

# EDUCATION AGAINST EXTINCTION



## How do you teach children to love black rhinos?

When black rhinos were reintroduced to Zambia's North Luangwa National Park after being declared nationally extinct from poaching in 1998, the team behind the translocations— a partnership between the Zambian Department of National Parks & Wildlife and Frankfurt Zoological Society—knew that it would take more than high security and habitat protection to ensure the species was never wiped out again.

**Katherine Johnston** | Former Communications Manager

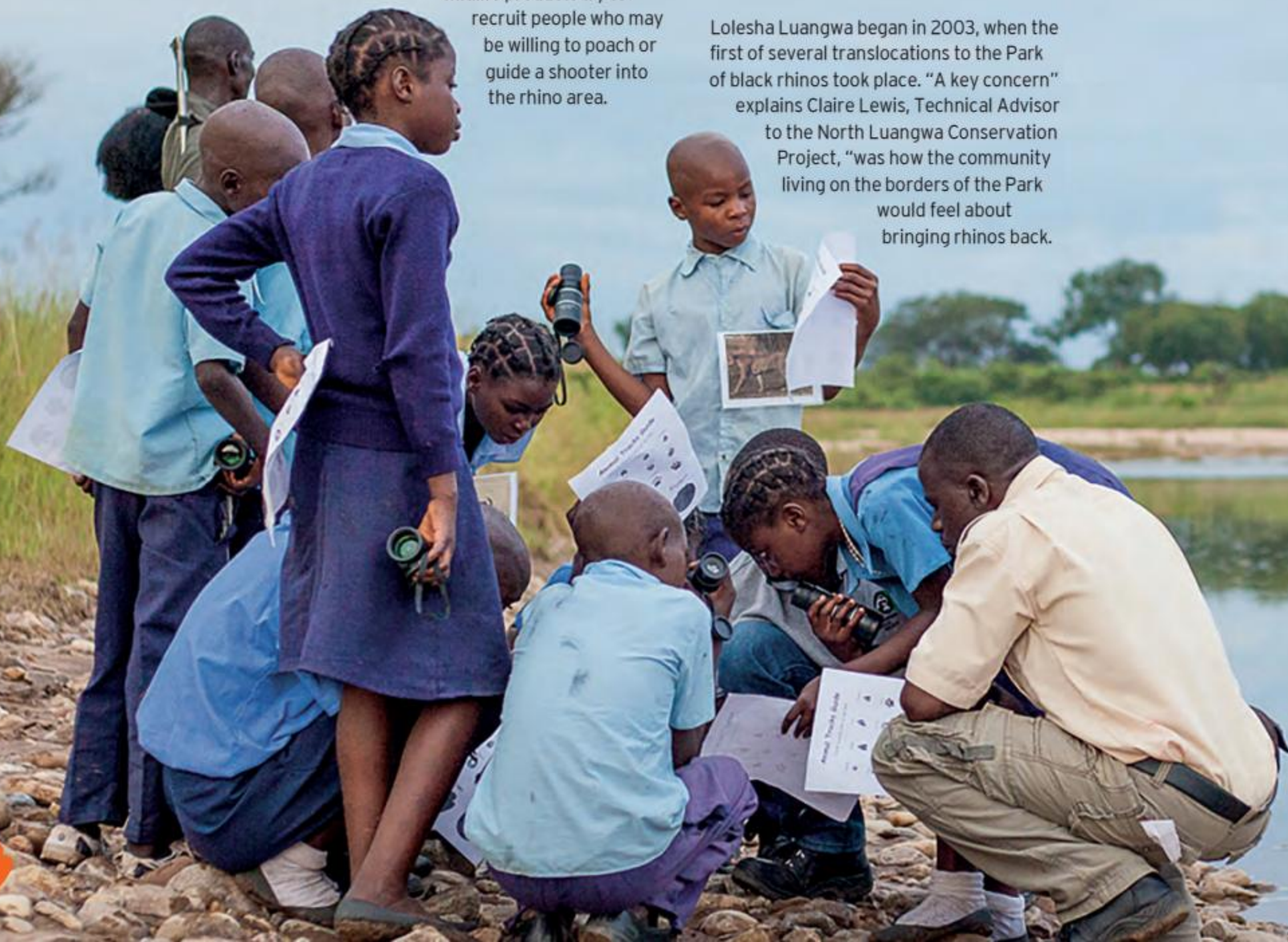
**L**ong-term, the future of the species is in the hands of the next generation. So how do you teach children to love rhinos? Zambia's only black rhino population lives in a heavily protected and monitored area of North Luangwa National Park. As I've learnt, courtesy of a rhino lesson by Michael Eliko, the Education Officer in North Luangwa, these animals play an important role in the ecosystem as a whole. I'm not the only one receiving a rhino education.

ALL IMAGES: TRISTAN VINCE

It's March 2017, and I'm in the Education Centre deep inside the Park with a group of sparky school children, who live around the Park's borders in rural villages. These are precisely the areas from which criminals involved trafficking wildlife products try to recruit people who may be willing to poach or guide a shooter into the rhino area.

The kids are staying in the Park for three days. They've never been inside the Park before, let alone on safari in the back of a truck, nor walked through the elephant grass with binoculars and a trusty ranger to keep an eye out for hidden animals. They are hosted by the team behind the education programme, Lolesha Luangwa, or "Look after Luangwa" in Bemba; the local language. The 3-day visit is the highlight of a full conservation curriculum taught in school by their teachers with the help of visits by North Luangwa's two Education Officers, Cephass Chota and Michael.

Lolesha Luangwa began in 2003, when the first of several translocations to the Park of black rhinos took place. "A key concern" explains Claire Lewis, Technical Advisor to the North Luangwa Conservation Project, "was how the community living on the borders of the Park would feel about bringing rhinos back.







Most of them would never have seen a rhino, and many wouldn't have had rhinos alive

in North Luangwa for most of their lifetime. It was vital to gain support from the community." Save the Rhino and its donors, including USFWS and Disney Conservation Fund, have helped fund Lolesha Luangwa since 2006. In that time, hundreds of children have seen black rhinos first-hand and learnt about the benefits of conserving this flagship species.

The school-taught curriculum covers conservation lessons from water hygiene to how to fish safely and sustainable forestry. At the end of term, pupils will know, for example, how to distinguish dangerous snakes from the helpful vermin-eating variety and how to live safely with the venomous ones. They will also understand that poaching for ivory, bush meat, rhino horn or any other wildlife product is illegal. These life-lessons will be put to good use. Beyond the practical, children are also taught an appreciation of the wider ecosystem and how each individual animal or plant plays its role in a delicate balance.

Most importantly, the conservation team is sharing the message that this wildlife is theirs to protect – and benefit from. But only if poachers don't get there first. Poaching in the Park, past and present, threatens the community's best future option for development: photographic and eco-tourism. In the absence of livestock due to the endemic tsetse fly, and harsh conditions inhibiting large-scale agriculture, wildlife could be the area's best financial asset.

I visited North Luangwa with photographer Claudia and film maker Tristan to find out more about the impact of Lolesha Luangwa. The rain was torrential, as befits the 'green' season in Zambia, and only one road in and out of the Park was functioning, so that's the route we took when Michael and Cephas drove us to Mukungule for our first school visit in Mukungule. The journey lasted more than two hours to get there, traveling up the escarpment no faster than 10 miles an hour through slicks of mud. Many of the children had walked for two hours on foot themselves to get to school that day, eager to learn.

Whereas the usual rural Zambian teaching style is "chalk and talk", with a lot of copying from a board in a bare classroom, Michael and Cephas – both Mukungule-born – bring laptops and a digital projector, and their interactive learning style is completely new and memorable. On every desk is a Conservation Education Booklet and pencil. At the end of the year, they'll be the only resources from school that the kids can keep forever. The teacher Dennis Chilekwa told me: "Without the Park, this school, these homes, they wouldn't be here. The Park provides so many jobs, you could say

that we are here because of the black rhinos. The children are learning that conservation is a good thing."

Later that week, back in the Park's Education Centre and surrounded by pristine habitat, I learned that most of the kids hadn't ever before spent a night away from home. As an ice-breaker, Michael and Cephas appeared with face paints and quizzed us on what we knew about our chosen animals. Naturally, we all enjoyed taking a huge number of selfies. The kids were then put into several teams and given the role of rhino, poacher, ranger and judge to play. It was up to them what happened next. All our groups' rangers ran after the poachers and made sure they got caught. One particularly firm female judge pointed her finger and shouted: "You are sentenced to 10 years" – if only!

That afternoon we went out with David, our ranger for the day, with 'spotter sheets' to record all our sightings, excitedly wondering if we'd see a rhino during our visit. Crocodiles surfaced from the river, a huge bull elephant came to the opposite bank and scooped up water with his trunk. The kids were delighted to discover hyena, hippo and lion tracks in the mud. The Park was theirs to protect – and they loved it.

Despite being over-excited and up way past bedtime (Claudia, Tristan and I included) we got up early the next morning and drove in the Lolesha Luangwa truck to the Rhino and Elephant Protection Unit's HQ, so the pupils could meet rangers face-to-face, and see the wildlife crime detection dog unit in action. There were plenty of chances to ask questions and learn about how the Park is protected 24/7 for everyone's benefit.

Emmanuel, dressed as a ranger and holding onto an old out-of-action radio, hid a sample of rhino horn and watched as Vicka, the cross-breed Belgian Malinois, found it in 30 seconds flat. Later on, we asked what he wanted to do when he was older. "I want to be a ranger and protect rhinos," he said. David, our scout still keeping an eye out for any charging elephants, looked particularly pleased to be his role-model.

That evening, wide-eyed faces peeked out from the open-topped truck and spied Hugo, a male black rhino, eating sausage-tree fruit against a technicolour sunset, apparently unfazed by the intrusion. His observers weren't rich tourists on safari; they were Emmanuel and his friends from families living and working in North Luangwa, children developing a sense of ownership and responsibility for their local wildlife.

Now that the kids know about rhinos and the threats they face, the test will be how they take this message with them into adulthood and beyond. Until then, the most important thing is that North Luangwa's black rhino population is growing. A lot of hard work by rhino rangers, monitors and conservationists helps create this success – but long-term it can't continue without education, and that starts with children learning to love rhinos.

**It costs just £40 to take a child to North Luangwa National Park to see rhinos and meet rangers for the first time. Text EDUC £10 to 70070 to donate £10 towards our Education Against Extinction appeal.**