

A visit to Hluhluwe- iMfolozi Park, South Africa, June 2008

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Over the last couple of years, the Safari Club International London Chapter has held fundraising auctions where the generosity of both donors and bidders has enabled the Chapter to raise significant funds. These funds have been divided between Save the Rhino International and the SCI Foundation, and both organisations have in turn supported a black rhino conservation project being run at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park in the Republic of South Africa.

Set in the heart of Zululand and covering some 237,000 acres, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi is the oldest game reserve in Africa, having been established in 1895, and is the place where Zulu kings such as Dinigswayo and Shaka hunted and put in place the first conservation laws. From these beginnings, it has become synonymous with successful conservation and, in particular, the conservation of white rhino. The Park was the home of Operation Rhino in the 1950s and 60s and has set the bench mark for animal capture and sustainable utilisation throughout Africa. Drawing on this experience and knowledge, attempts are being made at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi to replicate the success enjoyed with the white rhino and create a similar outcome for black rhino.

I welcomed the opportunity to see some of this work firsthand during a trip to South Africa, and was able to spend time with Dave Robertson, the Conservation Manager for iMfolozi, and his team, seeing their work and gaining knowledge of how the fundraising efforts of the SCI London Chapter were being converted into practical solutions on the ground.

Early one evening in June 2008, I arrived at the Cengeni Gate and went through the entry formalities. The 10 mile drive from the gate to the Impila camp, where I was staying, was marked by multiple encounters with wildlife, which significantly included white rhino with sightings of both single specimens and small groups which included calves. I commented to myself that I had seen more white rhino on this brief drive than I had combined in previous trips to South Africa.

The following morning, I was out in the field with Section Ranger Emile and a radio call from a field patrol meant that our luck was in, as the patrol had been tracking a black rhino cow from first light and she had now settled down. We headed towards the area of the sighting and were met by a field ranger who led us through the bush to within view of the resting cow. Again, luck was on our side as the oxpeckers that normally reside on the black rhino and act as their early warning system, were absent. I was assured by the rangers that had the oxpeckers been residing on their host and seen us, upon their flight the sleeping cow would have been on her feet in seconds and making pre-emptive charges at pretty much anything. Judging by the scars on some of the rangers, I was more than prepared to believe them.

We moved in closer and slowly worked our way into position to get a good view of the horn and ears, which would hopefully enable us to identify the individual rhino. All encounters are carefully logged and identification can be derived from either distinctive natural features or notches in the ear which have been applied during periodic immobilisation through darting as part of a process of ongoing census and monitoring in the Reserve. The cow was a known individual and we filled out the Identification notes and took a GPS fix of the position. Following this encounter we went back to the Section Ranger's office and I was shown how the information is uploaded onto a database and maps created to plot the encounters. I was also shown a map of the activity of the ranger foot patrols, who regularly take a GPS fix on their positions as they traverse the bush. Again, this is uploaded into a database and a map created, which enables them to view the effectiveness of their patrols and ensure thorough coverage of their section.

After a brief lunch we went to one of the remote field ranger outposts, where I had an opportunity to view the living quarters. The accommodation is functional and consists of a series of thatched Rondavels surrounded by an electrified fence. Given the remoteness of the camp, it was quite apparent why solar power was crucial, as it served not only to provide basic protection from large and dangerous game in the form of the electrified fence, but also to power camp lighting and charging units for radios, GPS units, torches and mobile phones.

We moved on back towards the offices where, we were due to meet up with other members of the team. On the way there I was shown a boma in which a number of Cape buffalo were being held. They had been captured and tested as part of a Bovine TB eradication plan that is being run across South Africa. Naturally the concern is that the TB will spread into domestic cattle; however, somewhat surprisingly, evidence is emerging that it may also be spreading into lions. The buffalo weakened by TB are a natural target for the pride and are usually taken down in preference to healthier specimens. The dominant members of the pride, usually the large males, are first to break into the kill and in so doing take the choicest parts including the lungs, which are the main site for the bacteria.

We eventually reached the offices late afternoon where we met up with other team members: San-Marie, a Section Ranger, and Alison, who works in the main office but regularly helps out in the field.

San-Marie, whose day had been held up by a bull elephant that had taken up residence in her section camp, had nonetheless earlier in the afternoon managed to get out and shoot a wildebeest that was now residing in the back of the Landcruiser. The wildebeest was to serve as bait for what was described as a "lion call up". There are approximately 100 lions in the Park, subdivided into a number of prides. There is ongoing research programme that studies not only pride dynamics, but also health and genetics and, in particular, monitoring for evidence of TB. This programme requires taking samples of both blood and hair and the "call up" is the way of achieving it.

The call up was to be in the southern region of the Park in an area known as the "wilderness", which visitors to the Park are only able to access on foot. This access is restricted to being part of guided walking trails as there are no roads other than the fence

perimeter track and vehicular access is limited to KZN Wildlife staff. The objective is to create a sanctuary area of minimum disturbance and replicate pristine bush.

We joined the rest of the call up team in the wilderness area section camp and were welcomed by Laurence, the Section Ranger. Roles were quickly allocated, team members headed for the appropriate vehicles, and we set off for the bait site.

Just before darkness fell, the wildebeest bait was set and then a tape of animal calls was played via a sound system to attract the lions. The first visitor was a hyena, who had clearly been watching us set up and more than lived up to hyenas' opportunistic reputation. Somewhat suspicious and reticent, it wouldn't move in on the bait. The reason became apparent a few minutes later, when a couple of lionesses moved in, followed by two large males. The males were known to the call up team and were referred to as the Pilanesberg brothers, who had recently been introduced from the Pilanesberg Game Reserve, whose name they bear as part of an attempt to diversify the genetic pool in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi. They were clearly going to be a good addition as they were in excellent condition and equipped with huge manes and body size. The rangers decided to focus on darting a young lioness and it wasn't long before she was gently resting by the bait. The next part of the process was to remove the rest of the pride from the bait, to enable the team to go collect the necessary samples from the darted female. Trying to convince two five-hundred-pound male lions and an assortment of smaller females that they should give up their dinner was an interesting experience. However, the skill of the rangers prevailed and the pride eventually surrendered the wildebeest. Once off the bait, half of team moved in and expertly and swiftly gathered the samples, whilst the other half ensured that the pride didn't return to the bait site until the task was completed. Matters were concluded fairly quickly and the reviving agent was administered to the darted lioness and the team returned to the safety of the vehicles. The lioness drowsily regained her posture and then rejoined the pride and resumed feeding, apparently none the worse for her experience. Nonetheless, we waited for another hour or so to make sure that she was fully recovered before leaving the bait site.

On the way back to the main camp the following morning we had another encounter with a black rhino. This time it was a bull and very much awake, so we kept a safe distance and observed it through the binoculars. Again this was a known specimen and all the details were duly recorded for later filing.

Back at the offices, I joined up with Dave Robertson, the Conservation Manager, who talked me through how the equipment purchased with the SCI funds was being integrated into their workflows. He explained one facet of their anti poaching strategy which typified how the equipment was used. The field rangers regularly set up observation posts (OP) and scan a designated area with the night-vision equipment or binoculars depending on the time of day. If they identify unauthorised persons in the Reserve, they can then use radios to guide the Anti Poaching Unit (APU) towards the area. The APU will often be able to identify a suitable point to intercept, and will set up an ambush where they challenge and apprehend the individuals. A lot of the equipment crucial to the success of these operations was purchased with SCI funds and the radios are run on batteries that are charged by the solar equipment also purchased with SCI funds.

We headed up to the northern side of the Park, where I was able to see other solar equipment that had been purchased with the SCI funds and spoke to a number of the field staff who were using the equipment every day. All the rangers were effusive in their thanks for both the financial and moral support that they were receiving.

We then went on to look at the motorcycles that the London Chapter purchased and Dave confirmed that they have been a very effective tool. The Park has a policy of compensating local farmers for attacks on livestock that occur outside the perimeter but in the vicinity of the Park. The compensation is limited to attacks by species that have been re-introduced such as wild dogs, but exclude species such as leopard who have maintained a constant presence. This means that every report has to be investigated by a ranger with a view to making an assessment on the validity of the claim. Prior to the purchase of the motorcycles, this often meant that a section vehicle would be used, thus depriving the rest of the section team of mobility. The availability of the bikes now means that this situation rarely occurs. It was also interesting to hear how the bikes are being used not only for investigating claims, but also for routine movements throughout the Park of single rangers as an alternative to motor vehicles. The running costs of the bikes are considerably lower and enable significant savings to be made, which is particularly relevant at the moment given high oil and commodity prices. The escalating costs of running motor vehicles is putting considerable strain on Park budgets.

On our way back to the office, we again had multiple sightings of white rhino. Going through the numbers with Dave gave me an idea of the success of the conservation programmes. The white rhino population in Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park is now in excess of 2,000 and black rhino are up to 260. The Park is recognised as a significant source of white rhino and now regularly captures and translocates animals. Over time, the expectation is that this success can be replicated with black rhino and that the Park will continue to fulfill its role in maintaining both the quality and quantity of South Africa's game stocks.

The ongoing support from the Chapter is playing a part in providing equipment which assists in the continuation of important conservation projects that will ensure that the black rhino will continue to be a presence and in so doing, and as a by-product, there are benefits for all wildlife in the Park.