



Protected: white rhino

By Sue Watt

RETURN OF THE RHINOS

A small sanctuary in Zimbabwe is providing a haven for white rhinos – and pioneering a new model of community-based eco-tourism

It

was a long and arduous journey that finally brought Thuza and Kusasa home. Two weeks ago, we had driven 800km through the night across Zimbabwe, from Malilangwe in the southeast to Hwange in the northwest. As our convoy approached its final destination, crowds lined the route, school children in pristine uniforms waved their flags, and local VIPs waited in safari Land Cruisers in the midday heat, all excited and eager to see their new neighbours.

Eventually, the two boys walked out of their crates and into their boma within the Imvelo Ngamo Wildlife Sanctuary, oblivious to the historic steps they were taking. Not only were they the first white rhinos in the Hwange area for nearly 20 years, but they were the first in the country to live on communal land, with scouts from local villages trained to British military standards as their protectors. Something of an unsung hero in conservation, Zimbabwe has the fourth-highest rhino population in Africa, with more than 1000 in national parks or private reserves. But this small sanctuary occupying 260ha is breaking new ground as the pilot project of the Community Rhino Conservation Initiative.

The CRCI is the dreamchild of Mark Butcher (known as Butch), MD of local operator Imvelo Safari Lodges and a former ranger in Hwange National Park. “In the ’80s, white rhinos were part of the scenery on the sand country of southern Hwange,” he says. “The northern area still has a few black rhinos. But my heart has always been in the south and the grassy open plains, always involving white rhino. We lost them all because of poaching and Hwange has never been the same since.” (White rhinos have broad, flat lips, larger bodies and a longer front horn than black rhinos.)

Butch’s plan is to gradually form a patchwork of mini-sanctuaries on cattle-grazing pastures in the Tsholotsho communal lands around Hwange. These would eventually become one conservancy with a viable breeding population of 30 to 50 rhinos roaming on 260 to 520sq km along the southern border of the park. The plan isn’t set in stone: it depends entirely on what local people want, but the benefits would be huge. Crucially, the conservancy would act as a fenced buffer zone to benefit farmers who endure crop-raiding elephants and lions killing their livestock. In one fell swoop it will decrease human wildlife conflict, draw more visitors to Hwange to see the famous Big Five (elephants, lions, leopards, rhinoceros and buffalo) and support local people through sanctuary entrance fees and employment.

Worth up to \$US60,000 per kilo, rhino horn is erroneously believed to heal ailments ranging from cancers to hangovers, fuelling the illegal wildlife trade to Vietnam and China. Having such vulnerable animals on communal land with the communities as custodians was initially deemed too high-risk, making it hard to raise donor funding. An estimated \$US250,000 was needed for the sanctuary HQ and training camp with electric fencing, solar power, salaries for the 30 scouts of the new Cobras Community Wildlife Protection

Unit, their uniforms, rations and top-of-the-range field equipment. Butch took on a philanthropic soft loan to get the ball rolling, hoping donors would be more forthcoming in the future. “This should have been a one-year project, but it took five years to move two rhinos from A to B,” he says.

Villages in the Tsholotsho area – particularly Ngamo, which lies closest to the park boundary – had benefited from tourism at Imvelo’s four camps for several years, enjoying improved schools, access to boreholes and healthcare. But asking them to invest in rhino conservation by giving up prime grazing land was new to everyone. Baba Mlevu, the 89-year-old headman of Mlevu Ward, helped persuade local farmers. “When I was small, I always used to see rhinos in Hwange,” he says. “And I want to see them again before I die. I want this to be my legacy for my people.”

The new rhinos will be prime targets for poachers, but Imvelo guide Vusa Ncube believes they will be protected in an area where 95 per cent of locals support the project. “The communities won’t let anyone take these rhinos from them,” he says resolutely. “And with all the security in place, it would be seriously difficult for poachers.”

That’s the deal-breaker for the team at Malilangwe, from where the two bulls were translocated. They won’t move their precious animals without knowing they will be safe. “These bulls will be guarded like the President,” Butch tells me as we watch CRCI’s Cobra scouts, all from local villages, on a training drill for a breach of the



Game plan: clockwise, Mark Butcher; Kusasa in his new home; Baba Mlevu; white rhino; children in Tsholotsho form a welcoming party; young female white rhino



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boma fence. A piercing siren rings out as the team run from their barracks, firearms in hand, magazines clicking hurriedly into place. In just over a minute their job is done, having checked inside the boma and all around its perimeter fence.

Their four years of rigorous training has clearly paid off under the leadership of Daniel Terblanche, ex-British Army with tours of Afghanistan and Iraq under his belt. His second-in-command, Cedric Moyo, who formerly trained at Malilangwe, comes from nearby Ziga village. The rhinos will be guarded at close quarters around the clock. “Within 100m of our rhinos there will be six scouts at any point, night and day, rain, snow, whatever. Wherever they move, we will move,” Terblanche explains. “We’ve been conducting a series of drills to iron out any issues using donkeys and pretending they are rhinos. Every night, I’ve tried to enter the boma to simulate poachers coming in. I couldn’t get within 80m of my target.”

The scouts have a real sense of ownership towards the rhinos and a rock-solid commitment to their protection. “It’s fantastic that they’re finally here,” Wisdom Mdlongwa says. “These rhinos are for the whole community, and the Cobras will protect them.” Bokani Mpofu is even more emphatic: “I would kill any poacher who tries to take my rhinos.”

In January, Butch received the invitation he had been striving for: to present his ambitious plans for the CRCI to the National Rhino Com-

mittee, coordinated by Zimbabwe’s Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks). It was the final hurdle in this marathon conservation challenge, and with the full support of Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, he was granted permission for the rhino movement permits. The reserve welcomed its first translocated rhinos in the late 1990s. Thanks to its ideal habitat, excellent security practices and extensive monitoring, Malilangwe has grown its population to the extent that it can now translocate rhinos to other appropriate destinations.

Having been captured by the dedicated rhino team two weeks earlier, Kusasa and Thuza, aged seven and eight respectively, were kept in a holding boma awaiting their translocation to Ngamo. They had been carefully selected by ecologist Sarah Clegg, who records meticulous data on all individuals in the reserve. She knew these two had been friends for years and were unrelated, an important factor for future breeding when females join the project. “Being together will help them adjust to their new home,” she says. “It’s rare for unrelated bulls to spend so much time together. They’re very special.”

With the rhinos sedated and loaded into crates on a 20-tonne truck, we finally set off in the convoy of Malilangwe’s experts, with ZimParks and police personnel. There were multiple stops en route, with vets checking the rhinos’ temperatures, drugs, and positions in the crates. Emotions and fears among the crew ran high but were kept in check by their calmness and professionalism. “Every translocation is a potential catastrophe,” says Clegg.

Near the small town of Lupane, two hours from Ngamo, the Cobras were waiting to take over security of their rhinos, with the flags of Zimbabwe, Tsholotsho and their own insignia flying high from their trucks. Cars full of VIPs including Baba Mlevu joined the convoy as it progressed through Tsholotsho’s villages. On reaching the sanctuary, the crates were lowered and the rhinos eventually released. Thuza rushed into the boma, relieved to be out of his crate, while Kusasa walked in quietly.

Every day since, the two bulls have stayed together and have been settling in well, closely watched by vets and scouts. Soon, guests will be able to visit the sanctuary, spending time with the rhinos and Cobras. Guide Vusa Ncube is excited about that. “Now I can take people from all over the world to see these beautiful animals on my own land, on the plains where I grew up herding cattle. That’s special,” he says. “Our rhinos will change these villages forever.” ●