



WISHING EVERYONE ALL THE VERY BEST FOR 2016!

Sorry – late again!!

The rainy season should be upon us, but we are still experiencing a blue skies and a heat wave, with scattered thunderstorms only. In the Falls to date we have recorded 135mm of rain since October, though 50mm was in one storm! Bulawayo and the Lowveld have received very little rain at all, and all the signs are pointing towards a very difficult year coming up. We could be facing a drought as bad as 1992, which is going to put a lot of pressure on waterpoints and wildlife, let alone farming etc. We are going to do a survey in early January to assess the situation and our requirements, and start to put measures in place to try and mitigate the effect of the drought.

I visited Lake Mutirikwe (Kyle Dam) this month – it is a spectacularly beautiful dam and surrounds, but it is only 28% full! This dam supplies water to the Lowveld sugar estates, and is indicative of the dire water situation we are experiencing. Lake Kariba according to the Zambezi River Authority as of 10/12/2015 is 16% full – last year at the same time it was 52% full! There was only 2 meters of usable water left, of which evaporation must account for a bit. There is little local runoff into the lake as yet, and the Zambezi River at the Falls has barely risen (though it is rising slowly) – this does not bode well!!

We had a great donation from Mark Unwin of the Clarkson Jersey Charitable Trust which will allow us to purchase another vehicle. This is much appreciated and many thanks to Mark. We will be sourcing a new vehicle early in the new year – this is very timely considering the pressure we expect with the drought looming.

We also received a donation from Patrick Jacquemin for the solar pumping unit we have installed at Shumba in the Sinamatella area. The unit is already in operation. Thanks again Patrick for your support!

Zambezi National Park



The pump at Timots Pan was totally trashed by elephants! They managed to push in part of the trench to cross over and pulled off the pipeline connection, the meter and the pump head, leaving just the top of the borehole pipe exposed. The pump restraining rope snapped and the pump dropped down the borehole. However, we have retrieved it and in early January will reconnect the whole system, plus put in better protection.

The pipelines to the second pump for No 1 and to Andre's were laid, but we delayed the pump installation until January.

Otherwise we recoded 88mm of rain for the last two months of 2015, and the grass has greened up, but under the heat wave we are still experiencing, it is showing signs of wilt. The rain has been from scattered thunderstorms, so No 1 and Thomsons have filled up considerably.

Left – the pump at Timots after being trashed by elephants. The blue in the middle is the borehole casing, with the meter middle left

Robins

In 2016 we will be going ahead with installing solar pumping units at selected waterpoints in the Robins area of Hwange National Park. After consulting with Mr Dzoro, the Area Manager, we have decided on Deteema Dam and Big Toms initially. The pump at Deteema is to be a hybrid pump – a solar unit with a back up diesel powered generator on a timer switch – this system will allow for 24 hour pumping but will considerably reduce the cost of operating as compared to a straight diesel pump – it also has the advantage of leaving the solar operating in the rainy season keeping the pan topped up at no cost.

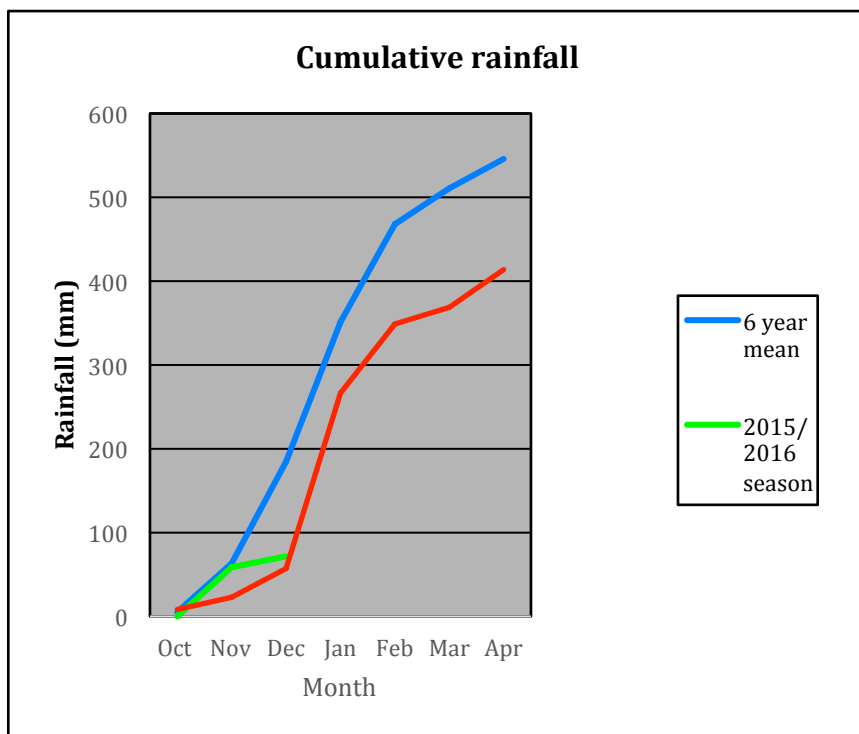
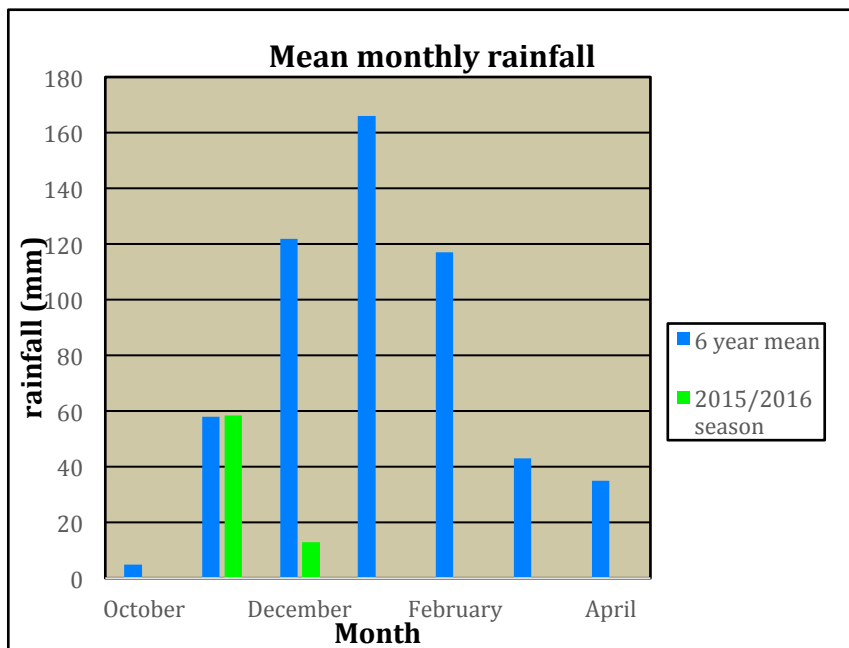
This unit has already been paid for through our long supporter, Michel Buenerd, with the funding from Le Pic Vert and the Le Pal Nature Foundation from France. It is intended to install this unit early in 2016, though we will still need to check the borehole and pipeline out to ensure we can operate at the most viable level.

The Big Toms pump is from a donor through Camp Hwange and will follow later in the year.

Sinamatella

Report by Stephen Long

I started my November report by saying how much the rainfall situation had improved in the course of the month. I really wish I could say the same for December but, as the graphs show, December rainfall was very poor indeed.



Just 13mm fell during the month which, added to the 58,5mm we received in November, brings us to 71,5mm for the season so far – way down on the average for the past six years and ominously similar to the very bad 2010/2011 season. We are trying to get the water levels up in the pumped pans but the problem will be, as always, that whilst we can pump water, we can't pump grass. The photos below were taken at Baobab Pan on the 22nd December, first looking at the water and second, from the same point, looking at the bush around the Pan. The Pan is looking quite good, thanks to the solar pump, but the bush has almost no grass.



One bright spot in the overall situation is that the rainfall has been patchy and one or two areas have received good falls. Bumboosie Camp and Bumboosie South have been particularly lucky and a trip out to either of those places takes us from relatively desert-like conditions to lush green with plenty of grass and small pans filled with rain water. We can only hope it will be the lush green areas that expand in the remaining few months of the rains rather than the desert.

Game water

Obviously, given the very poor rain so far, game water has been uppermost in our minds. Most of our pumps are running and we are working on getting the few out-of-order pumps going as soon as we can. We hope to re-build the former Shumba wind pump at Sinamatella Pan in 2016 so we spent some time looking at which components we can panel-beat back into shape and which we will need to replace. Sadly it looks as if almost none of the damaged parts can be repaired even with some heavy use of the workshop's magic 4-pound hammer but luckily we have been offered the chance to select what we might need from an old wind-pump that was taken down by Wilderness Safaris in one of their concessions so I will be travelling down to look at that as soon as I have time. Wilderness have also helped with getting the pump at Mashambo Pan replaced and after some work by ZESA on the power lines we were able to get the water flowing again late in December. We are very grateful for the help. In fact, without the help of many donors, we would have almost nothing in the way of game water infrastructure in operation. As well as Wilderness Safaris, we also received invaluable and generous help with game water in 2015 from Frank Zindel, Thor Thorsson, Patrick Jacquemin, Michel Buenerd, Makomo Resources and John Gillon. I would also especially like to thank Camp Hwange management and their staff who helped us on numerous occasions and supplied hundreds of litres of diesel and even a smile and a cup of tea when we turned up at Camp to borrow something - again.

Transport.

Early in December, Parks received a donation of vehicles and uniforms from China and these were handed over at a ceremony at Main Camp. So far Sinamatella has been given two of the vehicles and we hope they will help to solve a number of transport issues that plague us. Unfortunately the other Parks vehicles at the station were out of order for the two anti-poaching deployments over Christmas/New Year and the Chinese vehicles were not ready so Bhejane's vehicles and drivers had to cover all the transport needs. As usual, our driver Abednico Tshuma worked very hard, both driving and repairing vehicles but perhaps in the new year some of the pressure will be off him and his SAVE Foundation Land Rover Defender.

Poaching

With very few elephants in the Sinamatella area still, we have not had to worry much about any repeat of the cyanide killings. However, the rangers remain vigilant and a call-sign at Tshakabika located and destroyed a very extensive snare line that had been set far away from the spring and any normal patrol routes towards the Pangari river. The poachers had built a long, U-shaped bush-fence with snares in gaps and the rangers assume they had intended to drive animals towards it. The plan doesn't seem to have been successful as most of the snares were empty 'though still set

On the 20th, some tourists reported hearing shots west of Masuma Dam. We deployed a patrol to investigate but they found nothing and no vultures were seen circling the area in subsequent days so this was presumably a false alarm.

Wildlife

To our surprise, large numbers of buffalo were to be seen feeding on the Sinamatella flood-plain on several occasions in December. Normally the buffalo are like the elephants and disappear as soon as the



On the 8th we were at Shumba and we saw very large numbers of White and Woolly-necked Storks as well as Marabous and many Yellow-billed and Black Kites. It was hard to see what had attracted them all to the area but presumably a shower of rain had brought a hatch of some insect that they were feeding on. Whatever it was, it must have been abundant as the total number of birds was well over two hundred.

Back at Sinamatella, we have been seeing the effects of the poor rains in and around our house. Our local group of Dassies had a good crop of babies earlier in the year and they are still small enough to climb out on the smallest and thinnest branches to get at leaves they particularly like. As a result of heavy grazing by eleven of these babies every morning and evening for a couple of weeks, the *Strychnos* tree by our bird-bath is now almost bare of leaves. Meanwhile the adults are still raiding our 'garden' (which they normally leave alone during the rains), stripping the bougainvillea as fast as it can put out buds and repeatedly attacking the climbing aloe I've been trying hard to cultivate. Inside the house we have been visited by Tree Mice – something else that normally stops with the rains. On one evening we caught four of them in the live trap and released them elsewhere but they keep coming back. Luckily they are not especially destructive and not very difficult to catch. One good piece of news (for us anyway) is that the baboons haven't re-started their dry season raiding. I can't imagine what they are finding to eat out in the bush but whatever it is – long may it last!

Sinamatella

I wrote in the November newsletter that we were saying goodbye to our Area Manager Mr Gomwe. In December we were happy to welcome Mr Mbikiyana, who has taken over the job. We wish him well and hope the partnership between National Parks and Bhejane Trust at Sinamatella can continue to grow.

At the same time as welcoming a new Area Manager, we also welcome a number of new rangers to Sinamatella. There have been numerous transfers of rangers around the country in recent weeks and we have not been spared, losing as many as twenty one rangers, including some of our best and most experienced.

Some of their replacements come from far afield and the logistics of all the moves so close to Christmas have been difficult and disruptive for everyone involved. No doubt the station will be able to settle down in 2016 and perhaps the injection of 'new blood' will produce good results in what looks like being a tough year.

Finally, back in July the Sinamatella School Association (organised by Makila Tours) built a fenced garden for the school. It is common to read of aid efforts that are misused or unused so I am pleased to include the picture below, which I took, unannounced on a school holiday Saturday. It shows the garden with a variety of vegetables growing and one of the children who I found watering the plants. Well done to the headmistress, teachers and children.



Rhino Monitoring Unit – Report by Nick Long

I spent most of this month patrolling in the outskirts of the IPZ to try and possibly locate the rhino that have been known to be in these areas in the past. We found very little rhino activity but as usual there were many other interesting incidents and two in particular stick in the mind.

The first was when we were on patrol outside the Park in the Hwange Colliery concession and we came across signs of charcoal burning. Returning to our base in the evening on another day we intercepted seven people and a truck loaded with 56 bags of charcoal. When we questioned them they told us that the charcoal is loaded onto coal haulage trucks and transported to Bulawayo where it is used by chicken farmers. Making charcoal is hard work but they said that they did all of this as they were struggling to survive due lack of salaries from Hwange Colliery Company and they were selling each bag for \$4.00. We found such a low price, after so much work, hard to believe, especially as the truck they use is in good condition. They were arrested and the charcoal confiscated. They were fined only \$20.00 each as this is the maximum allowed for the offence but it is not much of a deterrent as I am sure they make much more than this.

The second memorable incident occurred early one morning when I was on my way out for a local patrol at Tshakabika. When I left Sinamatella it was dry but as I got towards the Lukosi river I could see that there had been some rain. When I got to the river crossing I was amazed to find water just beginning to flow down the previously dry river, this was quite a sight as I had never seen anything like this before.



I crossed safely and continued on my journey to Tshakabika but this turned out to be a bad decision. There had been a freak storm - very localised but very heavy and I got really stuck a few kilometres after crossing the Lukosi.



I had to spend the rest of the morning trying to get out of the mud and when I finally managed to get free I turned around and abandoned the patrol for the day. Before I left I walked ahead to see how the road looked but in fact it was hardly visible in a huge shallow pool that had formed on flat ground. The water soon went down and we reached Tshakabika the next day but now the area where I was stuck is a beautiful green patch of grass - one of very few in a still very dry area.

Poaching

A quiet month in Matabeleland North with no elephants reported poached in Hwange during the month. One suspected poacher was arrested near the Sinamatella boundary with a .303 rifle – he was sentenced to 6 months hard labour, plus the rifle confiscated

The Bulye Valley Conservancy has been hit with rhino poaching this last year, losing quite a few rhino. This poaching has been orchestrated by a fellow well known to the BVC and who knows the area and the systems well, which complicates the issue. However they had some success in early December and arrested one poacher out of two after they had killed a rhino – there was a bit of a shootout, and the one poacher got away, unfortunately with the horns, while the other was arrested with the weapon, which had a highly sophisticated silencer on it, fitted in South Africa.

The Save Valley Conservancy has also been hit with rhino poaching, also orchestrated by another well known villain, and have lost some rhino. They also have recorded some success lately – they had a shootout and killed one poacher, arrested three more and confiscated some weapons. Unfortunately the poachers had killed at least two rhino. The captured poacher was sentenced to 35 years of which 15 years were suspended on condition he repays the state \$ 480,000 (the value of the rhino poached). This magistrate is sending a very strong message out! Two members of the gang (including the ringleader Dumisani Moyo) who eluded arrest have fled to Zambia hotly pursued by the law. They are now marked men. Unfortunately we can expect no cooperation from the Zambians in bringing them to justice.

I read with interest that Zambia has created a special Marine Unit within it's armed forces. This unit is to protect Zambians at Kazungula and Sinazongwe. Both these areas are hot beds of illegal activity by Zambians, both fish poaching and crossing into Zimbabwe and Botswana for elephant poaching This unit sounds suspiciously like it has been created to protect the poachers – lets hope I am very wrong!

Comment

A Chinese NGO, Blue Sky Relief, has set up in Zimbabwe, with an initial aim of assisting National Parks, apparently in Hwange and Mana Pools National Parks. I gather they are already established in Mana Pools. Although viewed with suspicion in some quarters. I think this could prove a very positive step. I believe it could be a move by the Chinese nation to be more integrated into the world of NGO's where they have been conspicuous in their absence to date. Any assistance to help National Parks and to thus help the wildlife and Parks must be welcomed.

The team leader, Wang Yingjie, summed up the Chinese philosophy

"We want to get involved in conservation so as to help raise people's awareness of wildlife protection back in China. What's more, we want to make an effort to share the responsibility and improve China's image," noted Wang.

Richard Maasdorp of the Zambezi Society put it out very clearly what I think would be the reaction of most of the NGO's involved in wildlife conservation:

"We would support all well directed anti-poaching support from China and would encourage joint ventures with reputable local organizations, Chinese involvement can be highly significant and positive, if partnerships are formed," Maasdorp also said they hadn't been informed about BSR's arrival, and suggested that Chinese volunteers meet with reputable local people and organizations so as to develop harmonized strategies, tactics and deployment of resources. Otherwise, it's easy to make mistakes. He added that the key obstacles facing anti-poaching work in Zimbabwe are a lack of resources, the absence of modern management practices, little systematic research and monitoring, corruption and donor support that has no relation to the needs on the ground. We would concur with what Maasdorp has said, and would be perfectly willing to work with Chinese NGO's in wildlife conservation.

Recently there was an article put out titled "Killing Lions for Fun". I found this article extremely inflammatory and incredibly irresponsible by the author, who showed a complete lack of understanding and knowledge of the reality on the ground. The article was the authors blow up on what was actually a fairly well balanced article from a UK newspaper. The author of the "Killing Lions for Fun" article showed his ignorance of the area in question, and the ground operations in many ways:

- 1) The area in question is the Bulyebe Valley Conservancy (BVC) – not the Bubiana Conservancy which is a different area altogether. To make this basic error already shows ignorance of the topic he was trying to discuss, although once pointed out, the author corrected this error.
- 2) The BVC is one of the greatest conservation stories in Africa – a broken down cattle ranch covering 850,000 acres (bigger than some countries!) was taken over by a group of investors, a 240 kilometer double game fence put around it, infrastructure put in and it was restocked with wildlife, including lions and rhino. Had this not happened, this area would have been taken over and be bereft of any wildlife by now.
- 3) BVC introduced 19 lions in 1999, and they have now reached a population estimated at between 450 and 500 . This proves lion given the space and food can reproduce rapidly, but also brings in a problem – there is no dispersal area available for young lions kicked out the prides. These are the young lions that traditionally would go walkabout to find their own territories, challenge pride lions or die in the process. This situation provides however an ideal research project, which could produce vital information as lion get more and more confined to smaller spaces in Africa
- 4) The lions are "Affecting the ecology" – the author assumes ecology to be strictly vegetation – ecology encompasses all aspects of the natural system. No one has ever claimed that the lions are "destroying the habitat" – implying over grazing I would suggest that if the people on the ground and in the know feel the lions are affecting the ecology, they would have sound reasons.
- 5) WILDCRU or lion researchers are purely that – researchers. They have no management stake, though they could advise if asked. Their mandate is purely research, and should this include the effect on lion populations due to hunting, then this is part of the mandate, and the information acquired could be valuable (as has been the situation in the Hwange area)
- 6) BVC has the largest rhino population in Zimbabwe – over 220 Black Rhino, and 80+ white rhino. The cost of protecting these rhino runs at over \$500,000 a year – they get no outside assistance or funding in protecting these rhino, and certainly get no monetary gain from this conservation program.
- 7) The Professional Hunter who thought up the lion hunt raffle had the best of intentions, but was very naïve as to social media.

- 8) The author also shows his complete ignorance of the BVC situation with daft statements such as “The argument that Bubyee can only survive with hunting is nonsense “ Unfortunately when people with very limited knowledge try to comment on a situation they know nothing about, they can create confusion. In his ignorance he proposes two other options:

I) The author mentions game ranching as a non hunting option , saying “It proved very viable in the 1960’s” – referring obviously to Doddieburn Ranch where the first game ranching was carried out, and which relied on hunting revenues and game cropping to survive!! Where did he think the money in game ranching came from?

II) “How about trying upmarket photographic safaris like Sabi Sands in South Africa? This latter option is a viable option, but is there the willpower to even try a section of the Bubyee on the same lines as Malilangwe” This statement by the author again shows his complete lack of knowledge on the topic he is trying to comment on – the owners have looked at this option but ruled it out as non viable. We cannot presently fill the prime tourist spots like Hwange and Victoria Falls, so I do not know where the author will find another 10,000 tourists at \$ 1500 per day per person (which no lodge in Zimbabwe currently charges) to go to BVC. I am sure if he could guarantee such a market, the BVC owners would be amenable to change! Malilangwe has a affluent benefactor and does not rely on tourism revenues to survive.

The author also states : “This area had plenty of game before it was converted from ranching to hunting” – another piece of misinformation – it had some plains game which was extensively hunted, but all prey species were eliminated on sight, as were problem animals such as wildebeest, buffalo (cattle disease carriers) and elephant. The ranch was generally overgrazed by cattle, with little excess capacity for wildlife.

“What it often comes down to is more a choice of land use and lifestyle by the owners of the land. They like sport hunting and so will not consider other options” I have spoken to some of the owners of BVC, which I doubt the author has, so I do not know how he can make such a wild and unfounded statement! If anyone can come up with a practical, realistic plan to run the conservancy without hunting, and guarantee it’s multi-million dollar operating budget, the owners would be more then willing to listen.

I suggest before people make wild, unsubstantiated and inflammatory statements, they do their homework and find out the facts on the ground on the topic they wish to expose, before they go to print. I repeat that I think Bubyee Valley Conservancy is to me one of the greatest wildlife conservation and rhino protection programs going which should be commended, not condemned! We do not need people grandstanding to the social media to the detriment of this country and it’s people.

I would also like to state that we are facing a drought of major proportions at this stage and all Zimbabweans need to pull together. Animals are going to die horrible deaths in this drought but we have to try and save as many as possible. The number of animals that will be taken by hunting will pale into insignificance when compared to the number of animals that are going to die from the drought, unless we get very good rains now.

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 – a staunch supporter.

Mark Unwin and the Clarkson Jersey Charitable Trust

Michel Buenerd and Le Pic Vert and Le Pal Nature Foundation for another pump this time for Deteema dam in the Robins area

RAM Petroleum

Eco Energy Fuels

Patrick Jacquemin – for continued, invaluable support, including rangers rations. Patrick has now supplied funds towards another water point.

Mats Berglund of Sweden for his generous donation towards establishing water in Kazuma Pan

Prof Willem van der Riet of the Transboundary Conservation Foundation for his assistance in Kazuma Pan

Bud and Guy Cockcroft – donation of a solar unit in memory of their beloved Jane (RIP)

Chris Lampard – continuing invaluable support in the field

Piet and Anthea Erasmus - for their generous donation towards water in the Chamabonda

Alan Sparrow of the Kazuma Foundation for his assistance

Makomo Mine – donation of diesel

Ian & Sue Thomson – more assistance forthcoming, with upgraded pumps, and financial help.

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

Michel Buenerd and Le Pic Vert for four donated solar pump units for Sinamatella

Thor Thorsson– an intrepid traveller

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

Apologies if I have left anyone out – purely an oversight if so!!

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All those who support and assist in many varied ways – thanks and appreciated. My apologies if I have inadvertently left anyone out!!!

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

Donations

Bhejane Trust relies on donations to continue its operations. At Bhejane Trust, ALL donated funds go towards wildlife projects – we have no administration costs, and my time is purely voluntary.

Three projects we are concentrating on at the moment (a suggestion from a reader was that we advise on what we are currently fund raising for, so potential donors can support a specific project):

- 1) **Robins Camp** – waterpoints – The Robins area is neglected compared to Main Camp and Sinamatella and is in dire need of assistance in maintaining water supplies for the wildlife – the area is noted for its big buffalo herds, lions, roan, reedbuck and of course, elephant. The staff there are trying desperately to maintain the waterpoints, with old engines and diesel supply shortages, and we need to replace all the old diesels with solar pumps with a small generator back when required. The cost of a solar unit is running at \$ 6000 per unit.
- 2) **Drone** – we are looking to acquire a drone for two purposes :
To monitor the Zambezi River for Zambian poaching (both fish and elephant poachers). A drone would detect the mekoro's transporting the poachers and would allow a reaction unit to then position themselves to intercept the intruders. For rhino monitoring at Sinamatella – when the monitors feel they are close to a rhino, the drone could be deployed ahead to detect the rhino without disturbing it. It could take photo's for positive id. The cost of a drone is running at around \$ 3000.
- 3) Anyone wishing to help us save our wildlife heritage, donations to any amount would be gratefully accepted (note – it is a US\$ account) :
- 4) Bank details :
Bhejane Trust,
FBC Bank,
Galleria Building, Parkway
Victoria Falls
Zimbabwe
Branch Code : 8512
Swift Code : FBCPZWHAXXX
Account No : 6145093780178

- 5) Bhejane Trust office address :

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