

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY

BULLETIN

MARCH/APRIL 2004

BLACK RHINO

The first year of Society monitoring of the black rhinoceros population in the Matusadona Intensive Protection Zone has generated an excellent “first draft” of the numbers and distribution of animals within the Park.

As we have explained before, this project is intended to assist the management efforts of the Zimbabwean Parks and Wildlife Management Authority within the Matusadona, and we are not at liberty to divulge details, either of numbers or of the distribution of black rhino, for obvious reasons. We do, however, feel able to make the general observation that the Matusadona holds a significant number of animals, but not as many as might have been expected.

There are several possible reasons for this. One is the possibility of on-going rhino poaching over the several years during which there was little field protection and no monitoring within the Park. Competition with elephants for browse has also been suggested, but we are more inclined to propose calf predation as another possible reason. At least three calves are known to have been killed by predators, which means there could be numerous other, unknown casualties.

As is well known, populations of both predators and prey - notably lions and buffalo - rose steeply in the Matusadona when low lake levels, induced by the persistent droughts of the 1980s and 1990s, created vast additional reserves of grazing on the exposed shorelines. As lake levels rose again in recent years, this grazing was lost and populations of both predators and prey have crashed dramatically - but not before lions, in particular, learnt some novel hunting techniques. Lions have repeatedly been seen to attack and kill hippos and crocodiles, and it seems naïve to suppose that vulnerable rhino calves would have been exempt.

Meanwhile, Park management and anti-poaching activity has improved equally dramatically during the past year under the leadership of warden Eleckson Ndhlovu. Furthermore, the data produced by the Society’s monitoring is enabling the warden to focus his anti-poaching activities on vulnerable rhino groups; and the Society is also contributing to the payment for valuable intelligence concerning possible poaching incursions. Our money is on a significant improvement in recruitment to the Matusadona rhino population as predators decline and effective management deters further poaching.

Cheetah

A note about the Matusadona cheetah is in order under the same heading, as there are some similarities. Having survived for more than ten years under extreme competition from other predators, the cheetah population introduced by the Society in the early 1990s may also increase significantly.

As members know, the Society takes a long-term, ongoing approach to its projects and activities, and has periodically monitored the progress of the Matusadona cheetah through studies carried out by Colleen Zank and Netty Purchase. It is now time for a further study, and we are trying to source funds for Netty to undertake a predator project within the Park.

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CLIMATE CHANGE

Despite what George Bush may think, all the evidence now seems to point to the reality of global climate change. The experiences of the Inuit in recent years, the thinning of the Arctic ice sheets, and the rising incidence of extreme weather events all indicate that this change is no longer a vague future threat: it is quite possibly here already.

It is, of course, specious to look at what may be short-term fluctuations in climate and weather and extrapolate them into major phenomena, but even if no such evidence were to hand, the changes in atmospheric and oceanic chemistries already induced by rapidly rising levels of carbon dioxide and other contaminants by human activity dictate the employment of the "precautionary principle."

With respect, many NGOs in the region are focusing on the wrong thing. Local campaigns to reduce local emissions, albeit well-meaning, are unlikely to make a jot of difference in global terms. Such emissions pale into triviality when compared with those generated by the United States, Europe, China, Japan and other industrial giants. We can deplore the attitudes of many of these countries; we can advocate for change; but it makes sense to put the real money into what are sometimes called "coping strategies" - in essence, accepting the inevitable and devising ways of minimising its worst impacts. WWF is one agency that *has* been moving in this direction. It has produced possible scenarios for climate change in the region, and provided tentative, outline suggestions for ameliorating impacts.

We hope to contribute to the reduction of the impacts of possible future climate change within the Zambezi Basin in coming years, in close conjunction with agencies such as WWF who already have considerable experience in this field.

WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT TRAINING

The Society is delighted to have been able to send a further six Zimbabweans on the yearly two-week Wilderness Awareness and Management Courses held by the Wilderness Action Group at Lapalala Wilderness in South Africa in April/May.

All six candidates are key players in the future conservation of important Zambezi valley wilderness areas. They include the Wardens of the Matusadona and Mana Pools National Parks in Zimbabwe, two traditional leaders from the Muzarabani/Guruve communities; a district councillor and CAMPFIRE officer in Guruve District and the manager of a private tourism camp in the Mavuradona Wilderness, the only community-based wilderness area in Northern Zimbabwe.

We are grateful to the Wilderness Action Group, the Director of the Zambezi Society (UK), CIRAD (the French Government's International Co-operation Centre of Agronomic Research for Development) and to several Zimbabwean tour operators, including Natureways, Varden Safaris and Bushlife, who have assisted the Society in sponsoring these candidates.

Our past experience in sending candidates on these courses, (which are affiliated to the University of Natal) shows that participants return greatly inspired and fully understanding the principles and concepts of careful wilderness management and the need for conservation of wild values. The Society looks forward to the future contribution of these key individuals in building management teams to address the all-important issue of conserving the Zambezi's wilderness values in the public, communal and private sector.

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“FOUR CORNERS” BIODIVERSITY

The first phase of the USAID-funded “Four Corners” project, being implemented by the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), comes to an end in June 2004. As members know, the Zambezi Society and its partners, the Biodiversity Foundation for Africa (BFA), were given a subgrant by AWF to carry out biodiversity evaluation and interpretation within the “Four Corners” area.

Much of the work is now complete. The BFA have produced biological reviews across a wide range of topics including individual species, groups of species, animal movements and ecosystem processes, and the Zambezi Society is now interpreting these technical documents for a broad audience of decisionmakers within the project area.

A summary document will shortly be available from the Society, outlining the main findings of this work and underlining the advantages of a trans-frontier approach to conservation of this area. The study identifies key vegetation types within the area; nine areas of high biodiversity value; four key/determinant species and eight flagship species, and outlines the threats to the main habitat types and potential impacts on ecological processes.

COMMUNITY BASED CONSERVATION

The Society is seeking more funding to extend its biodiversity conservation work with communities in settled lands in the Zambezi valley districts of Binga, Guruve and Muzarabani, having come to the end of its UNDP Global Environment Facility Small Grant awarded in 2001. Considerable strides have been made in creating awareness in settled lands of the importance of sites of biological interest and in helping communities to develop strategies to conserve them. During the process, some interesting points have emerged:

- Communities believe that modern conservation practices are serving to disturb traditional conservation concepts based on myths and beliefs enforced by spirit mediums through the chiefs. They argue that biodiversity is not being as effectively protected as it used to be.
- Natural resource management is largely undertaken by married men, while women and other age groups play little active role
- Other stakeholders such as hotel owners and safari operators are not involved enough in community conservation practices

The Society’s future work intends to focus on integrating indigenous knowledge with sound science and to reinforce the capacity of local communities to start nature-friendly income-generating projects.

**A REMINDER TO ALL PAYING MEMBERS WHO HAVE NOT PAID THEIR
2003/2004 MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS – SINCE WE HAVE NOT RECEIVED YOUR PAYMENT,
THIS IS THE LAST BULLETIN YOU WILL BE RECEIVING AS WE ARE NOW REMOVING
YOUR CONTACT DETAILS FROM THIS MAILING LIST.
IF YOU WISH TO BE REINSTATED ON THE LIST, PLEASE SEND YOUR SUBSCRIPTION URGENTLY.
] (N.B.THIS DOES NOT APPLY TO LIFE AND HONORARY MEMBERS)**

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