

Positive trends in the **Matopos National Park**

The past two years have been busy in the Matopos National Park (MNP). 2014 was a red-letter year, as no rhinos were poached and there was a bumper crop of calves. Such successes are thanks to the dedication of Park management and rangers and the support provided by local and international stakeholders.

Nicky Pegg PhD | Senior Researcher, Dambari Wildlife Trust

Dambari Wildlife Trust continues to offer regular support to MNP, by assisting with equipment procurement, providing training, and running monitoring and research projects.

Equipment

A grant received from Chessington Conservation Fund in 2014 enabled us to purchase binoculars and cameras for MNP. Seven high-power digital cameras and 10 pairs of 10x42 binoculars were handed over in November 2014 to a delighted group of rangers. By March this year, the Area Managers commented on the improvement in sighting records, particularly black rhino, as a direct result of more patrols having powerful binoculars.

Training

Of critical importance to the successful management of rhino populations is the quality of data provided to management by personnel on the ground. The ability to accurately age, sex and identify individuals helps to keep track of population performance. Assessing rhinos' body condition alerts management to potential environmental and social issues that may affect population growth. In the past, rhino monitoring training courses were run irregularly for rangers by supporting NGOs. We felt it would be preferable to develop staff within the Park's corps itself, which has the dual advantage of developing the skills set within the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) and having people on the ground that can teach their colleagues on an ad hoc basis at little cost.

Six MNP staff, comprising scientific services, substation seniors and rangers that performed well in a 2012 foundation course, attended a 'training of trainers' course in June.

During a week's intensive training, participants learned about:

- rhino biology,
- how to age, sex and identify individual rhinos,
- how to use equipment (binoculars, digital cameras and GPS),
- how to record field data using standard datasheets, and the importance of data quality and quality control.

Most importantly, their ability to teach the material was examined. Following written and practical examinations, two people became full trainers and two others attained assistant trainer status. Equipped with knowledge, teaching materials and a massive dose of enthusiasm, they returned to their stations to pass on what they had learnt



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Support for this course and for the course materials was provided by Chessington Conservation Fund, Zoom Torino and Marwell Wildlife.



Monitoring

We have been running a camera-trap monitoring project continuously since June 2011, with support from Save African Rhino Foundation. This project augments information collected by rangers. With 18 cameras currently deployed, we get regular verifiable records of animals in the Park.

Research

For some years, there have been concerns about the safety of rhinos in a section of the Park that is not adequately fenced. Such fears are not unfounded, as a young bull was poached there in May 2015. To better understand what draws animals out of the safety of the Park, ZPWMA and DWT entered into a partnership with Marwell Wildlife and the University of Southampton. In the early dry season, two students reading for a Master of Research in Wildlife Conservation investigated how fire, human activities, and vegetation structure, amongst other factors, affects the distribution of large grazers. Results will be available later in 2015 and should help us to identify further research questions.

Along with our local and international partners, DWT will continue to dedicate time and resources to the conservation of the Matopos rhinos.

Grants

Since November 2014, Save the Rhino has sent grants totalling £1,000 to Dambari Wildlife Trust, including €1,000 from Zoom Torino.

Above: 'Training of trainers' course

Main: Subadult rhino captured on a camera trap set up for MNP's monitoring programme

