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# The Long Road to Gonarezhou

Chris Whitlatch, Communications Director,  
International Rhino Foundation

Headlights sweep around the last corner to light up the solid poles of the boma walls. Weary people maneuver the metal crate into position to offload the massive, drugged animal. The truck engine is cut, the antidote to the heavy sedative is administered, a minute of silence, then another, then a deep drawing of breath. A breath that sucks in awareness of a new landscape – new plants to eat, some new neighbors to know. One thousand kilograms of Critically Endangered black rhino steps cautiously into new territory.

After an absence of nearly thirty years, black rhinos are back in Gonarezhou National Park, Zimbabwe – a historic achievement after decades of preparatory work by the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT) and its partners. It has been a long road to get to this new beginning. Re-establishing a black rhino population in this 5,000 km sq park, with the potential to expand significantly, is a big step in the multi-phase process to save this magnificent species from extinction.

Three decades ago, Zimbabwe, home to the largest remaining black rhino population in the world, faced a wave of rhino poaching that had already decimated formerly large populations to the north. In the 1970s, an estimated 65,000 black rhinos survived in Africa. By 1992, those numbers were down to only 2,500 individuals.

It was 1992 when “Siabuwa”, a young black rhino cow, took her cautious first steps into new territory. A vague report of a

rhino sighting in the Siabuwa communal lands in the Zambezi Valley had been passed on to a small team working to build new rhino populations in Zimbabwe’s Lowveld region, away from the cross-border poaching. Siabuwa joined a growing group of rhino refugees in Bubiana Conservancy.

Rhino poaching started to flare up after a decade of quiet. Again, the black rhinos were left vulnerable and in need of a new sanctuary. That refuge was found in the Buby Valley Conservancy (BVC), where the Lowveld Rhino Trust, IRF’s on-the-ground partner, began moving vulnerable rhinos as a new phase in the process of consolidating rhinos into the most secure areas.

Siabuwa was one of the survivors of the poaching onslaught that engulfed Bubiana, although she had been badly wounded by a bullet. Again, on stepping into the holding bomas in BVC, she drew in a deep breath, gathering information on her new surroundings.

In Gonarezhou, Siabuwa’s daughter, Siashialaba, has just breathed in the smells of her new neighborhood. She had been loaded in BVC in mid-2021 onto the same truck that had moved Siabuwa to Bubiana 29 years before, kept functional by the Lowveld Rhino Trust. Siabuwa’s grandchildren will be born in Gonarezhou – about as far down the road as it is possible to get to where Siabuwa was born while still being within Zimbabwe.

In all, 29 rhinos were translocated from BVC, Malilangwe and Save Valley to establish the new population in Gonarezhou. Monitors report that all of the rhinos are doing well and adjusting to their new home.

The Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT) is an innovative conservation partnership between the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority and the Frankfurt Zoological Society that is responsible for the management of Gonarezhou National Park. IRF supported a feasibility study to assist in planning for this reintroduction and provided funding to support the translocations through the Lowveld Rhino Trust.

*Photos courtesy of International Rhino Foundation*

*Top left: Siashialaba’s calf on translocation to Gonarezhou National Park*

*Bottom left: Sia and calf on truck to Gonarezhou National Park*

*Below: Siabuwa with her daughter Siashialaba at one month old (2013)*

