were taken into the Conservancy's store rooms. There were over 100 rhino skulls from poached rhinos, which would put a lump in anyone's throat.

However, it's not all bad news. There have been more recorded black and white rhino births than losses, meaning

A white rhino sedated for horn removal procedure and to micro-chip the remaining horn. Ken Mackey (foreground) assists with the rhino's oxygen supply.

an increase in the population size. Poaching losses in 2013 were the lowest experienced in the Lowveld region in over nine years. No one knows what the future holds for rhinos but with dedicated conservation teams and zoos working together, the future looks a lot brighter.

Fieldwork is not only about conservation, it's also about building links with local communities. Without local community support, the chances of a programme succeeding and saving precious animals could fail. LRT works closely with local communities and runs outreach projects for schools in the locality. Personally there will always be a place for Zimbabwean people in my heart. Friendly smiles and warm-hearted people greeted me everywhere I went.

Since my return, I feel more enabled to educate visitors at Dublin Zoo about rhino conservation and the efforts being made both in the wild and by zoos. By protecting rhinos and helping them in the wild, we are working to maintain a whole ecosystem.

The team I worked with in Lowveld are amazing people and their dedication and commitment to saving rhino inspired me. I would like to thank Cathy Dean, SRI Director, and Leo Oosterweghel, Paul O' Donoghue, Sandra Molloy and Helen Clarke at Dublin Zoo, and all at LRT for an amazing opportunity and making a dream of mine come true.

Grants and thanks

Since 1 April 2014, Save the Rhino has sent €5,000 from Dublin Zoo and \$55,000 from the Anna Merz Rhino Trust to support the work of the Lowveld Rhino Trust.

