The Revival of Zakouma National Park's Elephant Population: Interview with Rian Labuschagne

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Joanna Eede

Zakouma National Park in Chad is one the last remaining intact Sudano-Sahelian ecosystems in Africa. During the mid-2000s, Chad experienced civil unrest and conflict with Sudan; rampant poaching had decimated Zakouma's elephant population, which had once roamed free in herds of a thousand strong. Seeking refuge from fighting, elephants would herd in Zakouma park, where they were easy prey for Sudanese horsemen who rode from the north armed with semi-automatic rifles. Elephant numbers fell from around 4000 in 2002 to just 400 in 2010: a drop of 90%.

'They would stop at nothing to take ivory back home,' said Rian Labuschagne. Together with his wife Lorna, Rian was employed in 2010 by African Parks to manage Zakouma's conservation programme. Within a year, elephant poaching had been brought under control; today, Zakouma's elephant population is increasing, and stands at around 550. Only a few poaching incidents have occurred in the past seven years. 'You cannot be weak in this occupation,' Rian has said. 'You have to be prepared to walk a mile in the dark.'

In 2017, Rian received the prestigious Prince William Award for Conservation in Africa, a lifetime achievement recognising his contribution to conservation. The award was presented by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu at the 5th Annual Tusk Conservation Awards, in Cape Town.

Joanna Eede interviewed Rian and Lorna Labuschagne about how they developed their programme in Zakouma, which has been referred to by Tusk Trust as 'one of the most significant conservation success stories of the past five years.'

- What is your background in wildlife conservation?

I have spent over 30 years in conservation. I have supervised the return of black rhino to Malawi's Liwonde National Park, set up an anti-poaching system in Tanzania's Serengeti and helped the American philanthropist Paul Tudor Jones establish the Grumeti Reserves concession area on the Serengeti's western border.

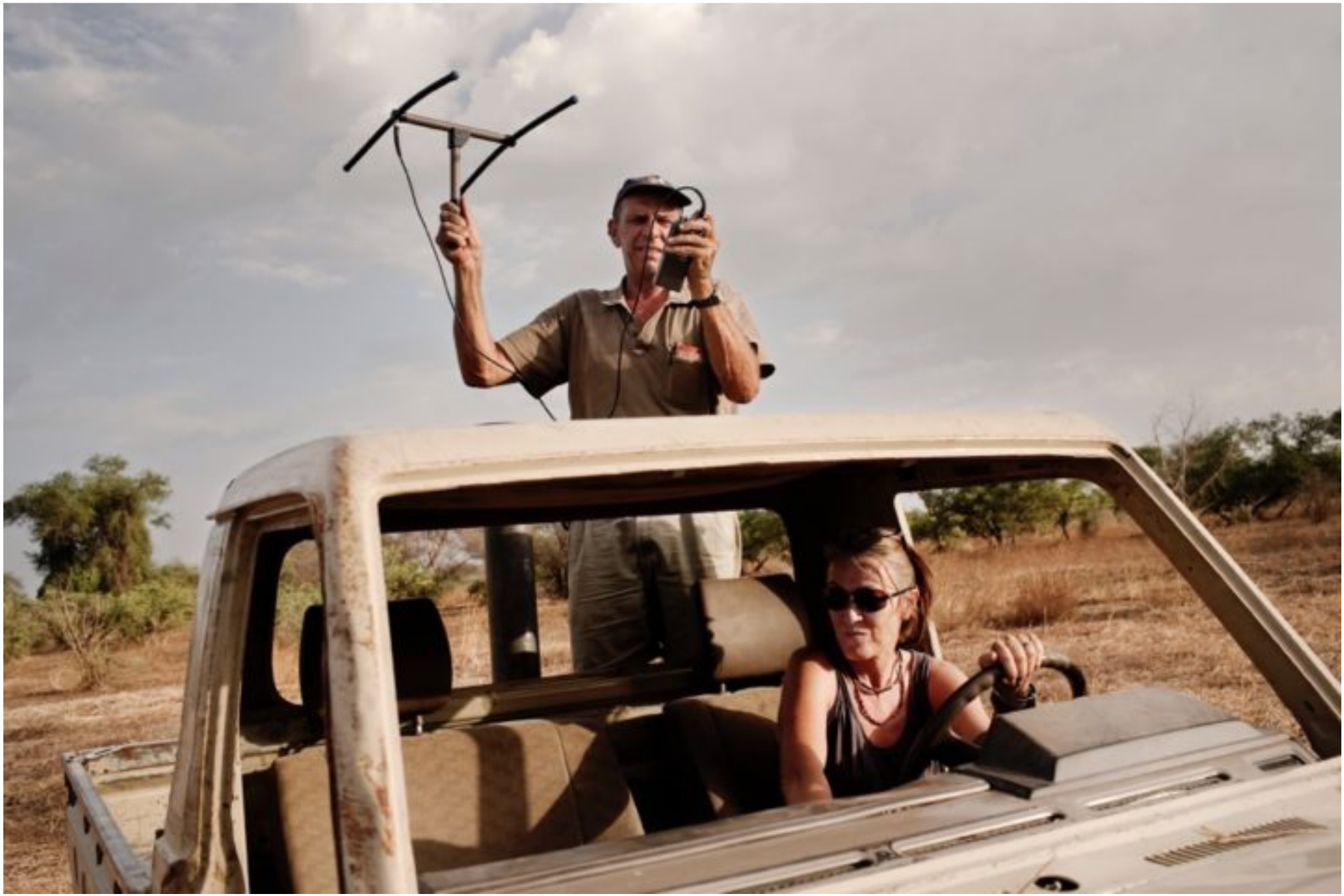
Lorna and I met at the Pretoria Technikon, where we studied Nature Conservation and Management. Lorna worked as one of the first female conservationists employed by the South African government and I started with the then Transvaal Provincial Administration as a research assistant on lion and cheetah research.

- What led you to Chad's Zakouma National Park?

Lorna and I had spent 11 years working for Grumeti Reserves. We were way past our previous target of working only five or six years on a project! We were living in an idyllic camp on the Tanzanian coast trying to secure a 'beach-and-bush' area for Paul Tudor Jones but we felt we were not achieving enough, and decided it was time to move on. We contacted our old friend, the late Dr. Anthony Hall-Martin, who was one of the founders of African Parks Network, and asked if there were any jobs available.

A month later we were en route to N'djamena, in order to visit Zakouma and accept their offer of employment as park managers of the then beleaguered national park, which had just been added to African Parks Network's portfolio.

It was the end of October 2010 and the park had been closed since the previous May. Getting there was quite an adventure – the airstrip at HQ was a wetland!



RIAN AND LORNA LABUSCHAGNE. ©DANIEL ROSENTHAL

- How bad was poaching in Zakouma National Park before you arrived?

Sudanese Janjaweed poachers would arrive at the park on horseback, having ridden for 9-14 days from Darfur. They were heavily armed and carried satellite 'phones, cell 'phones, ammunition (thousands of rounds), solar panels for charging, horse medicines, and so on.

The poachers were military in style and often avoided villages, moving quietly through the more remote areas, avoiding detection. They would set up camp and shoot elephants – as many as they could – before burying the ivory until they had amassed enough to take back to Darfur. Camels were then usually called in by satellite 'phone and ivory transported out by camel and horse.

Poachers also used horses to herd elephants towards marksmen, who would open fire with automatic weapons. They killed and wounded a terrible number of animals. The largest number killed in Zakouma at any one time (before we arrived) was 64, with countless dying later from their wounds. Local Chadians were also poachers.

- Did elephants in Zakouma stop breeding due to poaching stress?

There is no doubt that the years of persecution by poachers must have resulted in them ceasing to breed.

We also saw a number of calves that were either killed during a massacre (by bullets or from being crushed), or from being left behind after a stampede. It is therefore possible that not all elephants stopped breeding, but that they were just so stressed and had moved such great distances that calves were unable to keep up.

When we first arrived in Zakouma there were elephant bones everywhere; the large massacre sites were very noticeable.

A lion research project which took place during the height of the elephant poaching [2004-2006] revealed that elephant calves had made up an astounding 24% of the diet of Zakouma lions at the time. This was almost certainly as a result of the rampant elephant poaching, when calves were either orphaned or left behind after a stampede.

I don't think there are many elephant herds that have experienced what the Zakouma elephants have gone through.

- **What did you immediately put in place when you took over the management of Zakouma in January 2011?**

We weatherised the airstrip at HQ and ensured the park could remain active throughout the year (previous management projects had closed everything from end May – to end October, when the poachers would move in). We built bush airstrips where we thought they would be needed. We fitted satellite GPS collars to ten elephants before the wet season arrived, so that we could better know where they were going, in order to better protect them. Today, there are always at least 10 collars on elephants in Zakouma.

VILLAGE SPIRITUAL LEADER BLESSES ONE OF THE FIRST ELEPHANT COLLARING OPERATIONS IN ZAKOUMA NATIONAL PARK ©RIAN LABUSCHAGNE

We changed the anti-poaching system, making patrols more mobile and widespread. We implemented a radio-control room, manned 24/7 by trained operators, and an extensive VHF digital radio communication's system. All patrols are now given daily instructions by the control room as to where to patrol. Instructions are based on elephant collar data, intelligence, location of nomads close to the boundary, potential threats, availability of water, and so on.

We also put a big effort into the greater ecosystem, providing radios to 17 key villages to enable them to communicate with our control room and to pass on any relevant information (this was a private radio system, only the village radio operator and our radio operator were able to hear the conversations). A strategic village was chosen, a bush airstrip put in place to provide access (particularly for the wet season), a specially programmed hand-held radio installed in someone's hut with a solar power supply to charge the battery, and training given to the village operator.

This system also provided much-needed security and assistance in these remote areas, many of which are completely cut-off in the wet season, so we were also able to fly in to help locals with medical emergencies.

We facilitated extensive guard training, brought in better equipment, improved patrol horses, horse care and equestrian equipment and introduced motorbike and foot patrols.

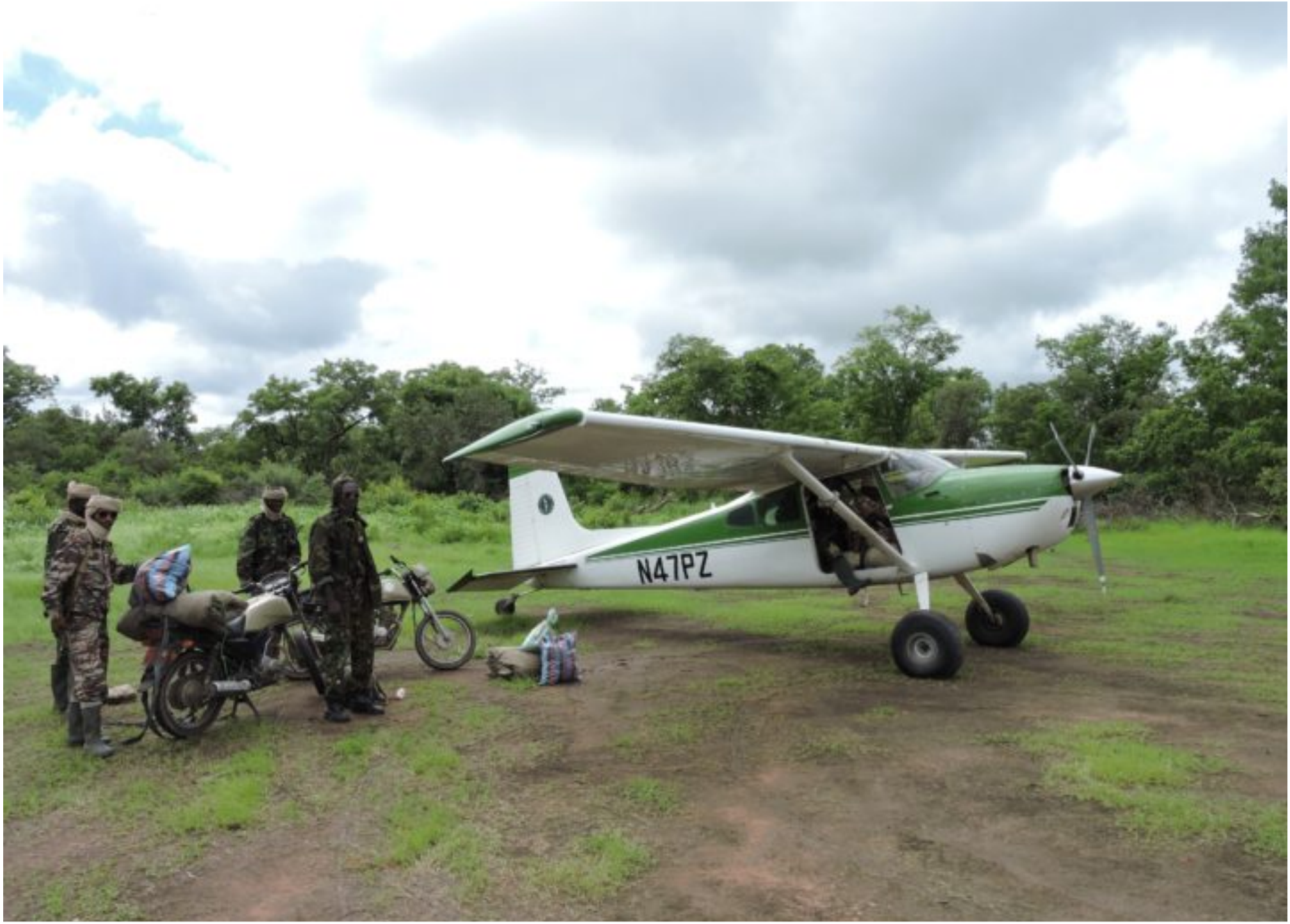
We worked on a 'predictable but unpredictable' anti-poaching system. In other words, it was known when the rangers went out on patrol (predictable), but only a handful of people knew where they were patrolling on any one day, with new instructions given daily, i.e. an unpredictable security system. Aircraft were key to this; we had two in the park during our time, so were able to carry out aerial surveillance. A quick reaction team, which was particularly necessary during the wet season when most roads are flooded, was also essential for security.

- Why are aircraft key to successful conservation?

A two-hour flight over the area in which you work gives a manager a clear idea of the situation on the ground. He/she knows where the anti-poaching patrols are, where new carcasses are, where there is remaining water, where there are fires, where there is cattle encroachment, where the wildlife concentrations are (and where they are not, which can indicate human presence), where there are vultures circling, which can indicate a carcass. And if the manager is in the right place at the right time, he/she can actually spot poachers and stop the killing.

In Zakouma, our two aircraft were used like transport wagons. The doors and back seats were removed, large tyres fitted, and the aircraft were then loaded with anything that needed transporting: motorbikes, spare Land Cruiser wheels, horse food and fuel. Even a baby elephant on one occasion!

Equipment was also air-dropped to rangers in areas where there was no bush airstrip. During the first two wet seasons, the 'planes sometimes carried out 150 flying hours per month.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RESUPPLYING FIELD RANGERS DURING THE WET SEASON ©RIAN LABUSCHAGNE

- **What form of training did the park's Rangers undergo?**

The Intervention Team, or Mambas as they are also known, went through a special selection course and had to be under 30 years of age to qualify. They are continually being assessed and re-trained so that they remain a crack unit. The Mambas have also had additional training in pistols and long-distance precision rifles. The Mambas mainly carry out foot patrols, whereas the older 'general' rangers are on horseback or motorbike.

However, all rangers have undergone extensive training in firearms, night operations, small team operations and first aid.

ZAKOUMA RANGER ON HORSEBACK ©LORNA LABUSCHAGNE

- Why do you believe it is important to involve the local community in conservation?

Zakouma has many agricultural villages within the greater ecosystem. So it is essential that the Park maintains a good relationship with the local population.

We introduced three main community based 'projects' in Zakouma:

1)The village radio system. This not only provided managers in the park with intelligence and information, but – just as importantly – provided the villagers with communications, and thus security.

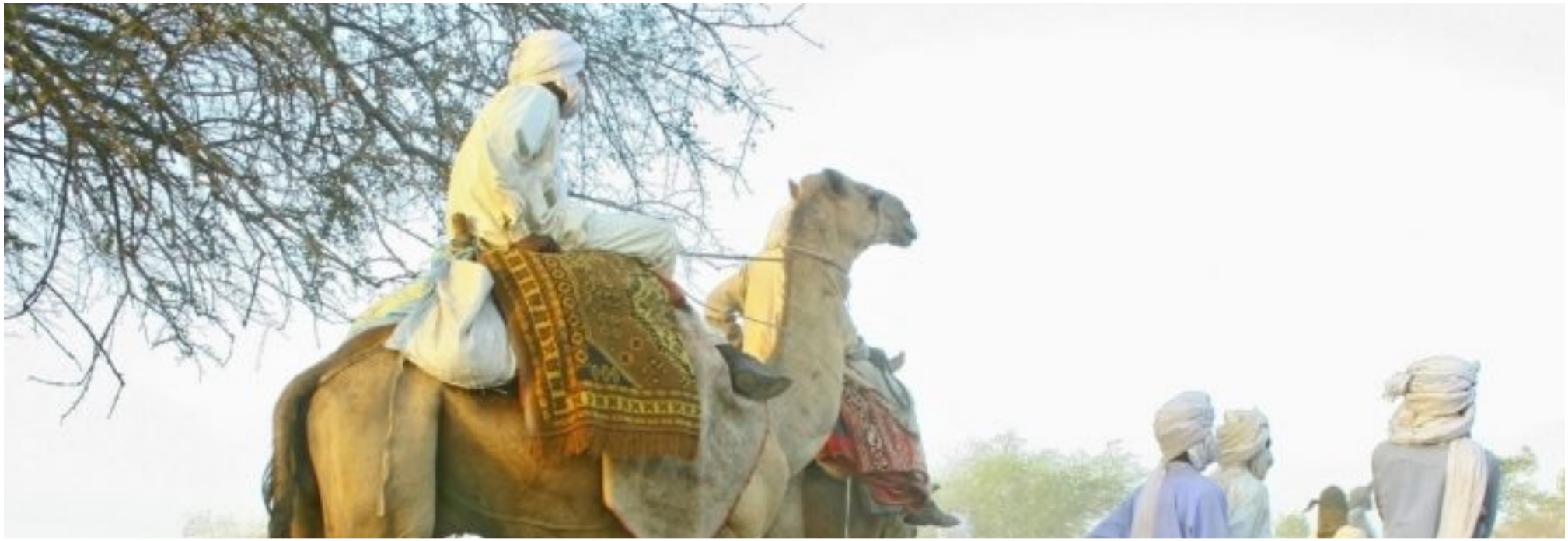
2) We introduced a free tourism camp for Chadians in order to expose them to the park, and build up a pride in their country's natural 'jewel'. It was a very basic camp, but in a lovely spot, and we provided huts, a kitchen and mess area. We had two game-viewer vehicles with driver-guides who would take the tourists on game drives. We also tried to take 5000 people (school children/villagers/local government officials/women's clubs) to the park for a day every dry season.

3) We built schools in the periphery (community areas surrounding the park). The environmental curriculum was being finalized just as we were leaving. We were also just starting a mobile school for nomads. All the 'traditional' outreach projects were undertaken by other NGOs working in the area, such as bee-keeping, micro-financing and gum Arabic harvesting.

We also put in a Land Use Plan to secure the wildlife corridors (for wild dog, cheetah, lion, giraffe, and later, elephant) and to secure the vegetation for the future. Fortunately, Chad still has nomads that are actually nomadic, so over-grazing is rarely a problem.

Chadian nomads were also helpful in terms of intelligence gathering. The greater ecosystem has an influx of around 50,000 nomads a year during the dry season. In the wet season, the nomads would move north to the Sahelian zone, away from the floodwaters that their livestock dislike, leaving huge tracts of land available for wildlife. As the animals moved back into the park, so the nomads returned to the periphery areas. They then moved further south to Lac Iro. Their movements definitely helped to get information to us on illegal activities or planned poaching trips.

Many areas in Africa, particularly rainforest parks, rely almost entirely on intelligence because conventional patrolling is very difficult in the rainforest. It is therefore critical for managers be in communication with local communities. One such example is Nouabale-Ndoki National Park in Congo.



CHADIAN NOMADS ©JEAN LABUSCHAGNE

- **What must happen over the next 10-20 years to ensure that key species within Zakouma National Park remain healthy?**

The inclusion of Siniaka-Minia Game Reserve into the Greater Zakouma Ecosystem has taken a couple of years to activate, but now there is a Memorandum of Understanding in place for African Parks Network to manage Siniaka-Minia as well.

Space is needed in the future, so the inclusion of S-M is a huge step. Human populations will continue to grow, and NGOs now need to secure huge landscapes for wildlife, especially elephant.

Human-Elephant-Conflict will increasingly become a problem, as well as Human-Wildlife-Conflict (e.g. lion, buffalo). The more land there is available for wildlife, the better. Zakouma has about 12,000 buffalo, which have already started moving outside the park boundaries into rural areas, which is why having Siniaka-Minia available is going to be hugely valuable.

The threat of large poacher gangs from Sudan or from Chad is ever-present, and the anti-poaching and community liaison effort will have to be maintained and improved upon in the future. As long as there is a demand, there is a threat. We learnt from poaching incidents in Zakouma; we used them to find the 'holes' in the system; thinking was then changed in order to 'plug the holes'.

Managers of all wildlife areas in Africa need to be proactive, and continually change their methods as the threats change. No system is ever 100% effective, which is why managers always need to adapt and improve what they have in place.

- **What is key to the future success of African wildlife conservation?**

Good law enforcement, which includes well-trained, motivated and equipped rangers, a well-managed control room, good radio or other communications, vehicles, aircrafts – are all part of it.

We put in place many other systems in Zakouma that helped to secure the park and surrounding areas. These included education of the local communities, by showing them the park and its animals, explaining its importance and building up a sense of ownership and pride. However each area is different and wildlife managers need to understand that what works in Zakouma is not necessarily a recipe for success in every park.

It is also important not to forget the 'background' support staff who play a big a role in keeping protected areas secure: logistics, mechanics, road maintenance teams, accountants and admin staff. As they are not on the frontline they are out of the limelight, but they are just as important as anti-poaching teams.

- **What are the most fulfilling aspects of working in African wildlife conservation?**

Working with African people who take pride in what they are doing, and who want things to happen. Wherever we have worked in Africa we have enjoyed working with our African colleagues to find solutions, put changes in place and build a sense of pride in what they have.

We have been extremely fortunate in the areas in which we have worked and the wonderful friends we have made, while trying to do our bit to sustainably preserve habitats and wildlife for the future.

ELEPHANT MUD BATH, ZAKOUMA NATIONAL PARK ©JEAN LABUSCHAGNE

MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including Portrait of England (Think Publishing, 2006) and We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.

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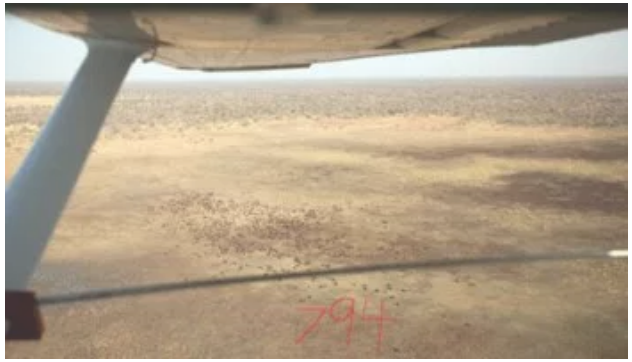

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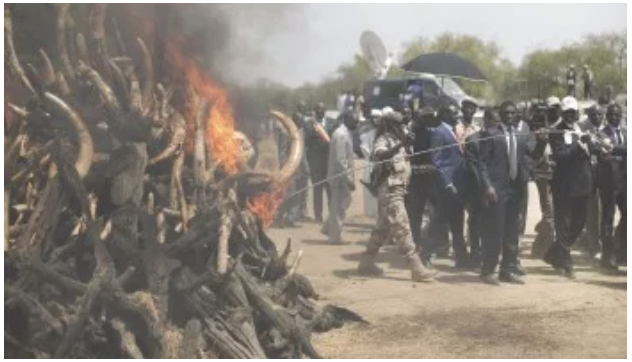

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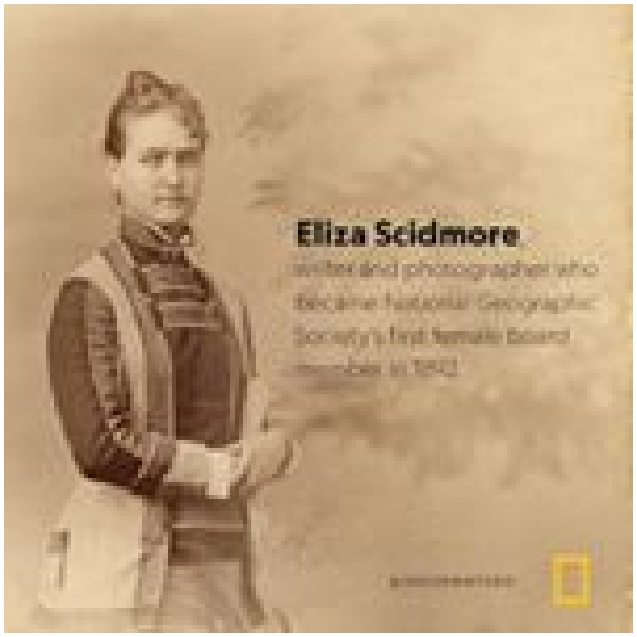
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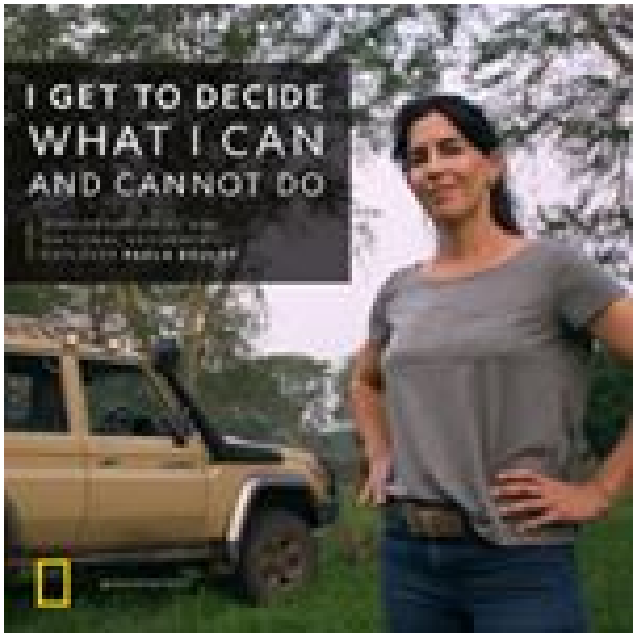
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