

## Boosting rhino population numbers with the Lowveld Rhino Trust in Zimbabwe, while ensuring that people living near rhinos benefit from their sustainable conservation

### How has Stichting Wildlife supported the work of Lowveld Rhino Trust?



Figure 1: A black rhino spotted from above in Zimbabwe.  
Credit: Lowveld Rhino Trust.

In July 2019, Stichting Wildlife made a very generous donation to Save the Rhino International of €10,000 to support the work of the Lowveld Rhino Trust in Zimbabwe. These funds have supported the continuing efforts of the Trust to: monitor and manage rhino populations in the Lowveld; engage local communities in rhino conservation; and, provide support and advice to regional and international rhino conservation initiatives. Your generous donation provides vital funds for the conservation of black and white rhinos in the Lowveld region, which is a prime target for rhino poachers, as well as support for wider, regional rhino conservation efforts.

### The Lowveld Rhino Trust

Standing at around 900 animals, Zimbabwe has a significant national population of rhinos. Home to both African species of rhino, Zimbabwe's black rhino population is the fourth largest in the world (following South Africa, Namibia and Kenya). This makes the country an important frontier for conserving this critically endangered species. Whilst the global population is, slowly, growing, poaching remains an ever-present threat to the species. Without vigilant protection and monitoring, black rhinos could disappear from the wild.

The Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT) undertakes rhino conservation activities in the Lowveld region of south-eastern Zimbabwe. LRT focuses on developing large populations of rhinos that achieve high breeding rates and retain strong genetic diversity, within protected, suitable habitats that demonstrate an ability to be economically sustainable as areas designated for wildlife. The LRT team intensively tracks and monitors rhinos to ensure their long-term well-being; treats rhinos with snare and bullet wounds; assists authorities with prosecuting poachers; and translocates rhinos from high-risk areas to safer locations when necessary. The Trust also works with local communities to build support for rhino conservation, and ensures that people living near rhinos benefit from their sustainable conservation.

Please see an outline of a range of activities Lowveld Rhino Trust carried out between January and December 2019, with the support of their partners, including Stichting Wildlife and Save the Rhino International.

### How is the Lowveld Rhino Trust helping to grow the number of rhinos in the Lowveld region of Zimbabwe?

1. *By conserving rhino populations in the Lowveld region through intensive management, monitoring and facilitation of anti-poaching and law enforcement efforts*

The Lowveld Rhino Trust's intensive ground monitoring continued throughout 2019. This work relies on the monitoring patrol members' skills and experience of spoor-tracking; following the field signs of rhinos, such as foot prints and feeding signs. Monitoring patrols deploy daily to locate the target rhino spoor which is then followed until the rhino is seen and its identity

confirmed. These intensive daily patrols have achieved an average of 78 rhino identity confirmations per month in Buby Valley Conservancy (BVC) throughout 2019. The very late onset of the rains in the region, whilst putting pressure on wildlife, made for good monitoring conditions through to the end of the year. With the reduced leaf cover and restricted water, the team maintained higher-than-normal sighting rates through the last months of the year.

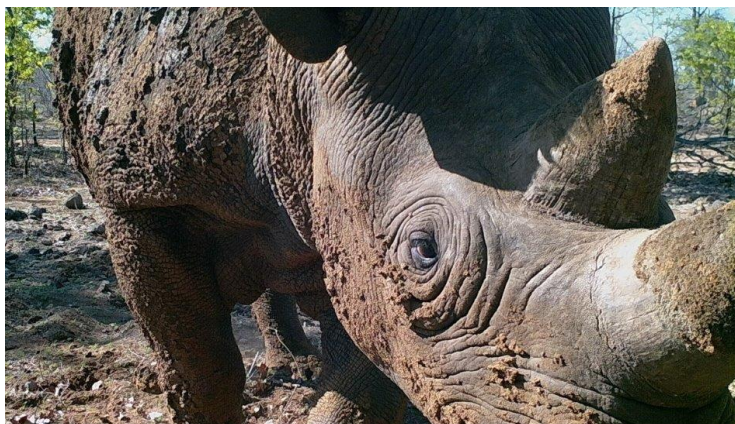


Figure 2: A black rhino sets off one of LRT's camera traps, which are another tool being used to monitor rhino populations in the region.  
Credit: Lowveld Rhino Trust.

To help the team at LRT conserve rhino populations, routine procedures such as translocations, emergency interventions for injured, strayed or orphaned rhinos and ear-notchings have continued, with 29 rhino calves ear-notched in 2019. In addition, detailed rhino ID databases are being maintained; Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags have been fitted to some rhinos and the information gathered from these, along with field observations by tracker units and aerial observations have been used to keep the database updated.

Unfortunately, rhino poaching continued to be serious during 2019. Although official statistics have not been released, early numbers suggest that poaching has increased for the fourth year in a row and is at highest since 2009. This is caused by poachers shifting their sights beyond Kruger National Park in South Africa to neighbouring regions, including Zimbabwe. As a result, the black and white rhino populations have both experienced declines in the past year. During a period of heavy poaching pressure in BVC, LRT's Director assisted in anti-poaching operations, flying an aircraft for aerial searches. Additionally, three emergency interventions were required in 2019 during a wave of poaching incidents. Sadly, all three rhinos had to be euthanised due to the severity of their injuries inflicted by poachers' gunshots.

Frustratingly, legal actions following rhino poaching arrests in the Lowveld have been largely unproductive. Bail has frequently been given to suspects, and even those who have been convicted so that they can appeal their sentences. In some cases, security staff working alongside the Lowveld Rhino Trust team have repeatedly encountered poachers they have previously arrested. This is obviously demoralising for the rangers and rhino monitors working hard to protect their rhinos. It also means that it is of the utmost importance that the Trust can continue their

### What is ear notching?

When you have a population of rhinos to protect, it helps to be able to identify every individual animal. However, that is easier said than done. Getting close enough to make a positive identification can be a challenge, and potentially put both the rhino and the people monitoring it in danger.

Instead, many rhino conservancies use a technique called ear notching to identify their rhinos. Under anaesthetic, unique patterns of notches are made on rhinos' ears. This one-off procedure allows the team to identify individuals, throughout their lifetime, from a distance. The notches can be seen, and the individual rhino identified, using binoculars.

By being able to record individual rhino sightings, biologists can then monitor the movements, interactions, health and safety of all individuals within key populations.



Figure 3: Example of a notched ear. Credit: Lowveld Rhino Trust.



vital monitoring work, so they have an accurate understanding of rhino populations and where poaching pressure is highest. This will help the Trust to best manage the region's rhinos to reduce the threat of poaching.

*“While the rhino poaching battle seems to go on and on, we cannot help but be impressed by the extraordinary bush skills of the poachers who track wide-ranging rhinos in big areas, hide their own tracks, evade dangerous wildlife, and all too often get away with rhino horns.*

*Although on our side we have men with equal abilities in bush-craft, using those ancient skills in reactive mode is always one step behind the poachers. So often we find ourselves hoping that we can get a competitive edge through modern technology.*

*We have found that the most promising new tools that we can use for monitoring rhinos are radio-frequency identification (RFID) and Internet of Things (IoT) systems. Hopefully the future does have some bright sparks for rhinos.”* Raoul du Toit, Director, Lowveld Rhino Trust

In more positive news, the Trust has successfully hand-reared five rhino calves which were released into a lion-free section of the conservancy in April, along with a rescued orphan rhino which was old enough to be translocated directly. Funding has been vital in ensuring that the Trust can cover the costs of the nutritional and medical needs for these animals. These animals now have a second chance to reach maturity and contribute to growing their species' population in the future.

## *2. By facilitating community participation in wildlife-based land-use projects, with rhinos as 'flagship species'*

The Lowveld Rhino Trust has continued a programme to enhance community awareness of rhino conservation, linked to annual incentives in the form of textbooks, exercise books and other materials to schools around Save Valley and Buby Valley Conservancies. The events held to distribute these resources and conservation messages included inter-school rhino quizzes, rhino-themed choir competitions, and various additional activities, which attracted considerable community participation, with traditional leaders and local politicians also joining in to show their support.

Throughout 2019, the Lowveld Rhino Trust visited 55 schools in and around the Buby Valley Conservancy, distributing 75,300 exercise books and 700 textbooks to their students. This continues to foster strong, positive relations between the wildlife, Lowveld Rhino Trust and the local community, and spread messages about rhino conservation. During this distribution process, a song with a rhino conservation theme was sent to all these schools for them to prepare for a music competition for rhino conservation awareness. This was held in November 2019, with schools taking part to win building materials to improve their facilities.



Figure 4: Rhino awareness activities with local communities. Credit: Simbarashe Chiseva.

Around Save Valley Conservancy, Lowveld Rhino Trust gave out 74,350 exercise books and 1,800 textbooks to 95 schools. The Trust also provided refresher training to 138 teachers in the

use of specially designed resources for the rhino conservation awareness programme as teaching media for environmental science, mathematics and English subjects.

By reaching out to schools and other parts of the community, the Lowveld Rhino Trust is spreading the important messages of rhino conservation with future generations of society and inspiring everyone to protect rhinos. Talking with students and others, the Trust is able to understand first-hand what members of the local area need and want from conservation programmes and whether that is simply to understand more about rhino protection, to develop joint initiatives, or to provide more resources for schools and public places.

### Rhinos: a 'flagship' species

LRT's primary focus is on conserving rhinos. However, black and white rhinos are just two species existing in the wider ecosystem of Zimbabwe's Lowveld region. From other mammals like lions and hyenas, to birds, insects, plants and everything in between, this dynamic landscape is home to a rich diversity of wildlife.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when rhinos were translocated into the Lowveld to help boost the population, they have been the 'flagship species' of wildlife conservation in the region, spurring the creation of the conservancies that they call home today. These large, protected areas offer habitat to a vast number of other species, which also benefit from the security and monitoring activities carried out for rhinos.

You can think about rhinos as 'umbrellas': by meeting their habitat and management needs, a broad range of species also benefit from their protection, like an umbrella sheltering these animals and plants from a storm of threats.



Rhinos, as a figurehead for all wildlife in the Lowveld, can inspire action and support at the local, national and international level for conservation, from which wildlife, as a whole, benefits.

Through the continued protection of rhinos and their ranges, the entire biodiversity of the Lowveld landscape has a chance to thrive for generations to come, and offer opportunities for people living alongside wildlife to benefit from these healthy ecosystems.

*Figure 5: Protecting rhinos protects lions, brown hyenas, leopards... As a flagship species, conservation efforts centred on rhinos also benefit many other species that share its habitat, helping to maintain a healthy and productive ecosystem. Credit: Lowveld Rhino Trust.*

### 3. *By supporting regional and international rhino conservation initiatives through advisory inputs*

The Lowveld Rhino Trust team continues to provide additional technical support, advice and expertise to other conservation projects in the region. In August 2019, LRT's Director assisted North Luangwa Conservation Project in Zambia with rhino ear notching operations, flying an



aircraft so teams could drug dart rhinos and efficiently complete the procedures. The Director also contributed to a handbook on principles of rhino biological management as an output of a Rhino Science workshop. In addition, the LRT team participates as required in activities of the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group and SADC Rhino Management Group, such as attending the African Rhino Specialist Group meeting in Namibia in February 2019, sharing knowledge and expertise with other rhino conservationists from across Africa.

### Thank you Stichting Wildlife!



We would like to say a huge thank you to the Board and team at Stichting Wildlife, and visitors to Beekse Bergen Safaripark for your fantastic support for rhino conservation efforts in Zimbabwe.

We are excited to continue working together to support vital *in situ* rhino conservation efforts, and look forward to sharing how your support is helping to make a positive difference to the black and white rhinos being monitored by Lowveld Rhino Trust. Thank you!

For more information about Save the Rhino International (UK registered charity 1035072) please visit [www.savetherhino.org](http://www.savetherhino.org).