

World Ranger Day

Meet the rangers giving Zambia's rhinos a second chance

31 July is World Ranger Day, a time to celebrate the personal courage and – all too often – commemorate the sacrifice made by wildlife rangers in the line of duty. In North Luangwa National Park, rangers work round the clock to protect Zambia's only black rhino population.

Katherine Johnston | Former Communications Manager

In the 1960s, Zambia's black rhino population was the third-largest on the continent, and their traditional stronghold the vast ecosystem of North Luangwa National Park. And yet just two decades later, Zambia's rhinos were hurtling towards extinction.

In the 1970s and 80s, demand for illegally poached rhino horn boomed, both in Yemen,

where it was used to fashion decorative dagger handles, and in Asia, for use in Traditional Chinese Medicine. In 1998, several years after

the last confirmed sightings, Zambia's black rhinos were officially declared nationally extinct.

Dean Bwale is a wildlife ranger in North Luangwa National Park. Growing up, he remembers learning that Zambia's rhinos had been slaughtered: "In the past we have lost a lot of animals here in North Luangwa. We had lost all our rhinos and that impacted on the community. We live together with nature, so if we destroy our nature, then we are destroying our own lives."

In 1986, a partnership between the Zambian Wildlife Authority and Frankfurt Zoological Society created the North Luangwa Conservation Project, with the aim of conserving the unique ecosystem. With improved security, poaching was brought under control, and the conservation team started restoring the Park's habitats; working toward a future where local communities benefit from the economic opportunities wildlife brings. Cementing

this vision, in 2003, the first rhinos were reintroduced to a heavily protected area of North Luangwa. Today, Dean leads an anti-poaching unit protecting the rhinos from the ever-present threat of poaching.

In the last decade, more than 1,000 rangers worldwide have lost their lives in the line of duty.

Protecting wildlife is dangerous at the best of times but, since 2007, rhino poaching has escalated once more, fuelled by demand for illegally traded horn in Viet Nam and China. Rangers are increasingly faced with highly armed poachers. To combat this threat, Dean and his team can spend days or weeks at a time on patrol in the bush, rising before dawn and walking for more than 12 hours a day, while investigating reported incursions and collecting evidence that can lead to arrests. The risk of an ambush is constant.

In parallel, a team of dedicated rhino monitors are tasked with tracking and identifying each individual animal and building a picture of their behaviour. Paimolo Bwalya, Head of Rhino Monitoring, explains: "You have to leave your family for a long time but knowing and protecting the rhinos like I do, it's worth it. I know their personalities very well and see them grow. It's a privilege to learn about them and be so close. We must keep them safe and not lose them again."

Save the Rhino and our donors, particularly the Wildcat Foundation, focus on helping improve rangers' efficiency and morale, whether through providing the best basics we can – like good quality shoes, socks and backpacks – or upgrading accommodation so that when Dean and Paimolo get back to base camp, they have a comfortable night's sleep ahead and some small luxuries to keep their spirits high. "It's dangerous, yes. But I love my work. If you asked me to do any other job I wouldn't want to", says Dean, "because I am protecting wildlife for our future and my children's future."

Worldwide, rhinos are perilously close to reaching the point where their population starts declining. Black rhinos are Critically Endangered but, encouragingly, Zambia's rhino population is growing. Long-term, the North Luangwa Conservation Project aims to grow sustainable, community-led tourism. The black rhinos will be a huge draw. Thanks to the dedication of people like Paimolo and Dean, Zambia's black rhinos – and communities living near North Luangwa – have a second chance.



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Working round the clock to protect the park's rhinos from poachers, rangers need to be well trained, well equipped and highly motivated



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