



GENERAL

Thanks to everyone who has sent in kind remarks on the newsletter. I must admit it was never supposed to get to this level – it started out as a small thank you note to donors so they could see where their donations were being utilized, but suddenly developed into a newsletter!

It looks like the rainy season is over, and the first slight chill of winter in the air. The bush is changing colour, with the browns coming out. The grass cover is dense, so fire preparations are already underway, and we can expect some fierce fires this year. The natural pans out in the bush are drying up and the game beginning to head towards the more permanent water supplies.

The Zambezi continued to rise steadily, and then peaked on 17th April . It was a fairly normal flood season – probably on a par with 2011 flood levels.

Some good news is that the Friends of Hwange, through the support of WET (the Wildlife Environmental Trust) have moved a drilling rig into Hwange National Park and are currently drilling new boreholes. Most boreholes are being drilled at current pumped locations, with the idea of establishing a borehole on solar power, with a secondary borehole on diesel power as a backup for when seasonal demand increases to where the solar cannot cope. This is a great idea, and will bring in big cost savings on diesel and maintenance during the year. Bhejane Trust is liasing with FOH on more boreholes in the Sinamatella region, which hopefully will happen later in the year.

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ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK



Photos from a local operator taken on early morning game drive in the Chamabonda.

Animals seen were:

Young leopard

Hyena – several

Side Striped jackal with a young porcupine carcass

Pride of 5 lions

Plus sable, eland and zebra were seen.





We have been doing ongoing maintenance work in the field – the old firebreaks that cross the park have been opened up – they have not been used for many years. Bush clearing of *Terminalia* around Thomsons pan was undertaken, plus a general tidying up of growth at the solar unit sites and at No 3 base.

The new solar pump unit for No1 was acquired. A frame was made up and the panels and pump imported. This was all assembled at No 1.



Erecting the solar panel frame at No 1

However, we discovered a problem when putting down the pump – when Management Unit from Umtshibi was here for the release of wildebeest, etc, they somehow dropped the pump and rods into the hole and did not bother to fish them out. This means we only have two meters of water – the borehole has gone from 32m to 15m deep!

We are test pumping with the solar pump to see if it will produce enough water, and, if not, will try and make a plan to fish the pipes out, or if it comes to the worst, to drill a new borehole.



One issue we are facing is the sudden increase in elephant population in the Chamabonda – they are sucking the water troughs dry at all three water points every evening and the first couple of hours of daylight pumping are just to replenish the troughs!

Bream back in the Chamabonda!

When one reads the old wardens reports on the Chambonda, they talk about fishing for bream in the vlei. This seems hard to imagine today!! However, when you look at the photos of old (following) you can see how this was.

The good news is that bream are now back in the Chamabonda! Ian du Preez of Nakavango Estates organized to catch a lot and transported them in drums, and were then all released into No 3. Big thanks to Ian and his crew. I will monitor how they get on. Warning – fishing at the pan strictly verboten!!! It is hoped the fish will clean up the pan, and might attract fish eating water birds



Vernon Booth, ex Parks Ecologist at Matetsi, has sent some fantastic aerial photos of the Chamabonda Vlei in 1980, when it was a lot wetter!!



No 1 Pan- pump house in bottom right. Buffalo herd in background.



No 1 Pan – note herd of buffalo coming to drink



Looking down the vlei towards No 3 – pools of water in the background



Looking up the vlei towards Thomsons Pan (seen in the center of the picture)



AWARDS APPEAL

A big thank you to all who responded to the appeal for donations to reward the rangers who excelled in their duties in taking on the armed Zambian poachers. A big thanks to (in no particular order):

Ian & Sue Thomson	Victoria Falls Safari Lodge (plus caps)
Malcolm Pringle-Wood	Bud Cockcroft
Sue Archer	Shane White
Keith Vincent	Ketayi Zifudzi

SATIB Insurance Brokers of South Africa and Zimbabwe, plus Friends and supporters of Zim Parks – this included Brian Courtney, Julian Freimond, Des Stephens, Anthony Courtney, Deborah Davis and Andrew Loveridge.

Thanks also to Nicholas Duncan and the SAVE The African Rhino Foundation for certificates to be issued to the rangers.

There are more names who have pledged but not yet paid up – I will be chasing!!

A date has not yet been set for an awards ceremony, as the Area Manager, Edmore Ngosi, has gone on a business trip to Brazil. (congratulations to Edmore on this recognition). When Edmore gets his feet back on the ground, we will set a date.

POACHING

Another successful contact with armed Zambians occurred on 12th April in Sijarira Forest Area, between a combined unit of Forestry, National Parks and Police. They took on a group of four Zambians at night, and a firefight ensued with the end result of one Zambian killed and one captured – unfortunately looks like the main man with the weapon got away! Well done to all concerned!

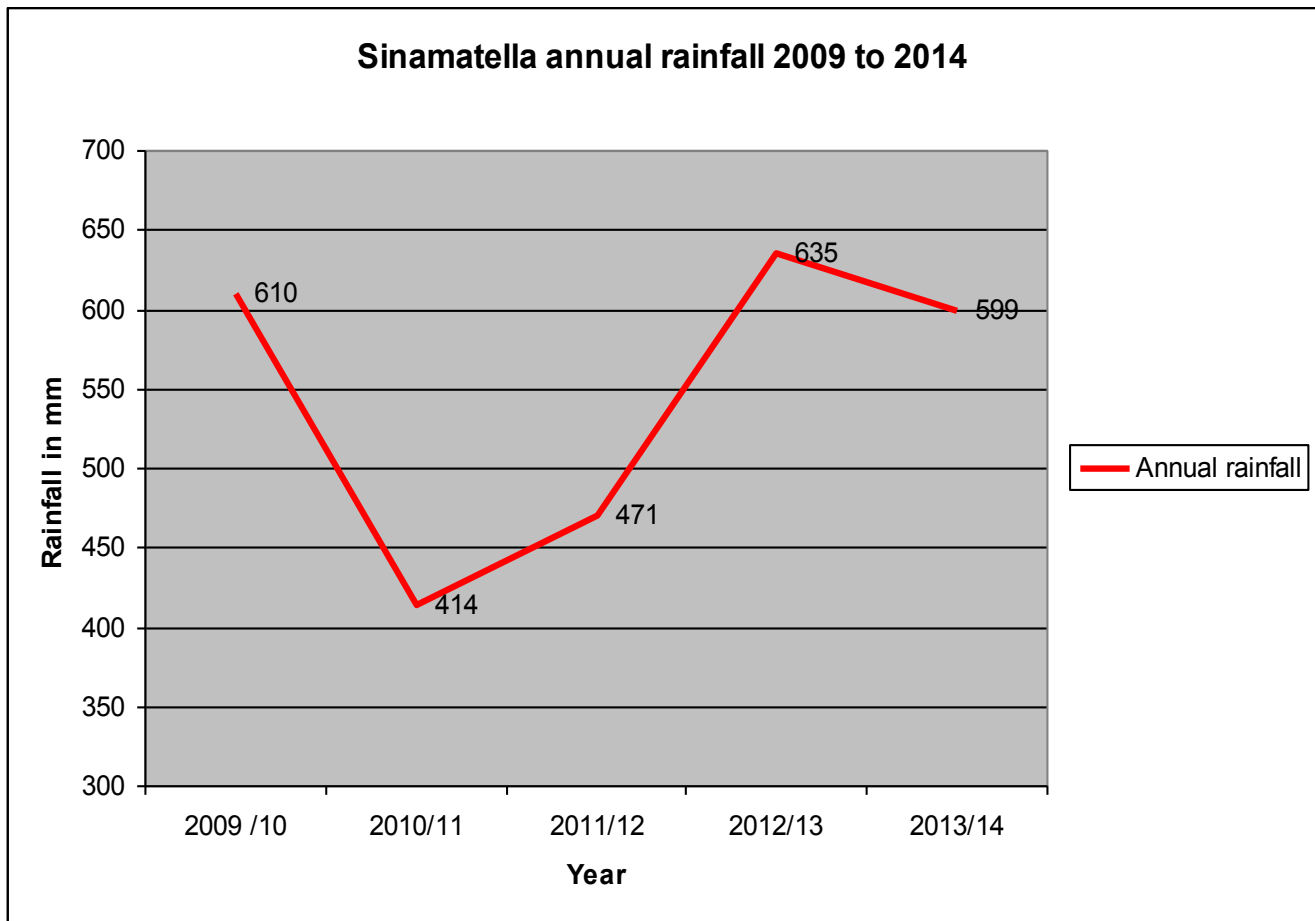
Acting on information, Parks investigation Unit and the Police raided a village near the Falls and recovered a pair of tusks, which a local was trying to sell. The fellow was promptly sentenced to nine years - the no tolerance policy which is a welcome relief from previous slaps on the wrist.

Unfortunately, the Zambian poaching groups are still crossing into Zimbabwe and Botswana, heavily armed and chasing primarily elephant. They seem to enjoy high up political protection in Zambia, as it appears the Zambian authorities are not acting against these gangs, and even more so not acting against the suppliers/buyers, despite having all the required information.

SINAMATELLA

Report by Stephen Long

My suggestion, back in March, that the rainy season had come to an early close was (of course) as accurate as most weather forecasts and we had 22mm of rain in April. That gives us a total of 599mm for the season.



In spite of that rainfall, the change of season has been very noticeable. Apart from the obvious drying out of the grass, we have also seen the arrival of part of the buffalo herd that will spend much of the winter along the Sinamatella and Mbala rivers, the Palearctic migratory birds have departed and Crowned Hornbills, Pied Crows and Golden Orioles, all of which are much more common or perhaps more obvious in the dry season have arrived. The game viewing has improved a little but there is still a great deal of long grass and sights such as this lion that sat nicely out in the open at Mandavu are few and far between.



For the second year running there has been a season-end plague of stink bugs. It hasn't been quite as bad as last year (yet) but even so there are thousands of them searching for places to hibernate, both in and out of the house and their smell is everywhere.

BIRDING

Back in February last year we started taking part in the Southern Africa Bird Atlas Project and, with the encouragement of the Parks Ecologist at Sinamatella, we involved a number of the rangers as well. In April this year the 100th Atlas card for the Sinamatella area was completed and we now have a reliable team of atlasers amongst the rangers. In fact, data comes in faster than I am able to deal with it and I have a backlog of cards waiting to be submitted to the project – something I would not have imagined when we started.

ROADS

Visitors to Sinamatella often complain about the state of the roads – with some justification as lack of equipment and funding has severely cut road maintenance in recent years. This year the Parks Authority has found the funding needed to get the Sinamatella road grader back in working order and to hire contract workers for a few months to do some road repairs. So far the road from Mbala gate to Sinamatella has been graded and some of the bush has been cut back and a team of rangers has cut back overhanging bush along the Sinamatella River Drive and bypassed the bridge that was recently destroyed by rain. The new river crossing is not for the fainthearted and certainly isn't good for anything but a 4x4.

There is an obvious need for a great deal more road work around the area and I'm afraid that the days of roads suitable for ordinary road-cars will not be back in a hurry but any improvement is a bonus.



RHINO

With the arrival of our 'new' Land Rover in March, we were able to introduce, for a while at least, a mobile monitoring team to search for our elusive rhino. We travelled to quite a number of outlying places during the month but the closest we got to any rhino was finding two or three-day old spoor. There is still far too much grass in most places for spoor to be easily visible and there is so much water around that the animals, of all species, are still able to move more or less anywhere. However, at the start of April there were few reports of rhino movements from rangers on patrol but towards month end many more reports were received so we are confident we can start bumping up the total of 'visuals' very soon.

During April there were more poaching scares from the Zambezi and Robins areas and it has become clear that the 'front line' in the poaching war has moved away from Sinamatella and is now focussed on the safer (from the poachers' point of view) places along the Botswana and Zambian borders where elephants are a cost-effective alternative to rhino. At first sight that sounds like fairly good news but in fact it is creating a manpower problem as anti-poaching at Sinamatella can by no means be safely reduced but at the same time more trained manpower is needed elsewhere.

VEHICLES

Back to the doom and gloom this month! In the March newsletter I suggested that our “new” Land Rover would inevitably give us troubles and unfortunately that was one prediction that I got absolutely right. Early in April we had problems with wheel bearings – which were easily solved, a shock absorber mounting broke off - also fairly easy to solve but the injector pump went wrong and that wasn't at all easy to solve. We eventually had to send the vehicle to Victoria Falls for repair and at the end of the month it was still there, waiting for a new pump. At the same time, our Land Cruiser started complaining that it needed some care. I took it to Bulawayo for spares but I was so nervous of one tie-rod end in particular that I took a chance on no-one at any of the many road blocks being alert and tied it with rope as a back-up. Not really necessary as it turned out but it stopped me worrying on the journey to town. The worst problem of all though is tyres. Between the 3rd of February and the 23rd of April we repaired an average of one puncture every two days mainly because of worn tyres and both the Cruiser and the Defender are in desperate need. We can not continue as we are for much longer – these are some of the things we are currently driving on.....



That they have lasted so long is a tribute to the manufacturer – but it does make life difficult sometimes!!

COMMENT

In early April, the American Government announced a ban on sport hunted ivory out of Zimbabwe to the States. This is extremely unfortunate, as in general Zimbabwe's elephants are not under threat, and the repercussions of this ban will be felt through loss of revenue to a struggling National Parks Authority, and to communities which are affected by elephants.

One communal area bordering Hwange National Park has a hunting arrangement with two safari companies on hunting in their area. This is virtually only elephant hunting, as there are no other animals left. One of these companies has a quota of forty bulls, and pumps over \$500,000 into the impoverished community – the company monitors the money to make sure it does not get misappropriated! Taking away the hunting value will not save these elephants – they are only bulls in these areas and generally resort to crop raiding – but the elephants are now reduced to nuisance value and will be shot for meat only. It might also encourage the illegal ivory trade as desperate villagers try to replace the lost revenue stream from the hunting. Conservation cooperation with the community will disappear – it is a lose/lose situation all round!

However, one must look at what could have prompted this decision by the Fish and Wildlife Department.

1) Are elephant populations under threat in Zimbabwe? Generally not at all – the population in Hwange is growing, and the principle threat to this population is stress and poverty in times of drought, as was seen in 2012. Despite wild claims to the contrary, the Presidential herd in the Sikumi Forest area is in no way threatened. Poaching in north Matabeleland is insignificant. However, the Binga/Chizarira/Chirisa/Matusadona areas are a hot bed of poaching, and the elephants are being hammered here. The rest of the country seems to be stable with the elephant populations. The excess bulls end up in communal areas where they are hunted, with no detriment to the population. There was also a quote by the USFW on 300 elephants poisoned, whereas there were only about 130, and this number is insignificant in the context of population numbers, and retribution was swift to the perpetrators.

Thus there does not appear to be any valid reason here

2) No Meaningful Census figures – it has been many years since any proper survey/audit of wildlife populations on Parks land has been carried out. Thus all figures produced on populations are pure guesswork, with no scientific back up. There is an urgent need for a proper assessment of our wildlife assets in Zimbabwe, to use as a basis for future utilization. From this point of view, The USFW have some grounds to argue on.

2) Poor policies by Parks – there are two areas where Parks have enacted poor policies in their elephant program:

a) Quota setting – quotas for safari areas for years now have been set on financial grounds rather than ecological grounds – those with knowledge of some of the safari areas and game populations therein knew the allocated offtake was totally unsustainable and would have long term repercussions . This has resulted in depletion of trophy quality in the safari areas, and has finally caught up with Parks in areas such as Chirisa and Chete where the populations have been hammered to the extent that the areas were not even bid for in the last auction. Trophy elephant bulls and buffalo in particular have had quotas set way above sustainable levels.

b) Ration hunting – this has been disastrous for the reputation and integrity of Parks, and opened the door to corruption and mismanagement. We saw the appearance of briefcase safari operators tied in to very dodgy South Africans, who took full advantage of the opportunity for corruption. One photographic unit apparently had over 40 buffalo shot on a quota of six, plus sable, zebra etc taken off under so called ration hunts. The practice of quota transferring has emerged, with animals shot in the Park are allocated to outside farms where generally there is not a lot left on the land – one so called safari operator has been caught hunting illegally and poaching several times, with the aid of a Parks official who issues TR2's, but every time he uses political influence and bribes to get away with it, and Parks re-issue his licence!

This abuse and corruption would give the USFW a very good excuse to clamp down on all, let alone elephant, trophies out of Zimbabwe. Thus I think the point is that National Parks must tidy up their act and clamp down on corruption, especially amongst their own staff, if they are to retain any credibility.

CONDOLENCES

We offer our deepest sympathies and condolences to the families of :

Mark Ellement – ex National Parks and Forestry Wildlife Unit. Professional Hunter of note, and a great fisherman! A brave fight against cancer

Fred Duckworth – Ex National Parks – last station was Sinamatella – in Holland, aged 80

Judy Dunjey – Ex National Parks – stationed at Main Camp in the 80's. A talented artist. To cancer

Winn Andrews – an old Victoria Falls resident, peacefully in Victoria Falls at the age of 96. Another ex Parks employee.

GRATEFUL THANKS

We wish to thank all those who continue to support our efforts.

A very special thanks to Michel Buenerd and Le Pic Vert of France for the new solar unit for Sinamatella – his third unit donated now!!! Also to John Brebner of WEZ for the help in importing the unit

Thanks to all the National Parks staff for their continuing support.

NOTE I will be happy to put sponsors logos on this page if they so wish. If they send me jpeg of the logo I will incorporate it. I will revising this last (donor) page

Ian & Sue Thomson

Pieter & Anthea Erasmus

Michel Buenerd & Le Pic Vert

Patrick Jacuemin

Nicholas Duncan & the SAVE the African Rhino Foundation

Barbara Ball and Clidder Mining

Makomo Mine

Ram Petroleum

Redan Petroleum

