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TRAVEL

Can tourism reverse the impact of poaching in Zambia and Zimbabwe?

The effects of poaching and climate change are keenly felt In Zambia and Zimbabwe. This ecological frontline is manned by innovative, but under-funded conservation units, with tourism supporting the survival of some of Africa's rarest species.

Tuesday, 21 April 2020

By Tamsin Wressell

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

PHOTOGRAPH BY GETTY

The sun yawns over the land, vast savannahs stretching until they blur into the horizon. I can see elephants stomping up dust storms and hippos smacking their tails on muddied banks. I'm in a hot air balloon with Eric Heseman, owner of Namib Sky Balloon Safaris, watching a new day come to life. It's a peaceful morning on Zambia's Busanga Plains: the only sounds come from the fire bellowing above our heads and the distant growls of hyenas.

"Look at all this land and not a single person in sight," Eric says, echoing what's in my head. "This is the wildest safari I've led in Africa. If this was the Okavango in Botswana, we'd have passed at least three camps by now."

Below us, antelopes leap over a trickle of a river, a barely perceptible waterway clawing its way through parched earth. In the 11 years Eric has worked here, this is the most brutal drought he's witnessed. The resulting lack of vegetation has made it difficult for conservationists like Eric to safeguard the wildlife: poachers can now spot patrols a mile off and thus evade capture.

Busanga Plains in the north of Kafue National Park, which is Zambia's oldest and largest park, stretches out for 8,500 square miles. Yet with growing funding concerns, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) has just three cars to patrol it. Eric runs these balloon tours to support the organisation. "People come and pay $200 (£150) for a ride and that all goes back into conservation. Plus, the more tourists we can get here in the sky, the more eyes we have on the poachers," Eric says.

"All parks are struggling," Ben Goodheart, field ecologist in the Luangwa Valley Team at the Zambian Carnivore Programme (ZCP), tells me over dinner that evening. "People come to Busanga because they can see lions, wild dogs, cheetahs, hyenas and leopards," he says, adding that these plains have 21 species of antelope — the highest diversity of antelope anywhere in Africa. One mammal the area doesn't have, however, is white rhino: poaching on Busanga was so intense between the 1960s and 1980s that every last one was killed. "Once you start losing animals to poaching, travellers lose interest in the area and the economy suffers."

A lot of the poaching here, Ben tells me, is for the bushmeat trade. It's a big commercial operation and, for conservationists, a big problem. Wire snare traps are hidden in the bushes and hooked on trees to catch animals like buffalo and wildebeest. In some cities, like Lusaka and Solwezi, bushmeat has become a delicacy. "I hear it tastes terrible, but there's a demand

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But the traps are catching more than just prey species. On a game drive, I spot Queen, leader of a 16-strong pride of lions. My guide, Lazarus, tells me about her: Queen got trapped in a snare in 2013. Every lion on this plain is descended from her, and without anti-poaching efforts to free her from the trap, the plains would be a very different place: with no lions, the entire ecosystem could crumble.

"Kafue is the second-largest national park in Africa — it should be a crown jewel, but because of traps, it's severely depleted," Ben later tells me. We're eating dinner at Shumba Camp and have the place to ourselves. "Without big herds of prey, there's a lack of carnivores, and tourists just aren't coming. That's why anti-poaching is such an important operation. More tourists would be the solution to more infrastructure and income for locals," he adds. "And there would be more eyes on the poachers and more funding to stop them."

A white rhino roams the wilderness in Victoria Falls National Park, Zimbabwe.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **GETTY**

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The next morning, I travel south to Toka Leya, a camp that sits on the banks of the Zambezi

in the diminutive Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. Turning off the main road, I drive between spindly parched trees to meet Bazel, one of the four rangers assigned to watch over the rare white rhinos in this park.

"We protect these rhinos 24/7," Bazel tells me as we carefully approach a four-month-old white rhino. The youngster stands statue-still next to its mother while she grazes on small patches of sprouting green grass. "We even plant grass for them because of the drought."

Rhinos were completely wiped out in Zambia in 1989 as a result of poaching (the keratin from their horns is erroneously considered to be an aphrodisiac in a number of foreign markets, including China). Four were reintroduced in 2008 by the DNPW, and the herd today numbers 10. They're not in their best habitat: while black rhino are searchers and feed off trees, white rhino are grazers who like to roam, and the grass here is in short supply. The rangers tell me they'd like to introduce them to more areas, but it's once again a question of funding and having the bodies to watch and look after them. Local organisations and farmers support the rangers' efforts, and Wilderness Safaris — one of Africa's foremost ecotourism operators, which has been bringing travellers to this area since 2006 — provides additional supplies, fuel and logistical support.

I leave the rhinos and head to catch the sunset on a boat ride along the Zambezi with Arnold Tshipa, the Zambezi Environmental Officer for Wilderness Safaris. The eyes of numerous crocodiles linger on a hippo carcass; nearby, an elephant bathes in mud on the shores. We pause to soak in the scene before conversation turns to the topic at hand.

"I believe poaching is fuelled by three things: corruption, greed and poverty," says Arnold. "The people who poach, their food security isn't as high as yours in the Western world. The cost of living is increasing, so they're more willing to put themselves in danger to feed their families. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, you get nine years in prison for stealing a cow, but for crimes against wildlife, people are getting away with bail or community service. That's something the DNPW is hoping to change."

Africa's population is projected to double in size by 2050, and with growing habitat fragmentation, habitat loss and poaching, the future for wildlife looks bleak when conservation is taken out of the equation. Effects are far-reaching: with the gene pool depleted, animals' genetic structures are changing. But Arnold can see progress.

"One solution is for tourism to be conscious rather than voyeuristic," he says. "Any tourism

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and community work. All these cogs are working together to create change that will. Arnold

hopes, stick.

Tourism for change

A thousand pearl black eyes are on me, unsettling my stomach. I'm in a car in the pitch black of night in Hwange National Park, having crossed the border into Zimbabwe, and we're surrounded by a herd of buffalo.

"They say buffalo look at you as if you owe them money," Livingstone, my guide, says. "A lone buffalo is more dangerous than an angry crowd. When they get old, they separate and parasites set in. They see humans and think we're the cause, so they attack." We're not the cause of this particular problem, but we're causing other issues: namely, climate change. "I haven't seen the ground this dry in a long time," Livingstone laments.

In 2019, Hwange saw its worst drought in nearly 30 years. "The Western world wants to have all these big talks about climate change, but if I ask for funding to remove snares, I'm not going to get it — it doesn't sound sexy enough. But we need to be acting on the day-to-day issues facing conservation, away from trending topics and buzzwords, if we're really going to address climate change and conservation on a larger scale," Arnold tells me.

He's brought me to the Scorpion Anti-Poaching Unit, an eight-person response team set up in 2011 to tackle increases in bushmeat and ivory poaching in Hwange National Park. The results of their efforts are notable. Columns of gnarled and rusted snares decorate their base camp, some of the 2,500 the team have found in the park. They've noticed the use of snares drop massively since the project began. Now, they tend to find older snares rather than fresh ones.

"The situation is currently under control, but we can't relax," Tyrone, one of the Scorpions, tells me. The unit spends a lot of time telling nearby communities that keeping animals alive, rather than resorting to illegal poaching, is good for tourism, which in turn creates jobs. "It strains us, but with passion in our heart, we keep going and we try hard." They also work with Children in the Wilderness, a programme that educates young students about conservation. "They go home and spread the message to their family and friends. It's definitely changing perspectives," Tyrone explains.

using up its natural resources, but we still have our wildlife here — and that's a resource we

using up its natural resources, but we still have our wildlife here — and that's a resource we can use. For one person to poach an animal, only they benefit from that. But to keep it alive means the whole community can build on an economy from tourism and create funding to build schools and farm crops."

The importance of conservation has never been something locals have disregarded, as Mr Johnson, a resident in Ngamo village, argues: "Some people say our ancestors were the roots of this problem but, if you know our history, hunting bushmeat was careful and seasonal. It was only for the winter months when the meat wouldn't rot, and they knew when these animals were breeding and gave them time in order to keep numbers high. The knowledge of conserving is within us. It was only when the white men came that they took that away; they didn't have the same mindset and came with greed," Mr Johnson explains.

It was this style of hunting that caused an imbalance in the ecosystem, to the point where it's now so fragile, Mr Johnson continues to tell me.

As I go to leave, Mr Johnson adds a final comment: "The eco-safari camps here have made local people and tourists connect in a healthy way. If it wasn't for the wildlife, we wouldn't have tourism. And because of that we now have good schools and community development. We're better off than any other area in Zimbabwe, so all the credit goes to our wildlife. That's something worth saving."

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This pangolin in Kafue National Park, Zambia belongs to one of the most endangered wildlife species in Africa.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **GETTY**

Reintroducing endangered animals

Black rhino

Black rhinos were reintroduced into Chad in 2018. Wild black rhinos had been wiped out by poaching 50 years earlier, but a collaboration between the governments of South Africa and Chad, as well as conservation non-profits SANParks and African Parks, enabled six rhinos to be securely translocated from South Africa to Zakouma National Park. *africanparks.org*

African wild dog

The first ever African wild dog introduction happened in Mozambique's Gorongosa National Park in 2018, after 25 years of local extinction. The project was spearheaded through conservation group partnerships, including KwaZulu-Natal Wild Dog Advisory Group and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. The South African state of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) has protected the largest population of wild dogs outside of Kruger National Park and is now a key player in redistributing the species into their historic range.

White rhino

White rhino became locally extinct in Zambia in 1989. In 2008, the Zambia Wildlife Authority successfully reintroduced four white rhino from South Africa into a secure section of Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park (Victoria Falls), creating a protected population on the north side of the Zambezi. After a number of births, the herd's population was up to 10. Tragically, in February 2020, two were killed after being hit by a truck.

Pangolin

With increasing demand for its meat and scales on the black market, the pangolin is believed to be the world's most trafficked mammal. A reintroduction programme in South Africa, announced in February 2020, aims to reverse Phinda's local extinction. &Beyond has partnered with the African Pangolin Working Group, Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital and the Humane Society International-Africa to launch the programme.

Addax

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African population of the critically endangered antelope to just a handful by 2016. In 2019, 15 addax were brought over to Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Achimal Wildlife Area in Chad from Abu Dhabi where they were acclimatised before being reintroduced into the wild. *africageographic.com*

How to do it

Africa Odyssey and **Wilderness Safaris** offer two nights at Wilderness Safaris' Shumba Camp, Zambia, and three nights at Linkwasha Camp, Zimbabwe, with a night in between at Toka Leya at Victoria Falls, from £6,200 per person. Includes all flights, transfers, game drives and activities including a tour of Victoria Falls, all-inclusive.

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