



World Wildlife Day

On the 3rd March, Stephen and I attended the World Wildlife Day, hosted by National Parks at Main Camp. Hats off to Parks!! It was a very well organized and run function, with guest speakers including the local chiefs and dignitaries, plus the Hon Minister Saviour Kasukuwere. I was extremely impressed with the turnout of locals from the surrounding communal areas – there must have been a thousand plus there. These are the very people that conservation needs to be targeted at, and the speeches were primarily aimed at the segment of the audience. There was a good cross section of operators, Parks staff, NGO's, locals et al .- a good day for interaction of all sectors of the industry.



Hon Minister Kasukuwere giving his speech on World Wildlife day, Hwange Main Camp

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Three stalwarts of National Parks – Area Managers Midwel Capesa (Robins), Edmore Ngosi (Zambezi, Victoria Falls) and Moses Gomwe (Sinamatella) – at World Wildlife Day

Rhino Policy Meeting

Bhejane Trust attended a two day National Rhino Policy workshop in Harare. Present were representatives of Parks and of organizations involved in the conservation of rhino in Zimbabwe. The overall current status of rhino in Zimbabwe was presented, and generally those rhino on the conservancies are either holding their own increasing in numbers, whereas on Parks estates they are either holding their own or are in trouble.

KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) as a means of monitoring rhino populations and their performances, were discussed at length and some great work has been done by the Lowveld Rhino Trust on the monitoring the large populations in the conservancies. The parameters laid out are very effective on large area/large population situations, but I am not sure how effective they may be when applied to small (4-5 animals) populations. However, they are a big step forward, providing valuable information.

All entities involved in protecting individual rhino populations put forward their management/conservation plans for the coming year – some were good, some rather impractical. I must admit I did not agree with some plans eg ear notching rhinos for identification purposes out of a population of four or five which are monitored every day! I also do not believe, as I have previously stated, that there is value in dehorning, as any serious poacher knows there is a lot of horn left behind on the animals (Matopos rhino poached days after de-horning for the remaining horn stubs!), but I do take the point that in areas like Midlands it could have psychological value to deter amateur poachers though.

Unfortunately, I left the meeting with a feeling of deja vu, and whether any of it equates to real action remains to be seen. The plight of the rhino is dire and we cannot afford to prevaricate – urgent action is needed in some areas, especially some Parks areas, and National Parks should be in the forefront!!

Poaching, Training

Congratulations to three dedicated and brave rangers from Robins.Camp, who on the 5th March, heard shots fired near to where they were on patrol. They followed up and found an elephant bull which had just been shot, with the ivory removed. They then tracked the poaching gang responsible, catching up with them in thick bush, and initiating a contact at close range. They wounded and captured one poacher, and saw blood spoor from others before the gang crossed the nearby border into Botswana. Information from the wounded poacher indicated a group of twelve had crossed over from Zambia into the Zambezi National Park, and had walked to Robins (6 days). This was the first elephant they had shot on this trip, and they had rations for a prolonged stay, which they intended to do (10 of the group were porters) They had dropped all their rations and kit in fleeing (incidentally the elephant bull had one tusk of 88lbs, and the other 62 lbs)

News has since filtered back that 8 of the gang have made it back to Zambia – according to sources, they buried one fellow in the Park, another died (not sure what they did with the body) and the “boss” with the heavy rifle ran off badly injured and has not been seen since!!

Well done again to Lovison, Enock and and Majele (the rangers) on dedicated work, and to Midwell (the Area Manager) and his crew!



Zambian poacher wounded in contact with Robins game scouts



*Ivory and kit (including 100kg mealie meal) recovered
from the Zambian gang.*



The elephant bull killed by the Zambians (88 and 62lbs ivory recovered)

On top of this Robins incident, came another very successful follow up and contact with a gang of Zambian poachers in the Zambezi National Park. On the 21st March, three Forestry rangers in the Panda Masuie Forest picked up the tracks of a gang of Zambian elephant poachers. They followed them to the Parks boundary, where the Forestry rangers were joined by three scouts from the Zambezi Camp, led by Senior Ranger Simon Muchibaya . This team continued to track the Zambians through towards the Zambezi River – the Zambians were obviously heading back to home territory.

The following day, the combined Forestry/Parks team caught up with the Zambians (a group of 18, of which 16 were porters) in the Siamunungu area of the Park, and a opened up on an armed poacher they spotted. In the ensuing melee, the main poacher was killed and his weapon recovered, while a porter was wounded and captured, and the rest of the gang fled, leaving everything behind. The deceased poacher was a gang kingpin with a long history of poaching elephant A total of 37 tusks were recovered with a total weight of 692kg ie an average of 18,7kg per tusk (or 41lbs). The Zambians are only targeting the bulls with larger tusks

This was a great effort by Senior Ranger S Muchibaya, Rangers B Mpunzi , and E Sibanda, and Forestry Rangers F Mutsvangwa, F Chiremba, and M Mutshongwe and plans are afoot to reward them by stakeholders in Victoria Falls, as a token of appreciation..



*Ivory recovered from the Zambian poachers after the contact at
Siaminungu, Zambezi National Park.*

These above incidents highlight the value of trained, motivated staff, There have been at least nine gangs of Zambians crossing into Zimbabwe along the upper Zambezi river frontage this year. The first line of defence along the river has been unsuccessful in intercepting any, or even detecting any, due mainly that the rangers are not trained in the requirements of anti-poaching operations of this nature, are not properly equipped, and have been years without any form of re-training. The Area Manager, Edmore Ngosi, is well aware of the problems and is doing everything possible to manage the situation, but does not have the trained staff capability under him, with a couple of exceptions. Training, or re-training, of the rangers has been offered, to get them to the professional level and standard required to take on the armed Zambians, and we are working on getting this training program instituted. Urgent action is needed now, and the opportunity has been presented to assist in this war on the poachers!

Congratulations also due to National Parks Investigation team, based in Hwange, and who are in the forefront of the war on poaching and other illegal activities. They do a great job under often difficult circumstance, and deserve recognition for their unstinting efforts.

A big thanks to Nicholas Duncan and the SAVE the African Rhino Foundation for the support they give by way of rewards in the fight against poaching. Their continued support has been invaluable.

These incursions by Zambian poachers into Zimbabwe illustrate two major problems in our northern neighbour

One is that this country, once so abundant in wildlife, has decimated its game populations to the extent that the Zambians are now prepared to risk their lives poaching in Zimbabwe.

The second point illustrated is the attitude of the Zambians – there seems to be little political willpower to counter the high levels of poaching activities, both in and out of the country. In Zambia it seems bushmeat is considered every man's right, and the killing of wildlife of no real consequence – the Zambians have even complained to the Zimbabweans about the killing of Zambian poachers!!.

The cross border poaching currently experienced along the upper Zambezi could be eliminated with a bit of cooperation from the Zambian authorities, as the poachers river crossing points are known, the mekoro polers who ferry the poachers over the river are known, the villages from where the porters come from are known, the poachers are known and there is good information on who at least one of the sponsors/ivory buyers is – not too difficult a case for a police force to crack!!

It will be interesting to see if the Zambian authorities will take any action against the person in Lusaka who is sponsoring the poaching gangs and buying the ivory!

Poisoned Vultures

A worrying development is a report from Botswana of dead vultures and eagles from an elephant carcass in the Panda Matenga area – where the Zambian elephant poachers have been operating! The bodies of the dead birds have been sent to Gaborone for further investigations. The question arises whether the Zambians are poisoning the carcasses of the elephant they poach to eliminate the vultures, as these birds give away the position of any carcasses, and thus draw attention to their illegal activity.

I will report on any follow up to this issue.

Appeal

I circulated this appeal on email (and thanks to those who have already responded).

Hi All,

The Forestry Commission and Zambezi Park rangers have recently had great success in eliminating a key Zambian poacher and recovering 37 tusks. This is following on a very successful follow up in Robins with a Zambian captured and we have reason to believe another key poacher was taken out. Parks are organising a reward/presentation ceremony for the rangers involved, to which locals will be invited. The SAVE the African Rhino Foundation of Australia has already offered some reward money, but i feel this is an opportunity for the people of Victoria Falls to show their appreciation by donating towards the rewards. I am only looking for small donations (+/- \$20) at a time, but more if you feel like it! This would be presented to the rangers involved at the awards ceremony.

Anyone who would like to donate can contact me by email and I can arrange collection Note : this appeal will also come through Friends of Victoria Falls.

On a separate issue, I am looking for a braai grill 70 x 80 cm for the braai at No 3 in the Chamabonda. And offers?? Plus 5 x 2 m of conveyor belting for the floor of the hide (Barbara Ball has already donated 5m)

Regards

Trevor

Bank details for anyone wishing to donate (Please notify me so I can follow up – on email tlanezim@gmail.com)

Bhejane Trust,
Kingdom Bank,
Kingdom Building,
Victoria Falls.

Branch Code : 12114Swift : KFISZWHAXXX

Account No : 35446036

You can also phone me on 0777057024 and I will arrange to collect.

General

Rainfall in Victoria Falls - I recorded a total rainfall of 58mm in February, and then on the 3rd March, we had 59mm in one day! Total rainfall for March in the Falls was 167mm (6,5inches for the older generations!)

The Zambezi River has been rising slowly but steadily, and the flow has picked up. The elephants are also starting to come back into town – it seems every year when the river floods, the elephants move into town – could be that the fast water discourages them from the islands they normally inhabit, plus these islands go under water. These elephants are generally bulls, and are a wonderful tourist attraction, but the downside is the danger they represent to locals – there have been a couple of very unfortunate incidents in the last couple of years. One solution will be to fence off the Park from Mkosana township area as this is the principle conflict area – this is effectively only three kilometers of fencing.

Zambezi National Park

This month, Mike Karasellos mowed all the roads in the Chamabonda Vlei, This has made travelling in the vlei more pleasant – not filled with grass seeds!!

The Sable have dropped their calves – the grass is so long we cannot assess yet what the calf drop has been like.

The solar pump unit for No 1 pan has been ordered, and should be installed in April – we are waiting delivery.

Bhejane Trust plans for the Chamabonda section of the Zambezi National Park this year include :

- 1) to install the new solar pump on No 1
- 2) to purchase a solar unit for Nyathi Pan (where we drilled a borehole last year), and install it. Piping has been donated by the Victoria Falls Truck Stop, and Kiggen Builders have offered to build the drinking trough
- 3) To re-route and repair the road between the entrance gate and No 1 where it crosses sidagga areas, to make the road all weather.
- 4) to put in a dam wall on the Chamabonda River near the seep towards the gate, which will give permanent year round water.
- 5) We will continue to work with Parks on fire protection, mowing and burning programs, water point maintenance, etc
- 6) To raise funding for equipment for Parks patrol rangers, once they have undergone a training program (which we have organized in conjunction with IAPF)

The Recreation of a Pan – Thomsons Pan

- watch this space as the pan develops over the year!!





This pan is solar powered – free water! From the 20st January to 6th April, a total of 75 days, the unit has pumped 1,684,000l – an average of 22,453 l per day(there were many overcast / rainy days). The elephant in particular are opening up (mud bath developing behind the main pan) and forming the pan, and much of the water has gone into resealing the base. This used to be a prime pan years ago and will get back to it's former status.

SINAMATELLA

Report by Stephen Long

WATER

Just 50mm of rain fell at Sinamatella in March – and 45mm of that fell in the first two days, treating us to some wonderful early morning mists which (as usual) Sue couldn't resist photographing.

Sinamatella, 4 March 2014.



Mandavu dam continued to spill for a couple of weeks, which is great for all the water birds, the crocs and the fish but I suspect that, with half of their rock outcrop under water, the well-known dassies at the picnic site are less happy.



On the 18th we took a trip out to Inyantue via Shumba to assess the water situation and made the following estimates:

Mandavu: 100% and spilling

Masuma Dam: 100% but not spilling.

Masuma top pan: 80%

Shumba: 90%

Tshompani Dam: 50 – 60 %

Tshompani/Tendele Pan group: 100%+

Inyantue Dam: 80%

I have never seen so much water in Inyantue and Tshompani Dams and, being reasonably deep, Tshompani in particular holds a lot of water at the moment.



Part of Tshompani Dam, 18 March

The pans between Tshompani and Inyantue were so full they had flooded over the road for long stretches making the driving pretty difficult. You know you are in trouble when there are sedges growing in the road and ducks fly up from under the wheels!



The Shumba to Inyantue road at Tendele Pan.

VEHICLES

I was gloomy about the vehicle situation last month but in March things improved. A new diff for the Parks Cruiser was supplied from Regional Office, putting that vehicle back on the road after several months out. It still doesn't have four-wheel drive but nevertheless makes a valuable addition to the Sinamatella fleet.

On the 11th I attended the National rhino meeting in Harare and after the meeting received a Land Rover Defender for Bhejane Trust from Nicholas Duncan of the SAVE African Rhino Foundation. The vehicle is not new and will no doubt give us occasional problems (it is a Land Rover after all) but it takes a lot of pressure off our Land Cruiser and has allowed us to re-introduce a mobile call-sign, concentrating on Rhino monitoring.



RHINO

On the 18th, Rangers located a rhino carcass in the Deka Safari area. It was at least four months old and completely scattered by scavengers with many bones under water in a small pan and it took some hours of searching over two days to find most of the bones and both of the horns. No obvious cause of death could be seen – none of the bones showed bullet damage and the fact that the horns were still there suggests poachers weren't responsible. The carcass was eventually identified as belonging to a young male – some distance from his normal home range so perhaps he was killed by a rival. We will probably never know but it is a sad loss.

The front horn, as it was eventually found



Late in the month poachers were detected coming into the Park. They were probably looking for Elephants but could easily have been after rhino so a screen of rangers was deployed, including our mobile call-sign, to look for them. None of our rangers saw any sign of them entering Sinamatella sector so perhaps they went elsewhere. We hope so.

Comment

The Minister of Environment, Water and Climate, the Hon Saviour Kasukuwere, accompanied by the Regional Manager (Arthur Musakwa) and the Area Manager (Edmore Ngosi), toured the Zambezi National Park this month, and had a good look at the Chamabonda Vlei (they saw wild dogs and leopard). The minister was able to see and assess for himself the situation on the ground in the Park– congratulations to Min Kasukuwere on this initiative, as this high level of interest in the operation of a park has not happened for many a year!

The Minister has mooted the idea of regional boards to assist the Parks Board (yet to be announced). Lets hope that this comes to fruition as this is a great idea (suggest they be voluntary from the point of view of board meeting fee's) and would go a long way to alleviate the problems faced by a Harare based board making poor decisions due to lack of understanding, which have proved in some cases to be detrimental to the area and stakeholders. We have faced this problem in the Victoria Falls and Hwange regions, and a regional board would ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their own areas – something that has been sorely neglected in the past!

The Hon Minister has also stated his opposition to the so-called ration hunts that have proved to be such a cancer in Parks. This so-called ration hunting attracted local briefcase safari operators tied in with the some of the worst of South African operators. This hunting has led to corruption in Parks, bad publicity and a bad reputation for Parks, conflict with tour operators and has effectively ruled out any chance of outside donor support. Parks argument for the ration hunts is on purely financial grounds, but this is hypocritical if Parks then arrest persons for poaching for the self same reason! The practice of setting hunting quotas on financial rather than biological parameters has now had a repercussion, with areas like Chirisa and Chete so depleted in trophy quality, combined with the reduction of game though poaching, that these once prime areas did not even meet the prescribed minimum bids when recently on auction.

Condolences

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

Chief Mvutu who died unexpectedly. A much respected statesman whose support for wildlife conservation will be missed.

Glenn Maroney, from Zambezi Helicopter Company, unexpectedly of a brain aneurism at a young age. His always cheerful assistance when aerial support required, a sad loss to the Vic Falls community.

Russell Caldecott – the “Wheelchair Warrior” from Ultimate Lodge – from cancer at a young age. A wildlife campaigner.

Grateful Thanks

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

A very special thanks to Michel Beunerd 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

Pieter & Anthea Erasmus

Michel Beunerd & Le Pic Vert

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