

## **MATOBO NATIONAL PARK**

### **Fuel n'money**

The problem of getting fuel from a normal garage in Zimbabwe for our survey vehicles continues and as a result it is often necessary to travel all the way to Botswana to purchase fuel.

This involves using a great deal of fuel to get to Botswana and back just to purchase the fuel that we require for our field work.

However in order to purchase fuel in Botswana we have to have Botswana Pula and as that cannot be obtained at any of the banks in Zimbabwe we have to purchase Pula from the Black Market in Bulawayo.

On the other hand fuel is available on the Black Market in Bulawayo at Z\$1800 per litre (the official price is Z\$200) so we have to pay over 9 times the value of the fuel to get it on the Black Market.

But there is yet another problem. In order to purchase the fuel on the Black Market you have to have cash. No-one will sell you fuel unless you have the actual cash, as they won't take cheques.

But cash is not available in Zimbabwe because the country has run out of money. It is therefore necessary to stand for many hours in queues at a Bank or Building Society to get cash and very often nothing is available.

When cash is available you are only allowed Z\$2000 or occasionally Z\$5000 (about US\$1). Now a drum (200 litres/44 gallons) of fuel on the black market costs Z\$340 000.00 - so where does one get the money to get the fuel? Wonderful isn't it; and under these circumstances we are trying to do field work.

But in spite of the fact that we cannot get cash or fuel our Carnivore project in the Matopos and Hwange National Park is proceeding wonderfully. I spent 7 days in the Matopos in August 2003 and during that period was lucky enough to find all our radio-collared animals. Because of the shortage of fuel we only had enough diesel for one vehicle for one week. Nevertheless we still achieved a great deal in 7 days, as shown below:

### **Radio-collared Brown Hyaena - 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2003**

On the very first night in the Matopos I went out in the open landrover with a bright spot light. Within half an hour of leaving camp I picked up the signal of our radio-collared brown hyaena. It was 7.30 pm. Ten minutes later we came across the animal at the side of the road and to my absolute delight and amazement I saw three brown hyaena chewing on some old bones of a female sable antelope. Our radio-collared hyaena was one of them.

This was the very first time that I had actually seen the radio-collared animal since it was collared over a year ago. While I had often located its whereabouts from its radio signal it was never seen as the nature of the habitat made it very difficult to see.

This sighting of three brown hyaena together was tremendous and clearly indicated that at least a small population exists in the Matobo Hills. There is no doubt that they move in and out of the National Park and spend quite a lot of their time on the farms north of the Park. However they always appear to return to the Park.

The fact that three animals were seen together does suggest that a fair population occurs in the Matobo National Park and surrounding hills.

### **Radio-collared Cheetah**

During my previous visit to the Matopos in July 2003 we came across lots of cheetah tracks in the Game Park section of the Matobo National Park. On one occasion there was evidence of an adult cheetah with very small tracks associated with it. It appeared to be a female with at least one cub.

We did not find the radio-collared animal in July 2003 and I suspected that they had moved onto the farms north of the Matobo National Park.

On Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2003, a visitor to the Matobo National Park called in at my camp and reported that he had only an hour earlier seen three cheetah near Pomongwe Cave. He clearly explained exactly where he had seen the animals. It was 10.30 am. I raced to the area where he had seen the animals and half an hour later I spotted them. They were still in the same area and one of the cheetah had a radio-collar. It was the male we released well over a year ago and it was still with the same animal that was released with it. The last time I had seen our two animals was in June 2003 and on that occasion they had joined up with two other wild cheetah. This group of four were seen on several occasions by National Parks staff and visitors to the Park.

Now on this occasion (23<sup>rd</sup> August 2003) our two animals were with a different wild cheetah. Judging from the behaviour of our animals (which were both males) which were aggressive to each other and were continually fighting, the stranger that they were now with appeared to be a female in oestrus. Both our males were trying to mate with her. This was exceedingly good news and again I was delighted that our radio-collared cheetah and his partner had managed to survive for such a long time in the wild. This clearly proved that as with our radio-collared cheetah in the Hwange National Park those in the Matopos were hunting on their own and indeed thriving in the wild.

### **Radio-collared Leopards**

Over the period 21<sup>st</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> August 2003 we managed to find all four of our radio-collared leopards in the Matobo National Park. In the case of “Nswatugi” we must have been within 10 metres of her and yet we still could not see her. She was in a dense thicket in a large pile of boulders and obviously well hidden.

In order to continue with our leopard project we set four leopard traps each day for a week. But instead of catching leopards we managed to capture three bushpigs. All different pigs in different traps. It certainly is a lot easier catching bushpigs in the Matopos than leopards. Over the last year we have now captured seven bushpigs.

Male leopards remain elusive. Fresh tracks are seen daily but there is a definite problem catching them. The males will not go into the traps and now after 18 months we still have not caught even one male. However we will continue as it is important to have at least one radio collared male.

### **Sponsors**

The work on the large carnivores in the Matobo National Park and indeed in Hwange National Park only continues as a result of the wonderful support from the following people and organisations:

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Columbus Zoo	-	Dusty Lombardi
Cheetah Species Survival Programme	-	Dr. Jack Grisham
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