

Conservation: Saving the Last of The Zimbabwean Rhino

Emergency efforts to protect the last of Zimbabwe's Southern rhino population are finally paying off.



They came in with machine guns and heavy artillery. Under the cover of darkness, the organised gang of criminals breached the border of the conservancy. They had been given inside tracking information and coordinates, and they knew exactly where each of them was. By the time the game scouts heard the rapid gunshots, it was too late. The large beasts had fallen, and their horns had been harvested by the poachers.

Working in the rhino anti-poaching unit is like working on the front line in the war against poaching. Last year during a period of heavy poaching, three poachers were shot and killed in an effort to save the rhinos. Brian Gurney is head of security in the rhino anti-poaching unit. He says: "Don't mistake these poachers for starving locals, 90% of rhino poaching is syndicated so they are run by high up officials from multiple countries. They are an armed gang with gunners, someone who is familiar with the area and gives inside information and someone who facilitates them. Generally, the facilitator is foreign and would be given weapons by a local."

During 2019 poachers shot 50 rhinos on the Buby Valley Conservancy. Brian Gurney says: "It was extremely catastrophic, we had probably more incursions than have ever happened before and more rhino being killed, it was a complete spike." This heavy poaching resulted in a steep decline in both the black and white rhino population. In order to combat this poaching, they increased their security with the rhino anti-poaching unit, and the Lowveld Rhino trust came in to help with tracking and emergency care. This month they have finally seen a clear population increase of 13.8% since the poaching last year. Buby Valley Conservancy is now estimated to have the 4th highest black rhino population in the world.

Natasha Anderson, an environmental scientist and the monitoring coordinator of the Lowveld Rhino Trust says: "Rhino poaching is an organised crime operation, they come in with high calibre automatic weapons. They are the same ones who finished off the rhino in the North of Zimbabwe and now they are coming for us in the South."

According to National Geographic the average black rhino horn is worth more than \$400,000 US dollars in China, Vietnam and other East Asian countries that believe it has healing and aphrodisiac qualities. The poachers are therefore paid well by the syndicates that run them. The average poacher could be paid \$5000 each, per kilogram of rhino horn. This is a large amount of money compared to what the average Zimbabwean earns which is estimated to be less than \$3.00 per day. It is therefore unsurprising that of the three rhino poachers killed on Buby Valley Conservancy last year, two of them were ex rangers who had worked there before.

Matthew Wijers, senior wildlife researcher and zoologist says: "Working on conservation in Zimbabwe is not easy. The political and economic situation in the country makes people very desperate, it also makes it hard to plan and initiate conservation projects."

Natasha Anderson explains: "It is a very intense job because I know how difficult the times can be. After the poaching incidents last year my team had to organise the treatment and sheltering of any hurt rhino. Sadly, you know, we did have a lot of carcasses to deal with. So, I will work on what we can get from a carcass, its identity and what that could mean for the rest of the population. If we discover the carcass of an adult cow, then where is her calf? If it's too small it needs to be rescued and not left out with the lions, it could also still be suckling so we need to rear it."

According to the International Rhino Foundation, after the poaching in 2019 at Buby Valley Conservancy, 81 rhino were immobilized for medical or conservation purposes. Of that rhino, 29 were ear notched for identification purposes, 50 were dehorned for their safety and 21 were fitted with horn transmitters. Natasha explains: "It is anxiety-ridden because you have to make difficult decisions with imperfect information. It is our nature to think we need to do something, but often the rhino is better off left to heal on its own."

However, this year the Conservancy has seen a decrease in poaching. Matthew Wijers says: "The poaching has decreased this year, probably due to the COVID restrictions. The poachers can't travel as freely as they did before." Although COVID-19 travel restrictions and border closures may be playing a role in the decrease of poaching in the area, the Lowveld Rhino Trust and anti-poaching unit have also put in more strict measures to protect the rhino.

Brian Gurney insists: "It has absolutely zero to do with COVID. The poaching had been reduced well before we were affected by COVID. It is more to do with improved security." They are training hard and are on high alert at all times for anything that is out of the ordinary such as "spoor left by armed cavalry poachers who wear five to six layers of socks over their shoes to

disguise their footprints”, says Brian. Once spotting prints they can deploy an armed anti-poaching unit, a dog tracking team and 50-60 scouts on the floor within half an hour.

They hope to see continued improvement in the population in the future, and they look forward to a time when the new calves in the conservancy have calves themselves. Natasha fondly describes the conservancy as a, “rescue island” for rhinos. She hopes that they can continue to keep them safe in the future with improved technology to help monitor and protect them more efficiently.