



The hot, dry spell has persisted, with no rain (other than one small shower) being recorded for the first 20 days of March, and then a fierce wind storm (knocked over a lot of trees) but only 14mm of rain! The rains came back for the last three days of the month, with the total monthly rainfall being a paltry 54mm in Victoria Falls. The grass has dried already, and though there is good grass cover, the nutritional value later in the year will deteriorate and could be a problem. Fires will be earlier than normal. The key this year will be maintaining as many waterpoints as possible, and spread the pressure.

The figures from Katima Mulilo on 19th March show the Zambezi River to be 39% lower than average. The river is rising, but not of significance. The level of Lake Kariba is now 50% full and dropping, compared to 64% and rising for the same time last year – not a good sign! The lake will obviously drop to a level where it does not have enough head to generate power anymore! However, on the bright side, the fishing will be good!

Some very good news – I wrote an article a while back on John Hume and his rhino conservation effort in South Africa, and it has come through now that apparently John had 131 rhino calves born last year!! What a great story!

We are slowly getting into the media age – our web page www.bhejanetrust.org is up and running, and we now have a facebook page under Bhejane Trust, thanks to Andy Lane. The next problem is to keep them updated!

The story in the last newsletter on the croc's eating a suspected poacher, as seen by a Zambian sunset cruise, attracted a lot of media attention, which took me by surprise. I guess I included it more from the viewpoint of accounting for one of the missing Zambians, rather than from the shocking experience for the tourists!

An interesting snippet – Midwell Kapesa, the Area Manager of Robins is the third generation of his family to be employed in National Parks – his grandfather was a senior scout who is mentioned with high regard in the rhino wars, in Mike Bromwich's Parks book. What a proud family record!

Zambezi National Park

A second National Parks/stakeholders meeting was held in the Falls (thanks to Victoria Falls Safari Lodge for the venue). The meeting was chaired by Area Manager Ngosi, with John Sithole (Zambezi Camp) and Precious Mhaka from Bulawayo representing the Regional Manager, plus a good cross section of stakeholders. AM Ngosi had done his homework from the last meeting, and addressed a lot of the issues previously raised (the normal stumbling block however was anything that was referred to Head Office!). The meeting was held in a very open atmosphere, with stakeholders impressed by the forthright attitude of the AM and his staff in trying to assist wherever within their powers.

With the lull in the rains, I went back in and repaired the road in the Chamabonda – we had done a lot of work last year, and the heavy rains in December served to compact and consolidate what we had laid down, so we now went and repaired all the damaged places - you can now cruise the full 26km length of the vlei! Mike Karasellos has sent in his tractor to mow the road and verges.

The pans are looking very good – nice and full to start the dry season. The advantage of the solar units is that they work all year round, so have kept the pans topped up. The only maintenance is to clean the panels regularly (at least once a month), as I find they get coated with dust very quickly in the drier part of the year, and this affects their efficiency. Cleaning is easy – one guy has a knapsack sprayer and the other a mop on an extended pole. I have found that it is best to have the panels not more than two meters off the ground, and I put a trench around for the elephants, and razor wire to keep the baboons off. The panels are enclosed in a frame with welded ends to stop theft.

The dry conditions being experienced has brought all the elephant back from the extended pan system in the Panda Matenga region of Botswana – they normally disappear there at the onset of the rains and only come back in later April/May, so obviously water is already short out in the bush. We are gradually getting a better picture of the seasonal game movements in the Zambezi National Park, with the animals at this time of year preferring the drier eastern end of the Chamabonda, rather than the western thick grass vlei section, and there is a lot of movement between the Kalahari forest cap and the Zambezi River frontage. The first sable calves were seen out this month.

Kazuma Pan National Park

There has been no further progress on the ground here, but the funding for the first borehole has become available though a Swedish donor – this will be to put in a solar unit at the “Border Borehole”, and to build a hide there, which will have a panoramic view of the Kazuma Depression, while overlooking the waterhole. It will be a minimum development campsite, with flush toilet and shower facilities, and hopefully help boost tourism in this remote park. Alan Sparrow of the Jafuta Foundation is coordinating with Area Manager Midwell Kapesa on the program, with Bhejane Trust providing the ground support. We will be going back to undertake surveys and develop a Park requirement plan in conjunction with Parks, as soon as the area will be dry enough to get around.

Matetsi Units 6 & 7

Matetsi Units 6 and 7 lie between the Zambezi National Park and the Botswana border, along the Zambezi River, and are National Parks concession areas, recently issued on long term leases to two new concessionaires. They are both beautiful areas, and Unit 7 is strictly photographic while Unit 6 will have photographics along the river section and hunting in the back area, with the hunting to be phased out over time – practical land use programs.

I have been assisting the new concessionaire on Unit 7, John Gardiner, for over a year now, and he has shown his commitment to conserving and developing the wildlife – he is currently drilling six new boreholes on the unit, to add to the existing waterpoints. These boreholes will allow for the spread the game throughout the area, much of which is Kalahari forest with interspersed seasonal pans, some of which will now become permanent. This unit will develop once again into being a great game area over the next few years

However, in over a year of driving around Unit 7 I have yet to see a “trophy sized” adult sable, waterbuck or kudu bull! This demonstrates the damage done by the “ration hunts” when a dodgy operator was given a quota, but in collusion with certain individuals, had an unlimited offtake on these areas, with false TR2’s issued etc. and using quota transferring methods where the animals are then claimed off private land for export purposes. The areas were then under Matetsi Station, but have since been transferred to under the management of Zambezi Camp, and are now well under control again, and the mature animals will soon reappear. One shudders to think how many animals were hunted illegally on these areas!!!

Both areas are showing the years of neglect from when the old concessionaires failed to undertake their responsibilities (for various reasons), and did not pump waterholes, did not maintain roads etc, but are well on the right path for recovery and I do not doubt will be returned to their former glory! I wish the new concessionaires well!



The first borehole going in on the Mabuza Vlei – Unit 7. Good water found



Jed Robinson of Unit 7 surveying for water for a new borehole/pan site (he spent some years in Aussie hence the divining stick goes up instead of down when over underground water!)



Not much to look at now, but a new borehole drilled here with good underground water, and this pan will soon be flourishing.



On behalf of the concessionaire on Unit 6 I took a drive around the back area (Kalahari forest area) of the unit to check on the current water situation, and the underground water feasibility for borehole drilling. There are some really beautiful pans (a couple pictured here) but they need pumping – the years of no water, over hunting and neglect were very apparent with no animals seen and little spoor. However, the concessionaire has purchased 4 solar pumps, to be installed shortly, and I have no doubt the area will greatly improve with some care and maintenance.



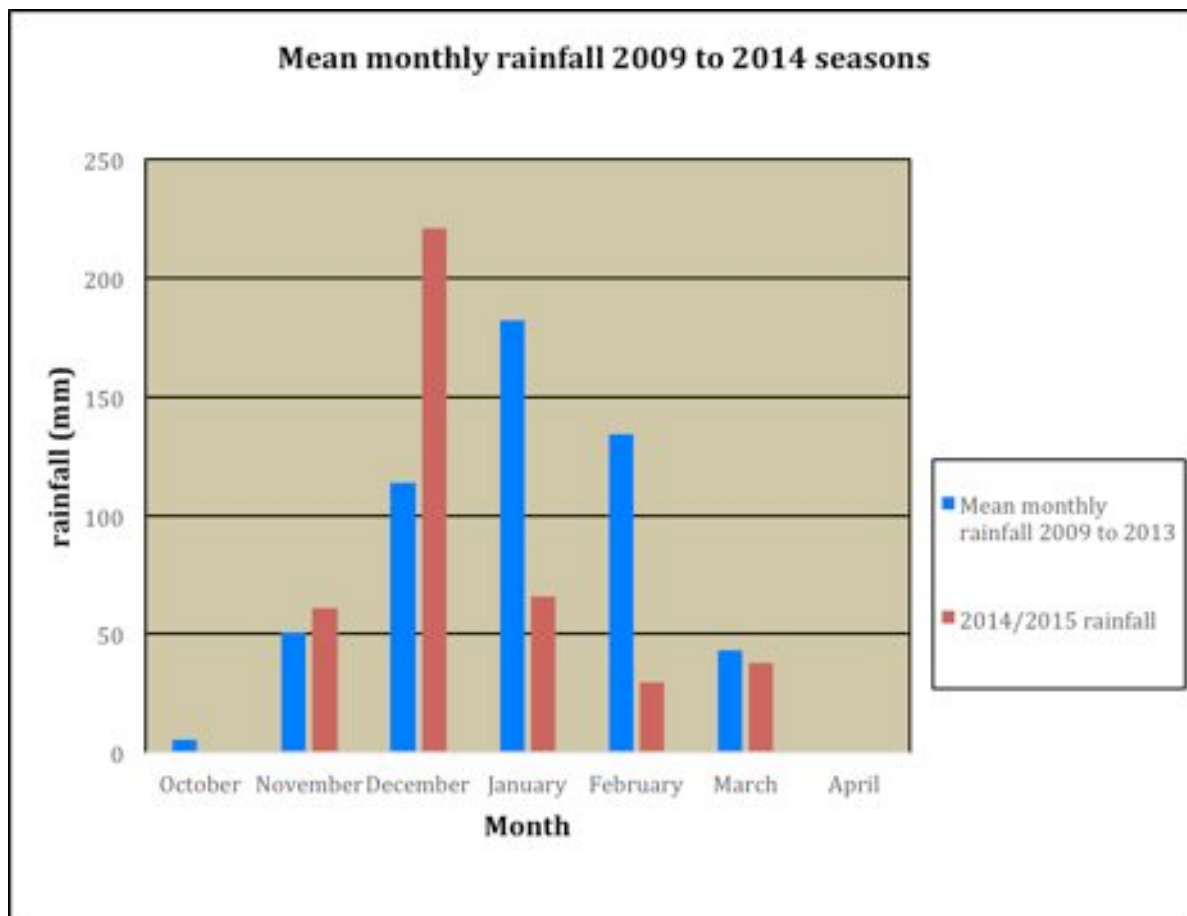
Sinamatella

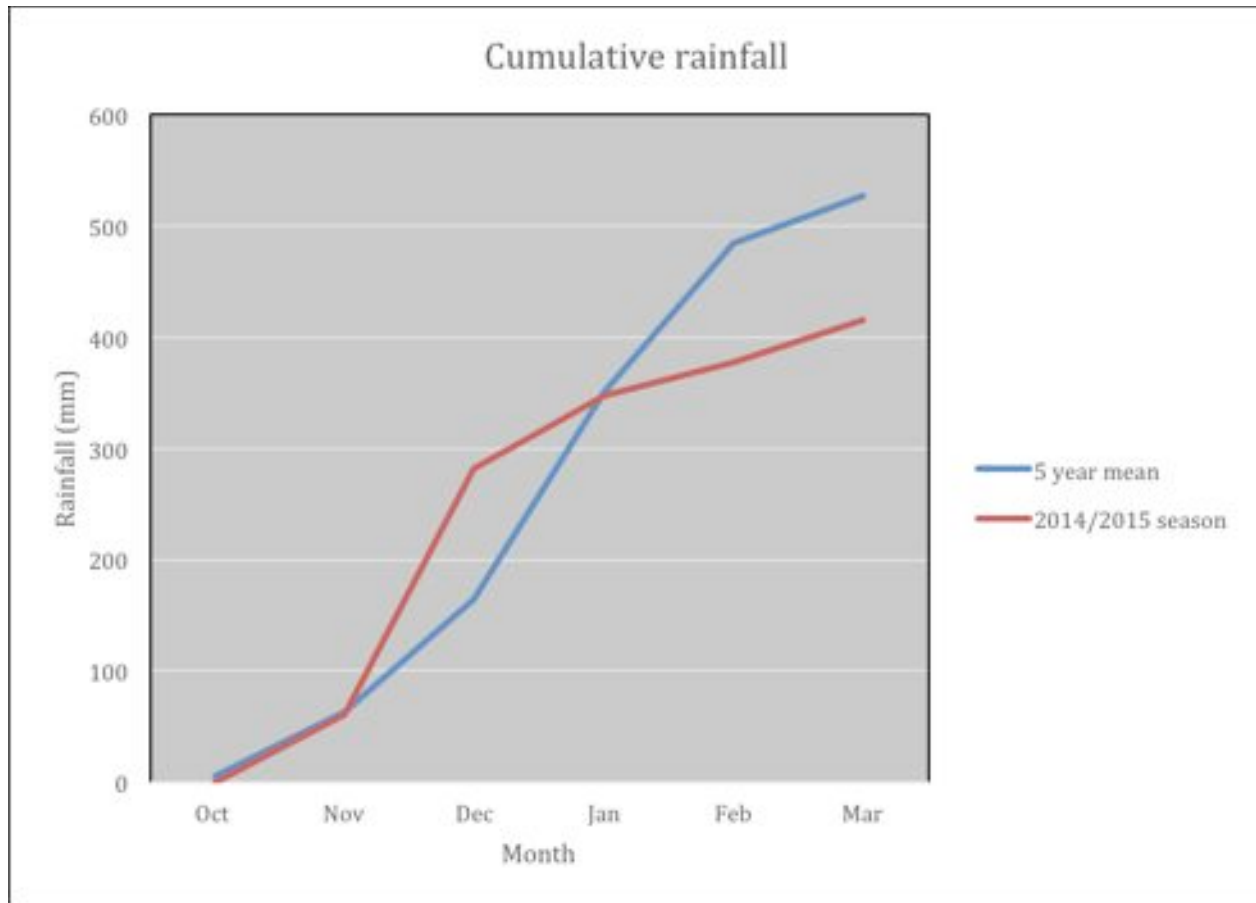
I must correct an impression that might have been given in the last newsletter that our Rhino Monitoring team found an illegal charcoal burning operation inside the Sinamatella Park area – this activity was outside of the Park, and I apologise to Area Manager Moses Gomwe for any wrong impression regarding his jurisdiction. It is actually a credit that his men were extending their range to include the Park fringe.

Report from Stephen Long

There was no report from Sinamatella at the end of February as I have had continual computer, e mail and electricity problems. Apologies once again to anyone who has e mailed me and not received a reply. Really, it's nothing personal!

As they have done for several months, rainfall and game water have dominated our work in March. I try not to be an alarmist but it is no longer possible to avoid saying it – this season, barring a late miracle, we are suffering a severe drought. The graphs tell the story....





Up to December we were having a great season but January and February failed us completely. Thanks to that good December rain we have plenty of grass and browse but the grass is already dry and the trees are fast losing their leaves so by September and October any remaining food for the herbivores will have little nutrient value. Of course, every crisis is an opportunity for someone, and the vultures, hyenas and other scavengers will no doubt be smiling.



Installing the pump at Inyantue Dam borehole

Meanwhile, we have continued doing our best to provide water at as many places as possible so that thirsty animals don't gather around just a few water points later in the year and quickly deplete the little food available. In March two new solar pumps were installed at Inyantue, one at the dam, donated by our long-term supporters the Le Pal Foundation thanks to the hard work and support of Michel Buenerd, and one at the vlei, donated by another old friend, Thor Thorsson.

Eventually we would like to connect the vlei pump to the dam but it is 2.5km away so for now it is pumping into an old trough, unused for many years. It will be interesting to see how the elephants and other animals take to a practically new water source but for now there are plenty of them using the dam.....

Considering that they are the main beneficiaries, the elephants are not helpful to us with our game water work and we have to spend quite a bit of time tidying up after them. To some extent the problems are of our own making with poorly maintained elephant-proof trenches, leaking pipes and so on to be found at most sites. Rehabilitating the decaying infrastructure has been one of our main jobs but the elephants create others almost as fast as we can deal with them.



Inyantue Dam, 19 March

At the end of March our game-water pump situation was, five solar pumps running (Inyantue Dam, Inyantue Vlei, Tshompani Dam, Baobab Pan and Mbala Lodge), two wind pumps running (Shumba and Tshompani Dam), two diesel pumps running (Shumba and Masuma), one diesel waiting to be installed (Bumbumutsa), one solar pump broken down (Bumboosie South) and the mains electric pump at Mashambo Pan not working due to lightning damage to the transformer. The Bumboosie South solar pump is our oldest. The splines on the shaft connecting the motor to the pump are worn out and we are trying to source a new motor compatible with the system.

Away from game-water we have also been very busy on the transport scene. The Parks “Mbada Diamonds” Land Rover has suffered a number of problems limiting its use for over a month and as a result our vehicles have been the only transport available. Abednico Tshuma and his green Land Rover have been busy with jobs ranging from routine anti-poaching deployments to carrying work gangs, to medical emergencies for rangers on patrol and numerous other jobs, Nicholas has been out on patrol with the rhino monitoring team and helping with deployments in the white Land Rover and I’ve been out in our poor, tired old Land Cruiser on many game water jobs, anti-poaching reactions, deployments and so on. At the end of March, there was some promise that the “Mbada” would soon return and the Parks tractor was almost back in action for the first time in many months, so there is at least some good news.

In late February some members of the SAVE African Rhino Foundation committee visited us for an afternoon. SAVE has surely been Sinamatella’s most faithful supporter over many years and as usual, Nicholas and his team brought us some gifts – radio, gps and camera trap equipment. Many thanks.



In March we were visited by Tim Scarrott, also from the SAVE Foundation who gave us a first aid training course. I was expecting to learn (and quickly forget) for the third or fourth time how to tie neat bandages on almost any part of the body but in fact even first aid has come up to date and I for one really enjoyed the course with its emphasis on keeping an accident victim alive rather than impressing Sister with the quality of the knots on a bandage! Good to know what to do but I hope I never have to do it.

Finally, at the end of March I attended a National Parks/Hwange stakeholders' meeting at Main Camp. The meeting was sprung on us at short notice but even so there was a good attendance. A lot of issues, some of them fairly contentious, were discussed and it was great to be able to talk things over in a spirit of co-operation and with the feeling that we were all working towards the same goals, even if some issues were beyond our influence. I'm not usually a fan of meetings but for once I came away with the feeling that something useful had been started and I hope there will be more of these in future.

Report by Nick Long – Sinamatella Rhino Monitoring Unit.

Firstly I would just like to clarify that the charcoal burning operation mentioned in the last month's issue was not in the National Park but in the Deka safari area but it is still a concern.

The team had a successful month of patrols and we would like to thank our donors once again who have made this possible.

We managed to have two major ten-day patrols this month and we were able to find several good rhino signs including browse marks, spoors and spray markings. The spoors we found, although in close proximity to each other, are possibly from two different animals as we were able to see a 10% difference in the width of the spoors and the animals seemed to act differently as one was definitely marking its territory and the other did not show any signs of territorial marking, which could also mean that one is a male and the other a female. All this activity was found towards the end of our last patrol and immediately after our return a call sign was sent to the area. I have just heard that they have seen a mother and calf rhino spoor and we will send camera traps out to them as soon as possible.





Where are we? Rangers using one of the maps donated to the station by Painted Dog Research Trust



This elephant we were able to observe from one of the gorges along the Bumboosie



This pack of Wild dogs which we found along the road on our way back from patrol



Robins – Hwange National Park

I had a meeting with Midwell Kapesa, the Area Manager of the Robins sector of the Hwange National Park. Robins is the most remote camp and the least visited sector of the Park, but is renowned for its buffalo herds, lion population, roan antelope and reedbuck. It has the Deka River running through it, with large pools, and is mainly basaltic with large vleis, impassable in the wet.

Midwell is struggling with old, broken down equipment – when he had a missing tourist last year his only reaction vehicle was a tractor!! There are vital waterpoints such as Big Tom's and Deteema, for the pumping of which there are only very old Lister engines leaking oil, requiring constant work on them, and thus putting the game water supplies in jeopardy.

Midwell is appealing for help on the same basis as what the Bhejane Trust is doing in the Zambezi National Park and at Sinamatella. We in BT do not currently have the resources to expand here, but are prepared to do so if we can find the funding, as I feel it is vital to support the efforts of the Area Manager. Thus I am appealing to anyone with any bright ideas or offers of support to contact me to see if we can keep this wonderful area up and running!

Poaching

ZAWA (Zambian Wildlife Authority) actually arrested a poacher in Livingstone, who confessed to hunting elephants in Zimbabwe (claimed to have shot 14). He is still being held in custody in Livingstone, pending further investigations

Two Zimbabweans were arrested in Kasane with four tusks – they are still detained and are suspected to be part of the Victoria Falls/Hwange wildlife poaching syndicate. They are awaiting trial

There was an incidence of cyanide poisoning in Tsholotsho Communal area – bordering Hwange National Park - where 7 elephants were poisoned. Following a tip off, 16,2 kg's of ivory relating to this incident was recovered, and three men arrested. They appeared in court and the first has received the mandatory 9 years jail, the other two are still to be convicted.

A Zambian poacher (he was actually a porter for ivory) wounded on 8th March 2014 and captured in the Robins area, was sentenced to ten years and three months – ten years for illegal possession of ivory and three months on immigration offence.

In a sting operation mounted by Charles Brightman of VFAPU and supported by Bhejane Trust, a lioness skin, zebra skins and a wildebeest skin were recovered. The case is in early stages of investigation, but another great job by Charles and crew.

Congratulations to the tireless efforts of Hwange Parks Investigations team, who certainly produce results! Also thanks to Nicholas Duncan and the SAVE The African Rhino Foundation who continually support the anti-poaching efforts, supplying equipment for field staff, and reward monies for informers. The rangers involved in the recent actions against the Zambian poachers were awarded certificates by the SAVE Foundation, and Bhejane Trust rewarded them financially as a small token of gratitude from all our supporters for their fine efforts.

Comment

In the last newsletter I commented on how sable and buffalo do not get along, and increasing buffalo numbers inevitably result in declining sable populations, for some unknown reason. John Davison, who grew up in Hwange Park, came up with an interesting theory – sable hide their calves in long grass for the first month after birth, before bringing them out to join the herd. John thinks the heavy pressure on the grass cover from buffalo and elephant trampling might expose the calves to predation, resulting in the drop in numbers.

I am disappointed to hear that hunting is apparently still occurring in some parks, notably the bottom end of Hwange. I was under the impression this had been stopped, as firstly our Parks should be sacrosanct havens for wildlife, and secondly, the so-called ration hunting that occurred was riddled with corruption and unethical so called professional hunters (this is well reflected on what happened on Matetsi Units 6 & 7 – see above). Lets hope this unethical blot on our national heritage is permanently cancelled.

I have been looking at the hunting quotas offered for various Parks areas, and one has to wonder about the Chete quota – pigeons? Wildpigs? Wildcats? Also Vervet monkeys – why would these be on a quota? This Chete quota is a pure thumbsuck – the area has been hammered, and eland and zebra should not be on quota – they were both scarce in this area before it was poached out. Elephant should also not be on offer as they have been poached heavily and any survivors should be protected. The quota offered is way above the sustainable level, and it is only possible to hunt one party in the area at a time without creating a conflict scenario. It strikes me this whole deal was put together behind a desk with very limited knowledge of the area involved. However, the Tuli and Sapi quotas, with a couple of small indiscretions (female eland??, pigeons?), seemed to be practical and put together by someone with requisite knowledge, although I do not know the areas well enough as to comment meaningfully.

A bit of help needed.....

I received the following email from John Davison, whose father, Ted, was the founder and first warden of Hwange . Can anyone out there help??

“For some time my eldest brother Rodney and I have been talking about one day trying to relocate, if it is still growing, a huge Baobab tree that my father photographed in about 1930 while on one of his first horse and mule/donkey patrols along the border.

We think this same tree has been mentioned in a Book on Famous Trees of Rhodesia wherein it is stated that my father's initials (EHD) can be seen carved into a branch high up on the tree. If he did in fact so carve his initials, which we doubt, it might be the tree in the attached photo whose location we are not at all sure about - could be down near Nata or further along towards Dandari and Pandamatenga. But then it might also be there are such initials on the famous Pioneer/Missionary Tree somewhere near Pandamatenga but that tree for many years before my father went to Hwange in 1928 had been carved by all sorts of passersby including having a large missionary cross carved into the bark (no evidence of that sort on the attached old photo).

Do you know anyone who lives at Pandamatenga these days who I could correspond with who might know about large Baobabs along that border area I would be grateful?

John Davison
Pinetown



Anyone with any ideas, please let me know on tlanezim@gmail.com .

GRATEFUL THANKS

A grateful thanks to those who have supported us and who continue to support us.

This month, we have had support from:

Nicholas Duncan and the SAVE The African Rhino Foundation

RAM Petroleum

Redan Petroleum

Patrick Jacquemin – We look forward to a visit by our long time supporter in April!

Makomo Mine

Ian Thomson – offer of further assistance

Dr Frank Zindel – of Switzerland, and Stuart and Sue Danks of Simply Africa

Michel Buenerd and Le Pic Vert for donated solar pump unit for Sinamatella – their 3rd donated unit! – APOLOGIES – 4th Pump (Baobab, Bumbusi South, Inyantue and Tshompani – I owe Michel a scotch!))

Thor Thorsson– an intrepid traveller – has made a fantastic donation going towards vehicles and waterpoints

Piet and Anthea Erasmus, from Cape Town – yet another generous donation.

Dave Carson and Camp Hwange for helping fund our Sinamatella Rhino Monitoring Unit

And a big thanks to the Minister of Environment, Climate and Water and to National Parks staff for their continuing support and the spirit of co-operation!

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