

# THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY

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INTERNATIONAL

# BULLETIN

JUNE/JULY 2003

## MEDIA REPORTS: DIRECTOR COMMENTS

Irresponsible media reports concerning the condition of Zimbabwe's wildlife continue to appear in the international media, the latest being in a recent edition of the British Sunday Telegraph. The hoary old tale of "70% of Zimbabwe's wildlife is destroyed" was peddled once again, together with a wildly inflated figure of 100 black rhino deaths from various violent causes. The reporter concerned interviewed the Director of the Zambezi Society, but chose not to make use of the vastly more accurate - but obviously vastly less sensational - information provided.

As regards black rhino deaths: the true figure is approximately 30 animals. This is not exactly a desirable situation; but neither is it anywhere near as catastrophic as the Sunday Telegraph wishes the world to believe.

As for the rest: part of the problem is that virtually all the publicity is emanating from the private sector in general, and a limited number of conservancies in particular. We cannot blame them for this, but we *can* criticise the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority for remaining silent on this.

Most - not all, but most - of the country's designated protected areas and their wildlife populations are in good shape; and a rapidly-increasing population of some 86 000 elephants does not exactly argue for mass destruction of valuable wildlife species. The figure, incidentally, comes from the latest (and, sadly maybe the last, unless further funding is found) of WWF's countrywide aerial censuses.

The events of the last couple of years argue powerfully for the maintenance of a strong system of protected areas, free of the vagaries of politics, land allocation and the notoriously fickle tourism industry. We have some reservations about PWMA's being cut loose from taxpayer funding, as these are assets that should be maintained on behalf of all Zimbabweans. Though there are some positive implications, such as the freeing of PWMA salaries from Public Service Commission restrictions, several undesirable effects are also likely to result from this realignment. One is the probable hiking of entry fees beyond the pockets of all "ordinary" Zimbabweans, thus alienating them even further from the wildlife estate. Another is likely to be the cutting of budgets for non-profitable activities such as research. Most of all, though, the new arrangement exposes the management of these priceless national assets to the chilly winds of international tourism fad and fancy.

Our interest in these issues extends far beyond Zimbabwe's borders. Recent years have seen an almost unquestioningly blind rush to promote private-land wildlife operations at the expense of State protected areas. Similar land reforms seem likely to follow in Namibia, South Africa, and possibly in other countries as well. Conservationists in the region would, in our view, do well to balance their enthusiasm for unbridled capitalism with some attention to their countries' formal protected area systems. These areas are the long-term, last-resort reservoirs of biodiversity, well institutionalised into government structures (until, as in Zimbabwe, they are smitten with an outmoded attack of Reaganomics), and are therefore not only unlikely to be handed over willynilly to new settlers, but also free from the vagaries of landowners who may decide on wildlife today, cattle tomorrow, sugar the day after.

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And as to the media reports: the Sunday Telegraph and other like-minded newspapers would do well to check their facts with formal management authorities and well-established NGOs as well as with the private sector and with individuals whose motivations seem, to say the least, to have heavy political overtones.

## BLACK RHINO

The Society's Matusadona rhino project, managed by Duncan Purchase, is nearing the end of its first phase which, members may recall, involved ground coverage of the entire Park in order to arrive at a reasonable assessment of black rhinoceros numbers and distribution.

The results of this assessment will not be published in this bulletin, for several reasons. Firstly, the Society's responsibility extends only to the provision of monitoring staff, not to the analysis of data, which is the responsibility of the Parks & Wildlife Management Authority. Secondly, such data is extremely sensitive, for obvious reasons, and our involvement in the project is conditional upon our assurance to PWMA that we will not publish either data or the results of the analysis.

Having said which, there are two possible outcomes, which will influence the nature of our future activities:

- The IPZ is performing well in terms of breeding and population increase, in which case we will merely continue our monitoring activities and general support to IPZ anti-poaching and other activities;
- The IPZ is underperforming, with a static or declining black rhino population.

If the latter appears to be the case, we will support a research programme designed to analyse the causes of any such under performance. Three possible causes have been postulated for such underperformance, if it exists:

- For much of the 1990s the Matusadona held one of the densest large predator populations in Africa. At last three black rhino calves are known to have been killed by predators in the IPZ.
- Elephant populations have been steadily increasing over the past decade, with possible destruction of preferred rhino habitat and competition for limited browse;
- There has been significant undetected poaching of black rhino.

The lion population - which exploded during the 1990s - has now declined in step with declines in buffalo and other prey species due to the loss of extensive grazing areas caused by rising lake levels (the so-called "Changa Cheryere" pride, for instance, has declined to three individuals from a peak of 24). If predator densities had a significant impact on rhino population growth, we should now expect an equally significant improvement in the performance of the black rhino population.

The impact of elephant on black rhino is a matter of some scientific debate, and is currently being researched in Hwange. However, the Matusadona reputedly supported at least 150 black rhino before the poaching "crunch", together with a certainly smaller, but nonetheless considerable, elephant population. It seems unlikely that the steady growth in elephant numbers will have made an immense difference, unless of course there is some "threshold" set of conditions that exerts a major influence on rhino survival rates.

Poaching is a different matter altogether. However, intensive ground coverage has revealed little evidence of black rhino poaching other than the known recent incidents.

There remains the possibility that the initial founder population was seriously overestimated - a suggestion which, we have to say, is not beyond the realms of possibility for a Park said to have 11 cheetah at a time - in the 1980s - when it actually had none at all.

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This is, however, all conjectural at this stage as we do not yet know how the IPZ has in fact performed. What we *do* know is that Warden Alexson Ndhlovu and his staff have taken a firm grip on the recent poaching problems, and that IPZ management is vastly better than it has been for some years. As this is the last remaining population of black rhino indigenous to the Zambezi Valley, this is encouraging; hence our continued support.

## **BIODIVERSITY: THE “FOUR CORNERS” PROJECT**

Our collaboration with the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and the Biodiversity Foundation for Africa (BFA) in connection with the “Four Corners” project continues. The Society is responsible for the dissemination of biodiversity information to planning and other developmental authorities and agencies who are in a position to influence biodiversity conservation within the project area.

Project Manager Sally Wynn has created a database of over 400 potential recipients for this information. Unlike many databases, this one is fully up to date, and each entry has been checked and doublechecked by telephone and email - a long, tedious but critically important task.

An introductory “Biodiversity Bulletin” was well received, and is now being followed by an initial information package containing details of the biodiversity work being carried out by the ZAMSOC/BFA partnership on AWF’s behalf. This work includes reviews of the major biological groups within the project area, including vegetation, plants, mammals, fish, butterflies, soil organisms, reptiles and amphibia.

## **ZAMBEZI BASIN INITIATIVE**

We have not updated members on our flagship “Zambezi Basin Biodiversity Initiative” (ZBI) for some time. This umbrella project - designed, ultimately, to acquire comprehensive information on Zambezi Basin biodiversity and identify priority conservation areas and projects - makes quiet but steady progress.

The ZBI framework was established with initial development funding from Flora & Fauna International, and initially sought to acquire funding of the order of US\$2million to further its objectives. This proved unrealistic, but several major projects undertaken by the ZAMSOC/BFA partnership have contributed to the programme’s progress. The IUCN Wetlands Project filled in the blanks on the biodiversity map for the Zambezi Delta and Barotseland Floodplains, while the Tete Province Biodiversity Evaluation did the same for the area surrounding Lake Cabora Bassa.

The AWF “Four Corners” project now enables us to make considerable progress towards the mapping and databasing of biodiversity across several important parts of the basin, centred on the Kazungula conjunction of Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe and including a significant part of each country.

## **COMMUNITY FOREST PROJECTS TAKE OFF**

Two of the Society’s community forest conservation projects are bearing fruit. The Sikalenge people of Binga District, custodians of three very valuable patches of *Guiburtia Conjugata* (False Mopane) woodland, have undergone training in bee-keeping funded by the Society, through the Global Environment Facility (GEF), have set up hives and are now producing honey.

The people of Gutsa and Kapembere in Muzarabani District, who are preparing a management plan for their Rikonde and Kapara Forests, recently welcomed their first eco-visitors - a group of environmental students from

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Italy , accompanied by their professor and the Zimbabwean Ambassador to Italy. They were treated to cultural dancing and tasted traditional foods, including some forest fruit products, prepared by the community with assistance from the University of Zimbabwe's Food Science Department. The Society facilitated the trip, during which community representatives were able to outline their forest conservation plan and seek possible assistance from the Italians through their contacts with the Zambezi Society.

## CHEETAH

Finally, for a "good news" tailpiece, the cheetah introduced into Zimbabwe's Matusadona National Park ten years ago have not only survived, but continue to breed: both adults and juveniles are regularly sighted by visitors to the Park.

In contrast to the conservation business in general, with the abrupt changes in direction and short, two- and three-year project timescales dictated by donor preferences, the Society has a strong preference for long-term projects and regular follow-up. We now plan to survey the Matusadona cheetah population to assess its current status and distribution, and thus to re-evaluate the success or otherwise of the introduction project. Netty Purchase, who gained her MSc with a thesis on the Matudadona cheetah some years ago, is devising a methodology for the survey.

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