

## Sokwanele - Enough is Enough - Zimbabwe PROMOTING NON-VIOLENT PRINCIPLES TO ACHIEVE DEMOCRACY

### Another devastating loss to Black Rhino conservation in Zimbabwe

Sokwanele Article: 16 November 2007



Amber was pregnant; due to give birth this week

[More images available here -[LINK](#)] Last week on the night of Wednesday 7th November, Amber, DJ and Sprinter were murdered. They were three adult black rhino, all shot dead by poachers. Amber was pregnant, due to give birth this week, but her perfectly formed foetus died with her. Their deaths represent a massive blow to black rhino conservation efforts in Zimbabwe.

The black rhino is listed as critically endangered, and is the most highly endangered large mammal on earth - it is being wiped out of existence faster than any other large animal on earth.



Orphaned Tatenda: 'Tatenda' means 'thank-you'

Imire Game Farm in Wedza, near Marondera, has been involved in wildlife conservation work since 1972. Whilst the world population of black rhino fell from 65,000 to 2,300 between 1970 and 1994, the Zimbabwe population fell from 2,000 to only 263 in the 6 years prior to 1993. The latest figures for the Zimbabwe rhino population are from December 2005 when there were 527 black rhino and 308 white rhino, but these figures have fallen since then due to poaching. By 1987, a decision was taken in Zimbabwe to move the remaining rhinos from the Zambezi Valley and to relocate them in Intensive Protection Zones. It was a desperate bid to save Zimbabwe's last black rhino.



Sprinter: the poachers hacked at an inch of horn

Amber, DJ and Sprinter, along with four other rhino orphans, began their new lives at Imire in 1987. They were aged between 4 and 6 months. 20 years later, last week, the three adults were senselessly slaughtered. Internationally renowned conservationist Dr Ian Player, who spearheaded Operation Rhino, an initiative in the Umfolozi Game Reserve that saved the few remaining southern race of white rhino from extinction, was appalled at the news.



Speaking from his home in South Africa, Dr Player said:

The shocking killing of a heavily pregnant black rhino and leaving a four week-old orphaned rhino calf on Imire Game Farm in Zimbabwe must arouse the anger of human mothers throughout the world to rise relentlessly against

this crime against endangered animal life.

Reports are that their killers arrived at the farm on Wednesday evening dressed in Zimbabwe Army camouflage fatigues and that they were armed with AK-47 rifles. They beat up a maid and left her tied up. They then forced someone else to lead them to the rhino pens where they viciously assaulted the guards whose job it was to watch over the vulnerable animals all day and all night. Amber, DJ and Sprinter were shot and killed, and only Tatenda, a four-week-old calf, was left unharmed. (DJ and Sprinter were Tatenda's parents).

The senselessness of their killings is compounded by the fact that two months ago a decision was taken at Imire to have Amber, DJ and Sprinter dehorned - this is a procedure that involves a wildlife veterinarian literally sawing off the rhino's horn. It is expensive to carry out, has to be repeated annually every time the horn stumps re-grow, and it carries mortality risks for the animal brought on from the stress associated with immobilisation and capture. It also may not work: poachers in Zimbabwe killed 80 dehorned rhino in 1993.

This must have been a very difficult decision for the owners to take, and indicates some measure of their concern and desperation. Their decision was made after another wildlife conservancy close to Imire had experienced a similar violent attack that resulted in the deaths of three white rhino.

The slaughter of three dehorned rhino seems to be especially pointless and motiveless, leading the owner of the game farm, John Travers, to assume that the poachers couldn't see that the rhinos had had their horns removed because it was a dark night.

But Johnny Rodrigues, chairman of the Zimbabwe Conservation Task Force, assumes differently.

Speaking in his personal capacity, he told SW Radio Africa that he believed the shootings were linked to the ongoing illegal eviction of commercial white farmers. He said:

As far as I am concerned it is some greedy officer in the army or air force that actually wants that property and that's one way of trying to get the people off.

The fact that the poachers were dressed and armed just like Zimbabwean soldiers adds to the suspicion. So does the knowledge that the government frequently uses armed soldiers and militia to intimidate and enforce commercial farm evictions. It is also fair to say that the rarity and importance of black rhino conservation efforts to the whole world would be a major stumbling block to any 'greedy officer' who wanted to seize the farm. Killing them, dehorned or not, removes the stumbling block.

A private email, forwarded to Sokwanele by a subscriber to alert us to the story, clearly articulates the owners' position with regards the rhinos and their conservation efforts in the complex and difficult political climate that is Zimbabwe today. It reads:

Imire Safari Ranch has always been apolitical, and we remain that. Our sole job is to protect and cherish the wildlife belonging to Zimbabwe. We have worked alongside National Parks and Wildlife, and the Ministry of Tourism since 1972. Through these trying times, we have had enormous support from these Departments. We will continue to do so.

Unfortunately, the repercussions of Zimbabwean politics ripple through all aspects of Zimbabwean life, regardless of political inclination, and it is possible that the Amber, DJ and Sprinter are among the latest victims. The more rapidly the country disintegrates into lawlessness and economic chaos, the more vulnerable protected species become and the harder it is to protect them.

In a report released earlier this year, the wildlife monitoring organisation TRAFFIC said that rhino poaching is at its most severe in Zimbabwe and the DRC, where 60 percent of rhino population were illegally killed between 2003 and 2005. In Zimbabwe, poaching accounted for two-thirds of all rhino mortalities over the same period, affecting one in eight animals. The Congo is recovering from years of conflict and Zimbabwe is experiencing civil unrest, a crippled economy and soaring inflation; both countries, the report said, are not only failing to rein in poachers, but their law-

enforcement agencies are struggling to prevent horns being illegally traded.

Inflation stood at 7 892,1% in September 2007 (independent estimates put real inflation closer to 25 000%). Hyperinflation, coupled with massive unemployment, food shortages and declining social services leads to increasing desperation among decent Zimbabweans. Add to that a social environment where the rule of law is discarded in favour of political imperatives, it isn't difficult to see how poaching for something as internationally lucrative as 'rhino horn' starts to look like a viable survival option with diminished risks. It is hardly surprising in this context that, having slaughtered Amber, DJ and Sprinter, the poachers spent some time trying to hack out the inch of new horn growth from Sprinter's face. Regardless of why they were originally there – whether they were soldiers or poachers – even the smallest piece of horn in a crumbling economy was too tempting an opportunity to pass up.

The decimation of Zimbabwe's wildlife and environment has been worsening every year. In 2005, we reported on the wide scale destruction one of our reporters witnessed in Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park:

The first thing they noticed on entering what used to be a strictly controlled ecozone of outstanding natural beauty, was that all the fences had been removed. All that remained were the steel poles bedded in the hard earth. Entering the park they were then struck by the number of indigenous trees that had been felled - literally thousands - leaving bare, empty plains where mixed woodlands had once stood. So much for the natural habitat that once supported a vast range of wild and bird life, but there was worse to come.

The formerly abundant grasslands had been devastated too, grossly overgrazed by cattle and goats, which now wandered freely through the area. The cause of this massive degradation of natural resources was of course the settlers who had moved into the area in search of fresh pastures and easy-to-harvest game. Indeed our reporter found abundant evidence of the hunting and slaughter of wildlife with rifles. The game wardens who at one time jealously guarded the wildlife against poachers are now instructed by their new political bosses to let things be.

As well as our National Parks, private game farms and conservancies have also been bitterly affected. It is estimated that over 80% of the wildlife kept in conservancies and on commercial farms has been destroyed through poaching and snaring since the land invasions began. The total loss of wildlife on private game ranches is believed to stand at over 90%, equating to a total of about 560,000 animals.

The reality is that these estimated figures are just that, estimates. The political situation in the country makes it very difficult to get a real grip of the scale of the problem. An opinion piece published on [zimbabweconservation.com](http://zimbabweconservation.com) attempts to get to grips with the facts and figures and the process of doing so describes the difficulties as follows:

Accurate monitoring of the poachers' toll is impossible. Wildlife researchers and law enforcement are now barred from going into many former game farms and safari concessions, making any systematic appraisal impossible under the current regime. These areas often abut National parks and it is likely that they represent wildlife sinks for animals that move beyond National Park boundaries. A few well-documented cases offer a tip-of-the-iceberg view of the situation.

If Amber, DJ and Sprinter represent the tip of the black rhino iceberg, then it is worth pointing out that, when we talk about endangered species like the black rhino, we are talking about a very very small iceberg.

We had an approximate 7,500 black rhino in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and wildlife experts estimate now that only 500 black rhino are still surviving. This figure represents a very small gene pool, and three healthy adult black rhinos therefore play a critical role in building a healthy population that will help the species to survive.

Imire, has lost their entire adult population and now face a struggle to protect the four remaining

orphans under their care. In addition to this farm's losses, it is reported that a large conservancy in the Mavuradonha area, about 200km north of Harare, had their rhino population fall from 54 to 8 in the last year. Other conservancies in the central Midlands province lost 31 in the same period, and are down to 21 now. The rhino 'iceberg' is melting fast, and if steps are not taken to address the grotesque scale of the problem, then very soon – perhaps in a few short years - there will be no black rhino left in Zimbabwe at all.

Zimbabwe ratified the Convention on Sustaining Biodiversity in 1994, an International Treaty emerging from the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992. It needs to take action and address the devastating consequences that Zanu-PF government policies have had on our country's biodiversity and ecological sustainability. For example, a return to the rule of law would help: Sue Lieberman, the director of WWF's global species programme has said, "better law-enforcement and protection measures are still needed for African rhinos, particularly in the DRC and Zimbabwe".

Why should the Zanu PF government or we care about a few rhino?

The email from Imire referred to earlier in this article hints at a global imperative motivating and sustaining those fighting for the survival of critically endangered species:

We are sickened, we are deeply wounded. As a human race, we have let down these Black Rhino, which are disappearing from the face of our planet so very fast.

In response to news of the atrocities, Dr Player sent out this appeal:

The whole of the African continent will now suffer the consequences of this unforgivable act. I appeal to the world to help save the black rhino in Zimbabwe as we in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, saved the white rhino.

The slaughter at Imire is not simply a loss to Zimbabwe, it's a loss to Africa, and it's a loss to the world. When the poachers shot and killed Amber, DJ and Sprinter they recklessly hastened the demise of a species that will affect the whole human race throughout the world. The likelihood that our children will ever see a black rhino in their lifetimes diminishes dramatically with the slaughter of every single rhino. The black rhino is so rare and is so endangered, that the knock-on effect of each death is literally that dramatic.

### **Imire Appeal for reward funding**

Reward funding required towards the arrest and conviction of the persons responsible for the brutal killing of our 3 Black Rhino at Imire Game Park on the night of 7th November 2007

DJ mother of 7 week old Tatenda (now orphaned); Sprinter (father of Tatenda); and Amber (pregnant mother and ready to give birth).

They were shot while in their bomas. In 20 seconds our Black Rhino breeding stock were annihilated

Obviously the bigger the reward the better the prospects of these culprits being brought to JUSTICE all funds will be carefully monitored and invested until such time the reward is paid or refunded to those who have contributed

All funds made payable to

Imire Game Park  
Zimbank Marondera Branch  
A/C # 4573 399451001

Contact: Mike or Sheila Thompson,  
John, Judy or Reilly Travers