

Project Update September 2009



On August 28th, we released seven dogs from our Rehabilitation Facility into Hwange National Park. The relatively smooth operation was the culmination of many months of hard work, blood, sweat and tears. Four of the dogs were “survivors” from Starvation Island and these had been successfully introduced to the female, Vusile and the two males Sithule and Sibuyile, who had walked into our facility in May.

During the days that followed we kept a watchful eye on them, using traditional radio tracking and relying on the GPS collar that had been fitted to Sibuyile. Our concern began to grow as they moved out of Hwange National Park into the Gwayi. We have three anti poaching units strategically positioned in the Gwayi to combat the ever-present threat of poaching, however we were still worried.

On September 2nd sometime between 9 PM and midnight, the pack, now named the Bambanani, which translates roughly as “a joint venture”, crossed the Bulawayo to Victoria Falls road approximately 500 metres east of the cattle grid that marks the western edge of the Gwayi Conservancy. The alpha male, Slima, had previously been translocated from South Africa to Zimbabwe to save him from possible euthanasia. A survivor of Starvation Island, still limping slightly from an old leg wound and carrying a wicked scar from the snare that nearly decapitated him, Slima was hit by a speeding truck. In less than a blink of an eye his adventurous life was over. Jealous, Greg and our dear friend Evelyne found his shattered remains at 7 AM on September 3rd.



The rest of his pack moved more than 25 km south west, perhaps driven by the shock of the event, then again some 20km north east, back in the direction they had come from. Jealous checked on them in the evening, picking up the signal from the remaining six collars. All of Jealous’s skills and the wonders of modern technology could not locate the dogs for two days. Then they “appeared” on the map over 20km east, having presumably passed through one of the worst areas in the Gwayi for poaching. Still we could not actually locate them in real time; it was only the GPS collar that betrayed their location, giving us historical data. On September 7th they had moved another 20km east, still deep within the heart of the poachers world. On September 8th they had moved more than 30km west, back towards the area where

Slima had been run over. They carried on moving west and on September 13th they were seen by one of our anti poaching units. There were only four dogs. Njiva and our (my) favourite dog Mashambo were missing. I followed up on the report and eventually caught up with the pack on the morning of September 14th. Indeed there were only four of them. I stayed with them for a couple of hours, constantly checking for a signal from Njiva and Mashambo's collars, but in vain. As the temperature rose the four moved to a near by water hole and drank thirstily before moving into the shade of the bush. I knew they would rest there for the day now and so went into my office to check on the locations that had been documented for the pack over the previous days.

Jealous was away in the far west of Hwange National Park, I was supposed to join him the next day but could not sit. I drove out alone to search for Njiva, but I confess that Mashambo was my highest priority. I knew the area well; we have spent a lifetime tracking dogs on those bush roads in the Gwayi. I dissected the area, pushing my Land Rover to every high point to maximise on the range of the collars. My desperation grew and a loss of concentration nearly sent me and my landrover tumbling over a ridge. The search was only surpassed in emotional strain by the search for Greg back in July 2003, after he had crashed his plane. I pulled over to the side of the road in my Land Rover and sat there. Alone in the dark. I wondered if this was it, was I going to crack? The intensity of the effort required to build PDC let alone keep it together suddenly seemed to be more than I could bear. I feared the worst. Was Mashambo really dead? The shocking waste of his life, his agonising death in a snare set by a ruthless poacher? He had become such a part of our lives since he first turned up at the Rehab as a ten-month-old pup in April 2007, looking for help, as the rest of his pack had been killed in snares. Just three years old now, he was reaching his prime and was magnificent. It was he, virtually on his own, who had kept all of the dogs alive on Starvation Island, as he was the only one who had really mastered the art of hunting. He was the new Eyespot, our hero. I know its wrong to speak with such affection about a wild animal, but what the hell.

I had to join Jealous the next day but before leaving I arranged for a helicopter to be at my disposal on our return. I hated the fact that I had to abandon my search, abandon Mashambo. Jealous and I arrived back at the office two days later on September 17th. The helicopter was not there, it was not even coming anymore. I slammed the phone down in frustration. I made another couple of calls but suddenly helicopters were hard to come by in Zim. Almost in desperation I phoned the Hwange Lion Project, as they have a small microlight. I say in desperation, because they have such a schedule of their own, that I thought it unlikely that they would have the time to fly for a missing dog. The excellent, University of Oxford's Wildcru Project is headed by Dr Andy Loveridge and when he heard my sorry tale of woe he did not hesitate to offer his help. We arranged to fly on the morning of September 19th. That gave Jealous and me one and a half days to continue with the ground search. Tired and dusty we headed out into the Gwayi again and dissected the areas that I had not previously covered. We both knew and talked about the fact that poachers would most likely destroy the collar of any dog they found in a snare if our anti poaching units or we did not get there first. If that happened, we would never find Mashambo or Njiva. Convinced they were both dead, I still wanted to find them.

We returned home on the nights of the 17th and 18th, very frustrated and I for one, being very agitated. I didn't sleep much on the night of the 18th and met Andy at the arranged time and place on the morning of the 19th. We flew out over Hwange National Park before turning north over the Gwayi. The stark difference between the densities of the bush outside of the park compared to inside, even in the dry season, was shocking to see from the air. We talked about this through our headsets as the tracking receiver scanned through the frequencies programmed into it. As we approached the park boundary the receiver skipped round to the

frequency of Mashambo's collar, 146.011. A familiar beep, beep reached our ears. I think my heart skipped a beat. Andy is experienced at aerial tracking and quickly closed in on the signal. Turning in ever decreasing circles until we were right over Mashambo. We could not see him in the thick bush and the signal from the collar told me that he was not moving.

The strong wind that is typical of this time of the year in Hwange had picked up, making it unsafe for us to keep flying. We took a fix on the position for Mashambo and headed back to the landing strip at Hwange Main Camp. After thanking Andy for his help I leapt into my Land Rover and headed off, calling Jealous on my radio to meet me en-route. I showed him the position we had marked on the map; it was more than 70km away, deep into the Gwayi. We drove as fast as we could to the area and homed in on the position, which fortunately, was only 600m from a bush track. As we approached the spot we checked for the signal from Njiva's collar as well, 146.201. The familiar beep, beep reached our ears and a smile briefly lit up our faces. Both collars indicated that the dogs were together but not moving and the worried furrow returned to my brow.

I stopped the car and we scrambled out, carrying darting equipment, water and blankets with us, everything we would need to deal with them if they were caught in snares and still alive. The signal from their collars still told us that they were not moving. We looked about us and saw plenty of evidence of buffalo in the area. The bush was thick and I commented that I should have brought my gun with me. Jealous shrugged his shoulders and said that we would not be able to carry that and the darting equipment as well, so we just walked in.

We have developed quite a skill at tracking radio collared dogs and quickly closed in on their position, fearful of what we might find, as the signal from their collars still indicated that they were not moving. I stumbled over a log and stopped. "I think that was a moving signal from Njiva's collar". I said to Jealous. "Lets go" is all he said in return.

We moved forward and both dogs gave the familiar alarm "bark" before running a few metres away. They were alive and seemingly well.



I was too stunned to smile. Though most people who know me say I don't smile often anyway. We moved forward slowly and were able to catch a brief glimpse of both dogs. They looked a bit thin but otherwise healthy. A wave of relief swept over me. On the drive back we speculated over why we thought Mashambo and Njiva had split away from the rest of the pack. We came to the conclusion that it was food. Mashambo and Njiva were both submissive to the other dogs. If the pack of six were not catching anything big enough to feed them all then Mashambo and Njiva may well have missed out. Ironic as Mashambo is an excellent hunter and would be the most likely out of the pack to pull the prey down. Knowing he could easily provide for himself, we suspected that he chose to go it alone and took his pal Njiva with him. Two dogs hardly constitute a pack but at least they were alive. I got back to my office and sent all of our anti poaching units into the region to clear it of snares.