

GETTING READY for rhinos

Gonarezhou National Park, at 5,000 km², is Zimbabwe's second-largest national park. Tucked away in the country's South East corner, far away from the better-known northern tourism circuit of Mana Pools, Hwange and Victoria Falls, it has been operating somewhat under the radar for many years.

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After going extinct in the National Park, Gonarezhou Conservation Trust is now getting ready to bring rhinos back into the region.

Employing and training rangers, improving fences and monitoring habitat are all key before rhinos can be moved into the Park.

However, the last decade has seen it slowly coming into its own and, on the back of a programme that saw the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) partner with the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) more than 10 years ago, the Park is readying itself to reintroduce black rhinos in 2020.

Black rhinos became extinct in the general area somewhere in the 1930s or 1940s, and although a successful reintroduction between 1969 and 1971 ultimately led to a population numbering around 100+ individuals, the Park's rhinos succumbed to the poaching pressure in the 1980s and, combined with a severe drought, the species again became locally extinct by 1994.

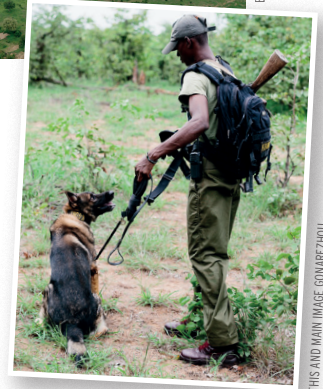
The Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT), a co-management partnership between ZimParks and FZS established in 2016, is now preparing the reintroduction on a number of fronts. Planning for rhinos is well underway and there are critical tasks to complete before rhinos are welcomed into Gonarezhou.

First and foremost, the safety of the translocated black rhinos is of primary concern, and all aspects of the Park's security strategy is being scrutinised to make sure that we are as well-prepared as possible to protect the animals. Since GCT began, we have focused on increasing the manpower available for field patrols, with a special emphasis on recruiting rangers from the communities that live next to Gonarezhou.

We must also undertake a thorough survey of the available habitat to assess the Ecological Carrying Capacity (ECC)



BAD RABBIT STUDIOS



THIS AND MAIN IMAGE: GONAREZHOU

of the area. While the Park used to have many resident rhinos, it's important that we know as much as possible about the available vegetation, water sources and general habitat today, to develop a long-term plan for the future.

There are also a number of logistical steps that need to be completed, one of these being the construction of an ambitious bridge across the Runde River, which will allow year-round access for security vehicles. A low electric fence, specifically aimed at containing the rhino but ensuring that other animals can pass over or under, also needs to be erected, as well as ranger pickets and bomas into which we release the rhinos on arrival.

Despite the many challenges lying ahead, we're incredibly proud and motivated to re-establish the species in one of Zimbabwe's premier conservation areas, boosting national and regional conservation efforts to secure the future of black rhino on the continent!

