



PHOTO BY SARAH CLYDE

Black Rhino spearheads Malawi Wildlife Makeover

BY FELIX PATTON

Whether as part of the British Central African Protectorate or, from 1907, as Nyasaland, or from independence in 1964, Malawi was known for its abundant array of wildlife. But all through the 1900s and especially between 1960 and 1990, a combination of uncontrolled hunting, destruction of wildlife habitat for agriculture and illegal poaching fuelled by freely available firearms decimated its wildlife. Malawi, one of the world's poorest countries, lacks capacity, resources and equipment for wildlife conservation.

But today, with several NGOs working with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Malawi's wildlife is

getting a makeover, starting with the reintroduction of the Black rhino.

This success story started in 1993 when a pair of Black rhinos was moved from South Africa into a 15 km² fenced sanctuary within the 538 km² Liwonde National Park. The translocation was funded by the J&B Circle of Malawi, which was founded in April 1992 and has now been renamed The Endangered Species of Malawi or ESOM. The translocation was paid for using funds from J&B London's "Care for the Rare" programme.

For the next six years the sanctuary focused on developing the Black rhino population. A first calf was born in 1996, and a second breeding pair was

translocated into a second fenced area in 1998.

Whilst 1999 saw the birth of a second rhino calf, it was also marked by an extension in the project's ambitions. The rhino sanctuaries became centres for breeding other species made scarce in Liwonde and other areas. Twenty-eight buffalo, 16 Eland, 26 Lichtenstein's hartebeest, 29 Roan antelope and 19 zebra were moved in from the Kasungu National Park, as well as 28 Sable antelope from the main area of Liwonde, to join resident populations of other wild species such as warthog and impala. The majority of the buffalo were released into the main body of the park.



PHOTO BY: PETRA CAMPBELL

Top: Successful re-population of the magnificent Sable.
Left: One of the black rhinos at rest in the sanctuary at Liwonde National Park.
Bottom: Giraffe at the Kuti Community Wildlife Park.

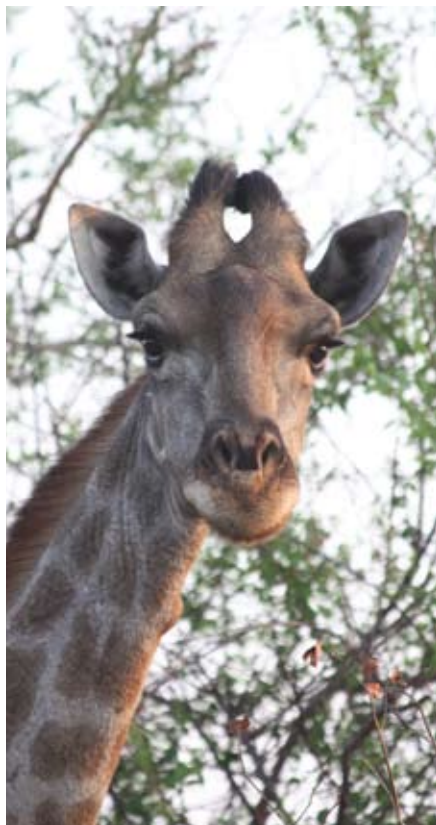


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The fence between the two sanctuaries was removed in 2000 to enable better grazing. With dedicated security, all species in the sanctuary area were able to breed, and populations grew rapidly to become the source of the 'Malawi Makeover' with the main area of Liwonde National Park being an early recipient of Sable antelope, impala, warthog and buffalo in 2003, and again in 2008 along with Eland, hartebeest and zebra.

In 2007, the species that could be found in the Liwonde Sanctuary (with the numbers released to other reserves

in parenthesis) were 114 (+22) buffalo, 68 (+6) Eland, 69 (+ 16) zebra, 75 (+21) hartebeest, 38 (+0) Roan and 300 (+329) Sable antelopes.

Another beneficiary of the makeover was the 691 km² Majete Wildlife Reserve. In 2003, the African Parks Foundation agreed to take responsibility for rehabilitating, developing and managing Majete. Hunters had decimated the wildlife population – Black rhino, buffalo, Eland, impala, zebra, hartebeest and lion had been eliminated by 1985. The elephant population of near 300 in 1987 was hunted to extinction during



PHOTOS BY: PETRA CAMPBELL

Top: An elephant family moves through the Liwonde National Park.

Bottom: Kudu mother and calf in Liwonde National Park

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Top Left: The River Shire is home to many hippos in Liwonde National Park.

Bottom Left: Crocodiles basking on the banks of the Shire river in Liwonde National Park.

Top Right: Zebra are breeding well in the game re-introduction sanctuary in Majete Wildlife Reserve.





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the closing years of Mozambique's civil war, with the last elephant shot in 1992. Sable antelopes were gone by 1998 and populations of kudu, warthog, waterbuck and hippo were significantly reduced.

Having secured the area, African Parks constructed a 140 km² game reintroduction sanctuary within Majete. In 2003, the sanctuary received two Black rhinos plus Sable antelope, impala, warthog and buffalo from Liwonde followed by 70 elephants, zebra and hartebeest in 2006. The elephant population grew to 82 in 2008. That year, 62 more elephants were moved to Majete plus further animals including purchases from game ranches in Zambia and South Africa. Since 2003, over 3,000 animals have been introduced into Majete while the increased security has also led to growing numbers of Greater kudu.

Once there is sufficient game, lion, leopard and cheetah will be reintroduced to Majete while, with the completion of a 160-km electrified perimeter fence in 2008, the sanctuary fence will eventually be removed allowing the wildlife free access to all parts of the reserve.

Mwabvi Wildlife Reserve, in the southwest, is the smallest national

park in Malawi at just 137 km². In 2007 the government and director of National Parks and Wildlife entered into an agreement with Project African Wilderness Trust (PAW) to take on conservation work and development in the reserve. It had long been neglected and the ecosystem was out of balance.

hyena, some elephants, plus many other locally extinct species. A habitat evaluation will be used as a guideline for any reintroductions and a 2.6 m-high game fence, with a five-strand offset solar-powered electrification, will be erected around the entire reserve to protect the animals.

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Many wildlife species had disappeared and some deforestation had taken place.

The existing populations of Sable antelope, buffalo, Greater kudu, impala, nyala and bushbuck will be supplemented with Black rhino, Blue wildebeest, zebra, lion, cheetah, leopard, eland, Spotted

One of PAW's Mwabvi conservation projects is the Predator Breeding Programme. A breeding pair of White lions was introduced in May 2010 as the foundation of the programme in collaboration with other protected species breeding organisations. The lions



Male nyala in the game re-introduction sanctuary in Majete Wildlife Reserve.

carry the white recessive gene, with their fathers being pure white lions and their mothers a normal brown lion. This will increase the genetic pool of the white lion population worldwide. They will soon be joined by two pure white females.

Other species to be introduced will include the black leopard, cheetah, Wild Dog, serval and hyena. Some predators will be made available for sale internationally under very strict controls. White Bengal and Siberian tigers will also be bred as part of an international breeding programme to help increase the very endangered world tiger population.

In 2007, the Liwonde Rhino Sanctuary supplied 68 Sable antelopes to the 960 km² Vwaza Wildlife Reserve. Recent Wild Dog sightings suggest they may be re-colonising the reserve from Zambia.

Vwaza has been earmarked as a possible site for Black rhino reintroduction as has Kasungu National Park, the second largest in Malawi at 2,316 km² and still supporting a greater variety of large mammals than any of the country's other protected areas. A wildlife

reintroduction sanctuary is planned with the long-term objective of bringing back the Black rhino. Kasungu NP was once the best place to see this species in Malawi.

Situated near Salima, the Kuti Community Wildlife Park represents the natural bush, forests, grass and wetlands, which dominated the Lake Malawi flat plains a few generations ago. The former government-owned, 3,000-ha cattle farm was taken over by the Wildlife Producers and Hunters Association of Malawi some 10 years ago in order to rehabilitate wildlife populations and educate the local community about the responsible use of natural resources by creating employment and income-earning opportunities.

Giraffe, zebra, nyala, Sable antelope, impalas, warthog and ostrich have been reintroduced while naturally occurring game such as kudu, duiker, bushbuck, Genet cats, Civet cats, Bush pig and numerous bird species have multiplied in the protected environment. More game introductions are planned when funds are available. Kuti is a model for other

such community projects to be developed in the country to obtain a financial benefit from wildlife for local people.

Malawi is readily accessible especially by air via Nairobi and has an excellent road network that makes visiting these conservation areas easy. With low gate fees and simple but good accommodation, it is an inexpensive option for wildlife enthusiasts. Following the reintroductions, the game viewing experience is rewarding and as the 'Malawi Makeover' continues, it will get even better. ●

FELIX PATTON, a rhino ecologist assisting with rhino monitoring at Solio Game Reserve, Kenya and his techno-savvy partner, Petra Campbell, spent two weeks on a self-planned, self-drive safari in Malawi.



The Rhinos of Malawi

Black rhinos once inhabited most of Malawi with a USD 40 game licence required to shoot one. By 1932, Black rhinos were generally uncommon but found in the Kota-Kota and Ngara districts and around the Nyika Plateau. There were just two populations in 1988 of 10 to 20 individuals in Kasungu National Park, only found in the far west and thought to have crossed the border from Zambia, and six or seven in Mwabvi Reserve that might have crossed from Mozambique. The last rhino was killed in Malawi in 1990.

The Malawi-South Africa Wildlife Project

In the early 1990s, this bilateral conservation project was started to assist Malawi in acquiring Black rhino and reintroducing them and five other scarce species to a breeding sanctuary in Liwonde National Park for later redistribution to other conservation areas in Malawi.

Three male/female pairs were introduced between 1993 and 2000. The rhino was declared a protected species soon after it was reintroduced, giving it management priority and ensuring adequate protection. Six calves have been born. One male and a pregnant female have died.

The 49 km² fenced sanctuary in the Mvuu area has an estimated carrying capacity of only 16 individuals. Extending the sanctuary is unlikely as it would hinder the movement of elephants in the park. A 250- km perimeter fence has been constructed and the sanctuary fence could be taken down allowing rhinos to access the entire area.

Visitors can access the sanctuary through game drives organised by Central African Wilderness Safaris who manage the nearby Mvuu Lodge and Camp and make an important contribution to the running costs of the sanctuary.

A 140 km² sanctuary was constructed in the 691 km² Majete Game Reserve in 2003. Two Liwonde rhinos were introduced in 2003 and six from South Africa in 2007. The first calf was born in July 2008. Today there are two males, five females and five calves. The reserve's electrified perimeter fence will allow for the sanctuary fence to be removed and the rhino population to grow substantially.

The long-term objective is to build existing populations and undertake reintroductions to Kasungu and Mwabvi reserve and possibly introduce new populations in Lengwe National Park and Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve.

For further information on the organisations mentioned see their websites:

Endangered Species of Malawi (ESOM) - <http://www.rhino.malawi.net>

African Parks Foundation (APF) - <http://www.african-parks.org>

Project African Wilderness (PAW) - <http://www.projectafricanwilderness.org>

Kuti Community Wildlife Ranch - <http://www.kuti-malawi.org>