

Zimbabwe's Rhinos: Secure at Last?

In each issue of *African Wildlife Update* the results of current African wildlife research are summarized. In this reprint, the findings of three recent reports from Zimbabwe on the status of that nation's black and white rhinos are examined.

For the first time in ten years, numbers of both black and white rhinos in Zimbabwe are inching upward. In early 1995, the total population of rhinos in Zimbabwe was estimated at 390 (260 black rhinos and 130 white rhinos).

With few exceptions, Zimbabwe's remaining rhino are found in eight areas: four Intensive Protection Zones (IPZs) and four private land conservancies. Each of these areas is described below.

INTENSIVE PROTECTION ZONES

The Intensive Protection Zone strategy was adopted by Zimbabwean wildlife officials in September 1993. Greater manpower is deployed in these areas (as many as one specially-trained guard per 10 square miles), and the rhinos are intensively managed (dehorned, radio-collared, and monitored).

No rhinos have been lost to poachers in any of these areas in more than 14 months.

Hwange National Park & Deka Safari Area: This IPZ consists of Sinamatella sub-region of Hwange National Park and the adjoining Deka Safari Area. At least 60 black rhinos live here, making it the largest remaining population of black rhinos in Zimbabwe. Hwange was once a stronghold for the white rhino too, but the population was heavily poached in early 1993.

Matusadona National Park: The valley floor is generally considered to be the IPZ. (Matusadona is in the Zambezi Valley adjacent to Lake Kariba.) At least 26 black rhinos remain here. The population was augmented during 1993-94 with the introduction of 20 black rhinos, but a number of these died unexpectedly. According to wildlife officials, this IPZ has great potential because of its habitat, but some are concerned about its proximity to the Zambian border. No known black rhino births have occurred here since 1992, but the population is young and just nearing sexual maturity.

Chipinge Safari Area: This IPZ—the only one located in southeastern Zimbabwe—harbors the smallest number of rhinos, perhaps nine. There was considerable opposition to moving rhinos here in 1991, but political pressure prevailed.

Matobo National Park: Within this small national park southwest of Bulawayo lies the Whovi Game Park, which is considered the IPZ. There are at least 42 white rhinos in the Whovi and eight in the other section, making Matobo home to the largest remaining population of white rhinos in Zimbabwe. Twelve black rhinos also live here.

PRIVATE LAND CONSERVANCIES

Three of the four private land conservancies are located in southeastern Zimbabwe (the

“lowveld”). The conservancies are individual properties joined together for ease of management. Each was established initially to further black rhino conservation. The rhinos on these private lands were once seen as merely an “insurance policies” for the species, but now these areas harbor more black rhinos than the IPZs (about 100 to 160).

Rhinos on these private lands remain the property of the State, with the landowners acting as custodians.

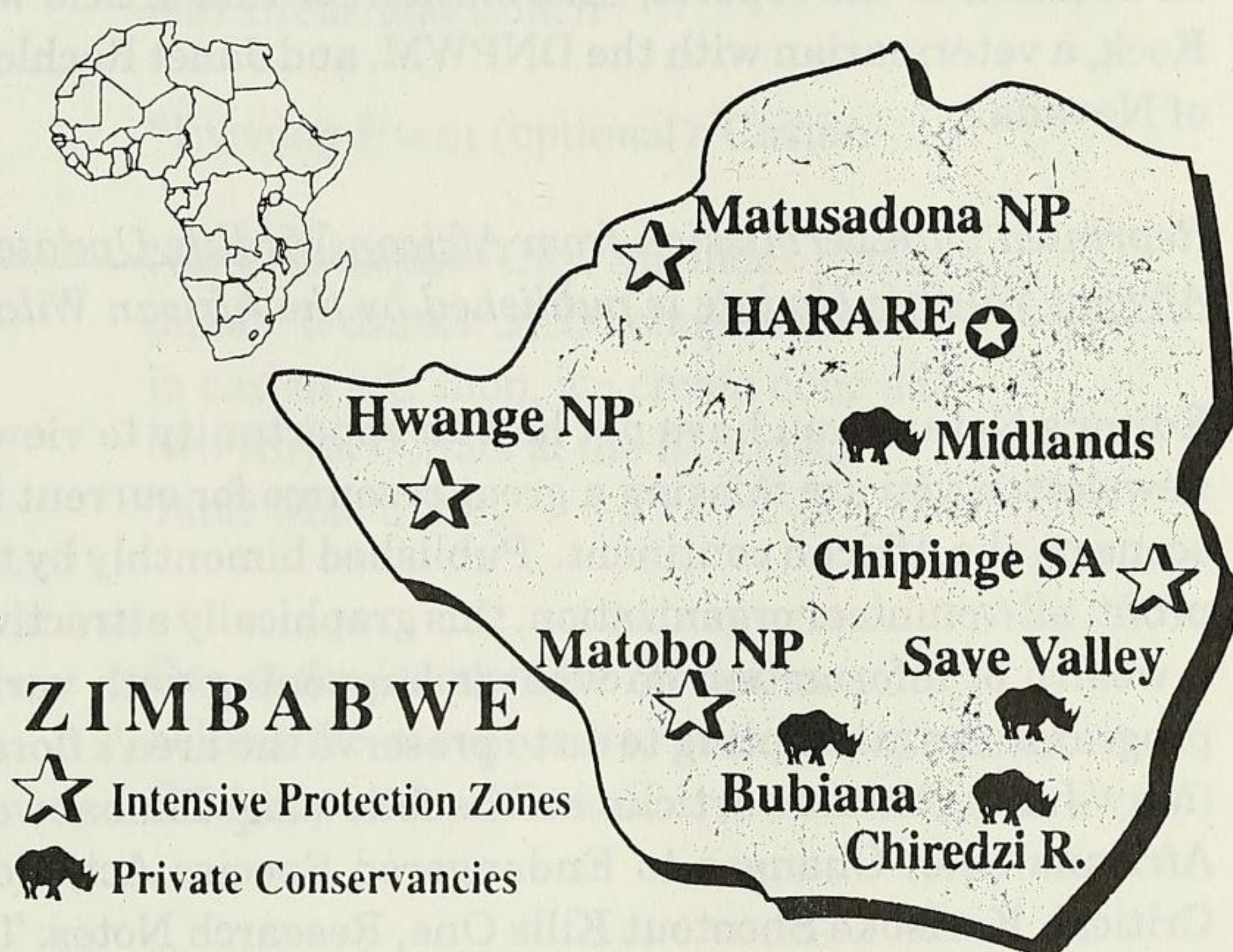
The three lowveld conservancies are:

Bubiana Conservancy: This conservancy, created in 1991, consists of 8 individual properties. Approximately 40 black rhinos reside here.

Save Valley Conservancy: Also created in 1991, the Save Valley Conservancy consolidates 23 individual properties and harbors an estimated 40 black rhinos.

Chiredzi River Conservancy: This conservancy was created in 1992. It consists of 12 individual properties. Eleven black rhinos are found here.

There has been talk of linking Save Valley Conservancy and Chiredzi River Conservancy (separated by a very narrow strip of land) and joining them with other ranches extending to Gonarezhou National Park. Gonarezhou itself could one day be linked with adjoining wildlife areas in Mozambique and South Africa, so it is possible that one of the world's largest wildlife areas could be created, eliminating all concerns about the viability of individual conservancies.



The remaining conservancy is:

Midlands Conservancy: This controversial conservancy contains 20-30 black rhinos. It has relatively poor quality black rhino habitat and was initially stocked with more rhinos than was warranted. Zimbabwe's wildlife department has moved some rhinos out of this conservancy to other areas and wants to move more, but opposition exists from some of the individual conservancy landowners.

Among the rhino controversies discussed in the reports:

1) Have Matobo's white rhinos exceeded their optimal level?

Forty two white rhinos now occupy the Whovi Game Park section (the IPZ) of Matobo National Park, up from the initial 13 re-introduced in the 1960s. But their rate of population growth has declined during the past decade as the density of rhinos has increased. (The annual rate of increase has dropped from 10.4% to 6.6%). The age at first calving has risen and the interval between births has increased. Nevertheless, ten white rhino calves were born here in 1994.

Should some of Matobo's rhinos be moved to other areas where the density is lower and where the rate of increase would be higher? According to Janet Rachlow, a doctoral candidate who has studied white rhino in both Hwange and Matobo, the Matobo population could be used as a breeding nucleus for restocking both private and State reserves. The government apparently agrees and planned to move out at least five of the rhinos beginning this past May.

2) Dehorning

Initiated in 1991 on an experimental basis with Hwange's white rhinos (most of which were subsequently killed), dehorning became a nationwide policy for both black and white rhinos in 1992. Despite its initial failures and its continuing controversial status, researchers consider dehorning to have played a major role in reducing rhino poaching in Zimbabwe, along with "the establishment of IPZs and **improved law enforcement** [emphasis in report]." No dehorned rhinos have been poached on private lands in two years.

Re-dehorning of rhinos has also become standard practice (every 1 1/2 to 2 years), except for older animals, which may have little or no regrowth at all.

In addition to the reports, information for this article was provided in March 1995 by Dr. Mike Kock, a veterinarian with the DNPWM, and Janet Rachlow, a doctoral candidate at the University of Nevada.

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Editor's Note: If you have not had an opportunity to view an issue of the African Wildlife Update newsletter, you are missing a great resource for current information on the wildlife conservation scene on the African continent. Published bimonthly by the African Wildlife News Service, a non-profit, all-volunteer organization, this graphically attractive publication began in 1992 and provides a wealth of information on what is happening with various African species, what conservation programs are attempting to do to preserve the area's flora and fauna, etc. The most current issue (May/June) contains articles on the following: Zimbabwe Halts Sale of Thousands of Elephants, Africans Seek Changes to Endangered Species Act, Botswana's Migratory Corridors Seen as Critical, Karisoke Shootout Kills One, Research Notes: The Impact of Village Hunting in Gabon, and Rare Floods hit Northwest Namibia.

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