

CRY OUR BELOVED COUNTRY

It has been six months since my last report and as I have had numerous requests for more news as to what is happening in Zimbabwe here is a very brief report. I really do not want to become an alarmist but I still believe it is important for people living outside this country to really know what is going on here. We seem to live from day to day and nothing appears to be getting any better. We are never sure what is going to happen next and how we are going to be affected by the next move.

Our field research programme has two major problems:

1. **THE FIRST IS THE COMPLETE LACK OF FUEL.** The country has run out of fuel and it is now nearly two months since I last got a supply of diesel from a fuel station. I have just returned from Botswana where I bought a full tank of diesel but that will only last another few days and then we are back to square one. But in order to purchase fuel in Botswana we obviously require Botswana Pula which is not available here in Zimbabwe. Then if you do manage to get some Pula the Customs at the Border Post want to know where you got the Pula from to purchase the fuel. If you are lucky enough to get through Customs without a problem then the Police at "Road Blocks" on the road between Plumtree and Bulawayo want to know why you are carrying fuel in drums or jerry cans.

THE FUEL SITUATION IS A REAL NIGHTMARE. I have often been told "cheer up things could get worse. So I cheered up and sure enough things got worse". Three weeks ago we got water in the diesel fuel in our Mazda pick-up and then the real problem started. We have no idea how the water got into the fuel but it cost us a great deal to rectify the problem. Both fuel tanks had to be removed, drained and cleaned, the fuel injector system redone and the fuel pump removed and serviced. It took two full weeks to get the work done and in the end it cost us Z\$15,000,000 (US\$2,500 at the official bank rate). This gives some idea of how expensive it is here in Zimbabwe and how one has to battle to undertake any field work.

If I was not wanting to do field work and go into the 'bush' it would not be too bad but as all my work is in the field and that is where I should be. Some fuel is available on the 'black market' and can be obtained at about \$17,000 a litre. (This translates into US\$2,8 a litre or US\$14 a gallon). A couple of days ago I saw a report in one of our newspapers that some people were paying as much as Z\$70,000 a litre for petrol (i.e. US\$11.00 a litre or US\$55 a gallon). Can you believe it!!

2. **OUR SECOND MAJOR PROBLEM IS FUNDING.** Where on earth can one get sufficient funds to do field work when our inflation rate is now over 200% and costs are going up all the time. Just one trip a month to Hwange National Park to track our radio-collared cheetah, leopard and Brown hyaena costs over Z\$3,400,000 (or US\$566) for fuel alone and then there is still the Matopos to do the same thing.

Support from companies and businesses in Zimbabwe is absolutely nil as most are battling to survive themselves and therefore have nothing left to give away. But I continually ask:- how long must we wait for the world to wake up to the real nature of what is happening in Zimbabwe and the plight of those of us who have to battle just to get a few litres of fuel.

However let me assure everyone that there is no way that I am going to give up or allow the system to beat me. The worse things get the more determined I am to continue and under no circumstances will I ever give up. I will not allow the conditions in this country to wear me down and no matter what happens I will continue with our Carnivore studies on leopards, cheetah and Brown hyaena.

However, at the end of the day we have the 'bush' into which some of us are lucky enough to flee when the atmosphere in this political jungle becomes just too oppressive or the problem of getting fuel for a vehicle clouds our horizon. After a week in the Hwange National Park or a few days in the Matopos we come back refreshed and with a renewed determination to see that we will eventually win this war and see out beloved country given a fresh start.

Other organizations have different problems. Here is an extract from a recent SPCA (Harare) newsletter

We were elated to receive the lovely award from Humane Society International for Extraordinary Achievement and Commitment at the Animal Care Expo in April. This recognition has kept our Inspectors buoyed during the period since, which has been a very difficult time for us all. Most of you will have read or heard about recent developments which have left over a million Zimbabweans homeless in the middle of winter with night time temperatures plummeting to nearly freezing point.

Obviously animals are once again caught up in the mayhem following government's 'Operation Murambatsvina' (Shona for "clean out the filth") and Operation Restore Order and SPCA centres are 'baby-sitting' a variety of different animals as their owners try to relocate and rebuild their lives but many are now living on the streets or in the ruins that remain. Another sad but inevitable result, exacerbated by the dire state of the economy, is the surrendering of many animals to SPCA centres and Inspectors.

Ostriches were found to be dying of starvation on a farm in Marondera which had also been taken over. Simon consulted with the previous owner and permission has been obtained for him to feed the birds.

Most of you will have learned that former MP, Roy Bennet whose farm featured regularly in our previous reports, has been released. Unfortunately, another farmer, Phillip Mennie, was attacked in Chipinge on Sunday and received serious head injuries. He was dragged from his vehicle by six men when he stopped at the farm gate and was head-butted, punched, beaten and kicked. The farmer who suffers from glaucoma was unable to see after a severe blow to the back of the head. Two other farmers who tried to rescue him were also head-butted and beaten with sticks. He has been hospitalized in Harare and his condition is reported as being stable.

A current major challenge is a crippling fuel shortage which has grounded many SPCA vehicles and is bringing remaining industry to a halt and will no doubt worsen the current food shortage. Many shelves are bare and mealie-meal (national staple), bread, sugar, oil and of course pet food are all in short supply. Our usual suppliers of vet meds and drugs report that they are unable to import even

essential drugs such as euthanase, vaccines, anesthetics and dewormer as they cannot secure forex from the government.

With ongoing kind support from those who continue to stand by us at this very challenging time, we will keep going and do everything in our power to continue to safeguard the extremely vulnerable animals of Zimbabwe.

I will end off with an extract from a report by the ZNSPCA Regional Inspector for Matabeleland, Glynis, on the situation following Operation Murambatsvina:

"We heard from the public that Killarney and Ngozi squatter camps in Bulawayo had been destroyed and we proceeded to load our truck with the necessary equipment - cages, meat and ropes, etc. On arrival in the area we were saddened by the sight of the people sitting amongst the ruins of their homes, holding their pets. Initially, on approaching the people, there was resistance because they did not trust us and didn't want to give us the only belongings they had left that had any worth. After much persuasion and discussion they realised that we were there to help and we documented all the animals and their respective owners.

In two days our team of four collected 155 chickens, 7 cats, 18 dogs, 2 rabbits, 26 guinea pigs and 3 ducks. By the afternoon of the first day the word had spread and people were running to meet us and set up designated points for pick ups. The squatters became so trusting, handing us their pets not knowing if they will ever see them again. We were all deeply affected by the sight of the owners hugging their dogs and cats and begging us to look after them. One old man brought me his black hen "madam - take care of Peggy for me, please" he said. I assured him that Peggy would be well looked after. The Bulawayo SPCA kennels are now full and we are struggling to feed all the animals. We do not know when the people will reclaim their pets. We can only carry on taking care of them and carry on rescues in other areas".

I promise my next newsletter will be full of good news about what we are still doing in the field. And how our radio-collared leopards, cheetah and Brown hyaena are doing. Cheers for now and I look forward to hearing from you.

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