

# Zimbabwe's Rhinos Under Attack by Poachers

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Just after dawn on February 16<sup>th</sup>, Sinikwe, a black rhino cow, and her 16-month-old calf were ambushed by poachers in the thick brush. Sinikwe escaped with gunshot wounds. Her calf was shot and killed – its horn hacked off with an axe minutes after its death. For weeks, Sinikwe regularly returned to her calf's carcass. The poachers staked out the dead calf, hoping to catch Sinikwe and kill her too.

But now, there is some good news. Rhino monitors from the Lowveld Rhino Trust (a local Zimbabwean organization supported by the International Rhino Foundation) staked out the site as well, and were able to protect Sinikwe from the poachers. And, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, they successfully captured and moved Sinikwe, her brother, and several other members of their extended family out of the high-risk area where they lived, and into a much safer conservancy – greatly increasing our ability to protect them from poachers in the future.

As the economic crisis in Zimbabwe deepens, we are witnessing a significant increase in poaching. Rhino poaching in Zimbabwe (home to the fourth largest population of Critically Endangered black rhinos in the world) has doubled in the past year. Eighty-eight of the country's nearly 800 rhinos – more than 10% of the population – were brutally killed by organized gangs of poachers in 2008, just for their horn. Actual losses are likely higher – these are only the documented poaching incidents. The slaughter has continued unabated this year, with at least 25 rhinos already killed in 2009.



Rhino poaching has now reached a 15-year high. These confiscated horns were removed from poached rhinos in Zimbabwe earlier this year.

*(Photo: Lowveld Rhino Trust)*

rhinos as poaching has increased. Rhino translocations are no easy feat. These expensive operations require the support of a team of vets, rangers and monitors; air support from a helicopter and a small fixed-wing aircraft for tracking and immobilizing the rhinos; and large trucks fitted with rhino crates and mounted cranes for transporting the immobilized rhinos.

With generous support from zoos, individuals and foundations, the International Rhino Foundation and partners launched the CRISIS Zimbabwe Campaign to raise funds for emergency operations in Zimbabwe, and to increase awareness about the need to combat poaching.

Thanks to the money raised by numerous committed individuals and organizations around the world, this summer our heroic team in Zimbabwe was able to move 45 critically endangered black rhinos out of areas where they were particularly vulnerable to poachers. It was a relief to rescue all 45 rhinos, but some deserve special mention.

Rosemary, a seven-year-old female, lost her mother, Myrtle, to poachers in November 2008 along with Myrtle's young calf, Mint. Myrtle's calf Basil was poached in December 2008, leaving

The IRF-supported Lowveld Rhino Trust is working to save Zimbabwe's rhinos from poachers by proactively translocating rhinos from high-risk areas to safer locations; treating rhinos with snare wounds and other injuries and returning them to the wild; helping authorities track, apprehend, and prosecute poachers; and intensively tracking and monitoring rhinos to ensure their safety.

The Trust is increasingly being forced to undertake emergency operations to rescue



Rosemary as Myrtle's only known offspring surviving in Bubiana Conservancy. When our teams found Rosemary, she was with Figtree, Marula's four-year-old calf. Marula and Myrtle were "best friends" and always found close to each other or "babysitting" for one another's calves, so it is no surprise that their two offspring were together. We also were able to move both our local big heavies - Dozer and Ganya. Dozer had a number of new scars indicating he had been scrapping recently with Ganya. There was only one death on the operation - a year-old calf that had been badly wounded by poachers.



Blondie, a young male rhino orphaned when his mother was shot by poachers, is one of five orphans being hand-raised by staff from the Lowveld Rhino Trust. He will be released into the wild when he is old enough to fend for himself. (Photo: Lowveld Rhino Trust)

Lowveld Rhino Trust

rhinos. Even though poaching has doubled over the past year, births in the Lowveld Conservancies still exceed deaths. During the recently completed translocation operations, our rhino monitors found several new calves! If we can successfully protect Zimbabwe's rhinos during the current crisis and pressure the government to crack down on poaching, then this species can have a bright future indeed.

And, since May, eight poachers have been killed in the Lowveld during armed confrontations with police, compared to four known rhino poaching losses. So for the moment at least, the numbers are in the rhinos' favor.

There is still hope for Zimbabwe's

rhinos. Even though poaching has doubled over the past year, births in the Lowveld Conservancies still exceed deaths. During the recently completed translocation operations, our rhino monitors found several new calves! If we can successfully protect Zimbabwe's rhinos during the current crisis and pressure the government to crack down on poaching, then this species can have a bright future indeed.

## Update: Greater One-Horned Rhinos in India and Nepal

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Rhino poaching worldwide has now reached a 15-year high – and rhinos in Nepal and some parts of India are virtually under attack by well-organized gangs of poachers that sell rhino horn on the black market. Nonetheless, there is some good news. Despite poaching losses, the population of Greater One-Horned Rhinos continues to increase, and the species was recently downgraded to Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

Greater One-Horned Rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) populations now number between 2,800 and 2,850. This species is restricted to Nepal and the State of Assam in northern India. Although the population is increasing, poaching pressure is intense throughout its range. In 2008, 26 rhinos died at the hands of poachers in Assam and at least eight were poached in Nepal, where populations are highly fragmented and difficult to protect. Already in 2009, at least 17 rhinos have been poached in India and Nepal. Despite these losses, the species' population is stable. But, current protection and conservation measures must be continued and intensified to maintain population growth.

### A Big Move – Greater One-Horned Rhinos Successfully Translocated in India

When the Greater one-horned rhino was downlisted from Endangered to Vulnerable, it represented a huge success story for a species that once numbered fewer than 20 individuals. However, more than 85% of the world's Greater one-horned rhino population inhabits Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India. Pabitora National Park holds about 100 rhinos -- the park's carrying capacity has been exceeded,