



In my last newsletter, I published a piece on the results of the Hwange Game count undertaken by WEZ. The Honourable Minister Saviour Kasukuwere emailed me after reading the newsletter, and I have copied in his script to me :

“My sincere thanks go to the WEZ for a fantastic job counting our game .
Please in your next issue publish my deep appreciation to all who participated and funded the game count.”

Well done to WEZ and it is great to know everyones efforts are appreciated!

I also have posted here an excerpt of an incident that occurred in the Robins area, per kind favour of Vic Cockroft, which is uplifting from the negative press currently associated with Parks. It proves the quality that we have available here in the field, as I have stated all along.

Vic had checked into Robins in mid December for a couple of nights. The rainy season was in full swing, and Robins had had good rain, rendering the roads rather muddy! Vic picks up the story: “Up, coffee, unpack as much as we won’t need and out the gate at 6am. The roads are wet, the rain overnight has certainly slushed in. I decide to head down Big Toms loop, it’s relatively short, we should be back by 9am, to enjoy an early brunch. Big Toms seems fine, although there are no fresh car tracks and there are quite a few soggy patches. After about 6km we come upon a soggy patch about 30m long. I stop, engage 4x4 and pick up a bit of speed, approaching the mud puddle at about 20km / h. Thwack, I hit a submerged log. My left front wheel goes over the log, but as it goes over, it tilts the log, such that it jams into my left back wheel, lifts the whole left side of the bakkie up, the tyre smoking. And then down with a thud and a dead stop!

I get out of the bakkie, with some trepidation, this is a National Park and a pride of 8 lions was seen not far from here! I look around the vehicle, not knowing quite what happened. I find the log wedged into the rear wheel arch, we’re almost up to the chassis in mud. There’s no room to fit a spare wheel and a jack underneath the vehicle! There’s nowhere to anchor my winch onto, despite it being 6000kg

In about half an hour I manage to remove the offending log. It's about calf thick and the length of a 12 year old. I throw it as far as I can, which is not that far, but further than I'd want it to be in about an hour. So I dig mud. I find sticks and logs and stones and I dig mud.

Eventually about 10am I admit defeat "J, I think we're stuck, I can't get us out of here, we need help". I'm splattered and caked in mud, my clothes are like cardboard. What little protruding fingernails I had are gone, leaving splits and cracks. I have scabs under both feet, where I've trodden on sharp sticks, or rocks. My guess is I look pretty wild and scary!

It's been a long morning. The storm clouds are building, in my mind also. What do I do? Do I walk, the GPS says we're only 7.8km from Robins by road. Luckily we have water, about 5 litres and about 1 litre of some homemade ginger beer. We have food too, so we're not in any immediate trouble. Probably a good idea to wait. The hours pass, we can hear the jets going into and out of Vic Falls, but no other sounds. It's mid-day, the right time to walk, if I walk. I discuss this with J, a mistake. She's a child and becomes upset, she doesn't want me to walk, she's afraid of what will happen if I do. She's right of course! I can't walk with her, that's putting all our eggs into one basket. If I walk alone, good chance I'll be fine and nothing will happen. But, if there's a problem, J will be on her own. Will she be ok? Will someone find her? So, the answer is to wait, obviously!.

Just amazingly frustrating, boring, sitting here. Other than the odd bathroom call, it's sitting in the cab, or the camper back. I left the camp chairs in camp, so even sitting in the camper back is uncomfortable. I start hooting an S.O.S call, short, long, short, you never know, someone might hear. But nothing, not even any game!

Evening comes, as does the thunder, lightning and rain. The puddle gets deeper. We adjourn to the back, create some food from tinned baked beans, smoked mussels and whatever, and as the sun sets, we get ready for bed. Darkness comes about 19h00. I wait for full darkness, when anyone in camp should be sitting around the braai and the night chorus has not yet reached its full orchestra. Into the front, start the engine and turn on the lights and spot lights. Hoot an S.O.S. and flash bright lights and spots for 10 minutes. It's an almost desperate hope, but I have to do it. But with the lightning and the thunder all around, there's very little chance that anyone will hear or see us.

The night is very disturbed. Neither of us sleeps well. It's not only the situation, but the singing frogs! It's hard to believe that flipping frog s can raise such a cacophony. Listening from 2 metres above the puddle, I think I can make out around 50 different frog locations and at least 3 species, but who knows, could be ten species, I just wish they would shut up! But, no other sounds during the night, no lions, hyenas, nothing, frogs and insects only. Even after the sun rises, the frogs keep up their 100 tenors rendition, trouble is, there's no harmony.

The sky is clear, though we know that the clouds are going to build again once the heat of the day starts. We've seen nothing of anyone for 24 hours. I remind her that we are safe, we won't starve or die of thirst. In fact, we can survive at least a week, we'll be bored shirtless but we'll be OK. The main thing is for someone to notice that we are missing, not in camp, then I'm sure we'll be found. Family are expecting us in the Falls on the 24th (today's the 23rd), so if we don't show up, they'll set the clockwork running. At absolute worst, we'll get to spend Xmas day in the bush! I must admit to wondering whether the camp staff had noticed that we were not there, that the tent, camp chairs and braai were standing alone, forlorn in their unused state. In other words, I was sort of steeling myself to being stuck for a few days

The time passes geologically slowly, I watch the storm clouds as they turn and change, but continuously develop. I shift in the seat, once, twice and again, over and over, swatting flies and shooshing wasps and hornets. I hear something, faintly!

Get out of the cab and, yes, definitely a faint sound, getting louder. It's a helicopter. I run round to the back, to the camper, get the torch, find strobe and jump onto the tailgate. The sound is getting louder, from the west. A small cream and green chopper appears, flying west to east. I jump up and down, flash my strobe, the chopper turns towards us, I shout to J "they've found us " and they have.

The pilot flies over us, I signal that we're stuck (swipe my finger across my throat), he waves, circles and comes over again. I hold my arms wide, then give the thumbs up, which he returns, before he flies off. I can feel myself get lighter, as the weight slides off my shoulders. My mood lifts immediately and J is smiling.

The chopper lands on the road, about 250 metres behind us and I tell J to stay in the car as I walk towards the aircraft. I walk about 150 metres and a chap in khaki and green walks out of the bush to greet me (I find out later this is the Area Manager for Robins, Mr. Midwel Kapesa). Mr Kapesa shakes my hand and says that when we didn't return to camp by 19h00 last night, they became worried and started the process of searching for us. He explains that they were very concerned that we had water, food and that we were safe. He apologetically says that they were unable to do much at night, with rain and mud, but that he had contacted Head Office in Harare this morning and been given permission to call in the chopper from Vic Falls to search for us. He says that as their Land Rover is out of action he'll have to send the tractor to pull us out. But, he says, the tractor tyres aren't great, so maybe! I said I was happy to wait, I was happy that at least they knew where we were. Mr Kapesa says he'll send the tractor as soon as possible.

Just after 14h00 I hear a strange sort of thunder, that becomes louder. Within a few minutes a tractor comes around the bend at speed, with a driver and 2 rangers, one ranger balancing on each side. Within a couple of minutes I've packed up the floor mats I tried under the wheels, the muddy shoes, the caked clothes and sealed up the camper roof. By this time the rangers have boots off and trousers rolled up and immersed knee deep mud rope to my tow bar and to the tractor. The tractor hardly puffs and we were out!

Back at camp we find the tent, gas stove and chairs are as we left them, but everything else has been put away in safe storage. The camp attendants bring everything down to our site, explaining that our goods were stored away for safety. Our dirty washing has been washed and everything is tidy. J and I go to shower in refreshingly warm water. I have to take a scrubbing brush to get rid of the mud under nails, in crevices I didn't know existed. While we're in the shower the camp attendants wash the car and fold the washing. After showering, we pack up camp, to leave for the Falls. I tip the attendants. Mr. Kapesa comes walking down to the camp, I have a horrible feeling he's going to ask me for several hundred dollars, to pay for the rescue. But he does not, he wishes us well, reiterates again that we were wise to stay with the vehicle and though he regrets our leaving early, hopes we come back to Hwange in future. I give Mr Kapesa my remaining \$ to share amongst the rescue team. It's not much, but it's all I had on me.

I thank you for your efficiency, your dedication and for the team you lead.

I am a Zimbo by birth, schooling and wonderful years as a child, adolescent and young adult. I have grown a little sour and negative with age, especially living and working in Africa. When it comes to Zimbabwe I expect very little, simply because of the bad press and general deterioration (by my = western opinion) in the country as a whole. So the efforts of Zim Parks and Mr Kapesa and his staff in particular, are a 'wake up' call for me. I must stop being a sour, dour old fart and expect more. Maybe if I expect more, I'll get more.

Thank you Mr. Kapesa, and your staff, and to Zim Parks, you not only saved us from the bush, but you renewed some lost faith in the humanity of humans. I'm glad that Mr Kapesa, his staff and Zim parks showed me that I, the tourist, am still important."

Schalows Turaco. Of interest to birders is the invasion of Schalows Turaco into the suburbs of Victoria Falls. Their raucous calls can be heard all day, and they can be seen flitting between gardens. I assume they are breeding in some gardens. I have never seen them in the town like this before! In Sasol Birds it is classified as "uncommon", localized along Zambezi River west of Victoria Falls.

Zambezi National Park

Not much to report this month. The good rains have continued, and the grass is growing at a frantic rate. The waterholes have filled up and looking great. The wildlife numbers are down – the zebra and buffalo have moved back to the river frontage, though the sable are sedentary.



No 3 - full



No 1 - full



Thomsons Pan – in March 2014 (left) and January 2015 (below)



CHAMABONDA WATER RECORDS

Month Jan,2015

Waterpoint	Vol pumped	No Days	Daily Vol	Notes
Timots	218,000	22	9909	Panel problem, also left switched off by mistake for 9 days!!
No 1	701,000	31	22613	semi blocked borehole
Thomsons	961,000	31	31000	
No 3	803,000	31	25903	

Kazuma Pan National Park

Alan Sparrow and Neil Rix of the Kazuma Foundation have been assisting Parks with their operations at Kazuma Pan National Park over the past couple of years. Late last year Alan hosted a couple from Sweden, who were looking at possibly donating towards a borehole in the KPNP. Due to the inaccessibility of KPNP, Alan asked if I would assist in showing them the work done on the Chamabonda, as an example of what is required at KPNP.

I duly accompanied Alan and this delightful Swedish couple on a trip to the Chambonda, showing them the waterpoints, the solar units, water divining with a forked stick, mowing program, etc. The end result is the Swedish gentleman offered to fund not one, but **three** waterpoints in the KPNP! This is a fantastic offer and will really put KPNP on the map.

I have agreed to help Alan on the water program for the KPNP, and we took a trip out there. We basically did a recce of the whole area, which Alan and I know from days of old, and we took Jed Robinson with – an old Kazuma hand. The area was very wet, but with some great birdlife, especially on the depression. We got a good idea of where waterholes are needed, and where to locate camp sites, but will need to go back for a more in depth survey, in cooperation with Parks and with Midwell Kapesa, the Area Manager responsible for the KPNP.

We are hoping to sort out a solar pump for the parks camp, as the current requirements of the existing diesel pump is a real logistical problem, plus put in three water points, along with establishing two minimum development camp sites.

On the Kazuma Depression with Andrew Lane, Jed Robinson and Alan Sparrow



Sinamatella

At a meeting in January, held between Stephen Long, Dave Carson from Camp Hwange, and myself, it was decided to set up a dedicated Rhino Monitoring Unit at Sinamatella. This Unit will be a joint venture between National Parks, The SAVE the African Rhino Foundation of Australia, Camp Hwange and Bhejane Trust. We have agreed to take on Stephen's son, Nick, as the leader of this team, which will be for a trial period of three months initially.

This SRMU will comprise Nick as the team leader, three dedicated rangers from Parks, a vehicle from SAVE, rations and backup from Bhejane, and back up from Camp Hwange. They are tasked with locating the remaining rhino and giving feedback on their status – information we are currently sorely lacking.

Bhejane Trust will be assisting Parks on all the waterpoints in Sinamatella – we will be jointly operating a record number of waterpoints this year, all going well! . Stephen has already made a start on renovating points, and the current situation is :

- 1) Inyantue Dam – has two boreholes – One solar unit donated by Michel Buenerd/Le Pic Vert of France to be installed in February. This is the most remote borehole in the Sinamatella area, and the solar unit will save a lot of hassle. The dam will be monitored during the year to ensure the inflow is sufficient, and whether a second pump on the other borehole needs to be activated at a future date – Stephen is standing by to install an engine if required.
- 2) Tshompani – has two boreholes. One is equipped with a windmill, which has been repaired by Stephen and now operating. The second borehole has a solar unit on it donated by Michel Buenerd/Le Pic Vert, installed last year and operating. This will be the first time there has been water pumped here for years
- 3) Baobab – solar unit pumping well, troughs repaired and area cleaned up
- 4) Bumboosie South - problems with existing pump – to replace with a spare which we have. To extend piping in the borehole. Should be working properly by end of rains
- 5) Masuma – engine to be serviced
- 6) Shumba – a solar unit funded by Bhejane Trust to be installed here. Windmill also to be repaired. Possible plan to swop the windmill for an engine at a later stage should the combined pumping not prove sufficient to keep the pan full.
- 7) Mashamba pan – on ZESA (thanks to Wilderness safaris)
- 8) Bumbumutsa – to be equipped and operated by Camp Hwange. Bhejane to assist where required.
- 9) Mbala gate – small solar unit installed to feed a pan nearby, and for staff, client water.

We hope to have all these waterpoints operational by the end of the rains.

A note from Stephen : Early in January I encountered a problem with my e mail and I lost any mails that were sent to me over a period of a week or so. I am now receiving mail normally but have difficulty sending so if you mailed me in January and I either replied very slowly or not at all, my apologies – and please re-send anything I didn't reply to

Stephen Longs report

Water

After December's excellent rainfall, January was a disappointment with just 66mm, 35% of the average for the previous five years. In spite of the poor rains the water situation is good. Mandavu dam spilled on the second of January and still looked superb at month end.



Mandavu Dam

Masuma Dam was very full but we faced a problem that also arose last year with water spilling through a path made by elephants over the dam wall rather than through the spillway. The small upper dam was full for a while but then it cut right through its wall and emptied into the river. The damage is quite severe and with no suitable equipment available we are unlikely to be able to repair it. There is good water in the rivers, Tshompani and Inyantue dams and the Tshompani/Tendele pan complex and springs are running well so we can look forward to a good dry season, provided we get rain in February.

We had a busy month at our various pumped water sources. Thanks to support from Patrick Jacquemin and from WEZ we are trying to improve some of the infrastructure and solve some long-term problems before the pumping season starts. At Tshompani we have once again got the wind pump running but, unlike the last few

times I have reported the same thing, this time it has pumped for a couple of weeks rather than a couple of hours. At Baobab we have repaired a leaking outlet pipe, re-dug some of the elephant-proof trench where it had collapsed and cleared some of the bush to open up the view of the pan. In anticipation of a new solar pump installation we travelled out to Inyantue and took out the old diesel pump pipes from both boreholes. It was good to see water in the dam with elephants and buffalo drinking and lions on a kill nearby. Finally, we have installed a small solar pump at Mbala gate. So far it is set up to pump into the shallow dam approximately 200m after the gate but we hope that it can eventually also be connected to the tank for the toilets if we can obtain enough pipe. The pump does not supply enough water to keep the dam anywhere near full but even a small amount will be welcome later in the year.



The shallow dam at Mbala.

Wildlife

There is usually a time around mid-February when elephants suddenly re-appear on the Sinamatella flood-plain to feed on the long grass. They make a great deal of noise greeting each other so we are always aware when they arrive. This year they arrived in January, presumably because the grass growth is more advanced following December's heavy rain but not, I hope, heralding an early start to the dry season. We'll see.

We have been getting some interesting information on rhino from rangers on patrol. It is always difficult to find rhino in the rainy season, especially as patrols tend to continue to visit the areas where they have seen activity in the dry months when tracking is easy and the rhino don't move far. This year we are trying to

improve our patrol coverage and we are seeing reports of activity outside those areas and rangers and camera traps are being deployed to try to locate the animals involved.

In mid-January we took part in the African Waterfowl Census, counting at Masuma, Mandavu, Mbala and a number of the Shumba pans. Bird numbers were fairly low but there is so much standing water around the Park that the birds are very spread out. Highlights were large numbers of terns and an Ethiopian Snipe at Shumba, and a Darter at Mandavu. We have never before seen Darters at Mandavu and often wondered why not but the behaviour of this one gave an answer. Mandavu has many crocodiles (in 2012 we counted over 120) and they regularly feed right out in the dam, catching fish at or near the surface. We watched the Darter fishing. It caught a fish then spent at least five minutes swimming around on the surface, occasionally shaking the fish in the water as if it was suicidally determined to attract a croc. Eventually it swallowed its prey and flew off to perch in a tree but we haven't seen it since. Maybe it flew elsewhere but I wouldn't be surprised if a croc got it.



Ethiopian Snipe near Shumba

Tortoises, ranging from tiny hatchlings to fairly large adults have been very active in recent weeks. Normally we only see Leopard tortoises but in January we saw a Bell's Hinged for the first time. We also met what we took to be a small but ambitious Leopard Tortoise male determinedly following a much larger female. We watched them for a while from a distance as they hurried along the road then we moved up closer. She was unconcerned by the car but he immediately gave up the chase and headed off into the grass – or by that time he'd realised his mistake and we were just a good face-saver!



Ambitious

Miscellaneous

Sinamatella camp's water problems finally seemed to be solved right at the end of the month. For most of January we only had water thanks to a couple of rangers who made it their business every few hours, including the early hours of the morning, to start the diesel engine which was pumping water to the overhead tanks. Luckily for them ZNWA finally fitted the necessary switchgear for an electric pump, originally donated by Bhejane, and the job could be handed over to the ZNWA rep at the camp. It would be better if the automatic switching system could be repaired and the necessary non-return valves fitted to allow the main reservoir to be put back on line but for now we have water – provided the ZNWA rep doesn't oversleep!

On the 18th of the month lightning struck and destroyed the transformer for the camp borehole. ZESA responded quickly and two days later they had replaced it with an unused transformer from elsewhere. On the same day, lightning also struck at Shumba, setting fire to the thatched roof of the toilet block. The roof was destroyed and will have to be temporarily covered until new grass can be cut in July.

On the 30th of the month rangers at Inyantue found a man wandering in the Park. He was clearly mentally disturbed so he was transported to Hwange and handed over to the Police who said they knew him well from similar wanderings in the past and they would try to get him back to his family. On the same day a young man was found at Kwizizi. He said he had got lost walking from his home at number three colliery to join his mother working in their mealie field and when he had found a road he had no idea which way to go so he chose one direction and just kept walking, being certain that it must eventually lead him somewhere. Since he was wearing a bright red shirt and gumboots the rangers were pretty sure he wasn't a poacher and he was transported to his sister's house at Cinderella where, I suspect, he got a frostier reception than he did from the lady rangers at Mbala who sat him down and fed him while he waited for transport. Neither of these men was any danger to the Park but nonetheless it was good to see that they were quickly intercepted by Sinamatella's rangers.

Poaching

Generally a quiet month, with not much reported poaching activity. However, 5 persons were arrested in Victoria Falls by Victoria Falls Anti-Poaching Unit for being in possession of illegal ivory. They are currently to appear in court, but again in Victoria Falls we have a major problem with prosecutors and magistrates handling any wildlife related crimes where there is no real attempt at prosecution and utmost leniency! It is very disappointing to go to as lot of effort and risk to apprehend wildlife criminals to watch them walk free because of the attitude or otherwise of the judiciary. It is a very different scenario in Hwange where there is quick and efficient enforcement of the law.

Comment

There is a lot of very bad publicity surrounding our National Parks on the baby elephant saga, involving the capturing of young elephant calves out of wild herds in Hwange, for export purposes. Unfortunately, Parks in their efforts to conceal this operation, and their tight security measures at Umtshibi, reinforced the idea that this was an operation they knew was not above board and they thus tried to keep it hushed up.

Parks had previously tried a similar elephant calf capture, which was bungled and led to the calves that survived being handed over to the private sector for their rehabilitation. Parks no longer have the trained staff to undertake such capture and care operations, so it is alarming that they still attempt this without suitably qualified personnel.

Parks made a statement in trying to cover up by claiming this is part of a population reduction exercise “preferable to culling” - 60 calves out of a population of 58,000 elephants is hardly going to affect the population!! The bottom line is that this capture has nothing to do with populations, controls, ecology or anything else – it is purely financial, which Parks made a grudging admission to.

I can sympathise with Parks in their stressed financial situation, which is putting immense pressure on them to try and cover their operating expenses, as they are an autonomous body and thus required to raise their own finances. This unrelenting pressure has led to desperate measures to raise funding such as setting quotas on financial rather than scientific grounds, quote transferring, hunting in National Parks and now catching animals for export. They are also sometimes subject to politically motivated requirements which is beyond their control. This has resulted in damage to the Parks themselves, and the animals therein, and to the once proud reputation of our Parks department being sullied.

Parks have to face up to the reality of the dire current financial situation like every private company in Zimbabwe has had to, and react – this means restructuring, budget planning and accountability! There needs to be an impartial analysis of the whole Parks structure, with the retrenchment of non essential staff, to reduce head office in size, to bring in performance related contracts and accountability, and a balanced budget spread across the stations.

To undertake such an exercise, they need professional assistance. This issue is urgent, and the requisite assistance can be sourced. There is a lot of goodwill in the donor community towards Parks, and these donors would be prepared to fund sections of the operations, provided they are assured of openness and the required political support. There are already organisations in the field assisting Parks such as Frankfurt Zoological Society, Tashinga Initiative, Friends of Hwange and ourselves to name a

few, and this concept can be expanded on by bringing more donors on board, if the enabling conditions are in place. By working with the donor community and local tour operators, NGO's, etc, Parks can salvage the current situation, and generate some positive publicity – I believe we have many of the right people in Parks, but it is the system that is at fault!

Thus, the bottom line is we need a viable and responsible Parks department for tourism and for the future of our wildlife in Zimbabwe. This PR disaster of the elephant saga has badly damaged the reputation of Zimbabwe in wildlife conservation, and is affecting a tourist industry already struggling under ebola cancellations. Parks must accept they have a responsibility for tourism in this country, and they must act responsibly for the benefit of Zimbabwe, the wildlife, the tourist business, and the people. Parks needs to work with those willing to help, for a common good – unfortunately they have played continually into the hands of their detractors!

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 – donated funds for waterpoints

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!

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!

