

Elephants enjoy a dip in Lake Kariba



Zimbabwe

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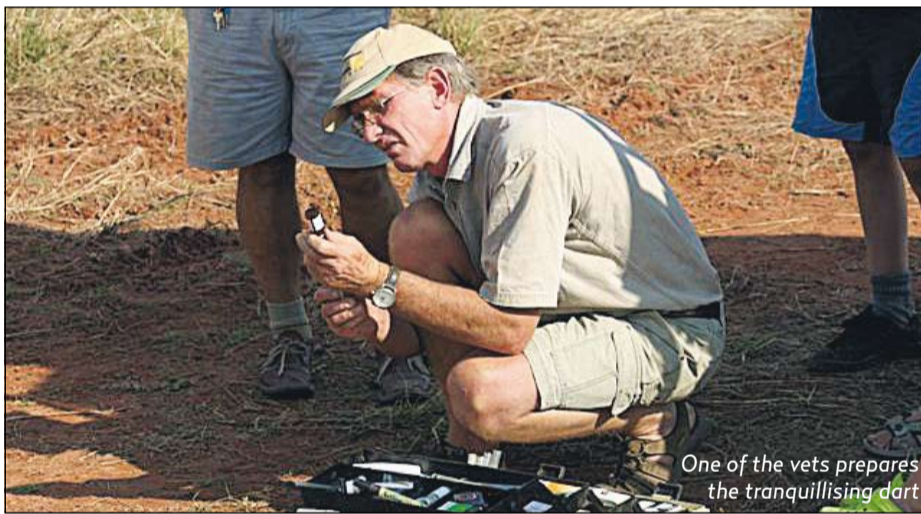
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# TOURISTS for animal aid



## A team of vets and tourists collars an elephant and saves trapped wildlife in Zimbabwe

By CHERYL ROBERTSON  
Special to Explore

When the six-seat Cessna 206 landed on the gravel airstrip near Musango Safari Camp in Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe, we had an inkling this was not going to be an ordinary safari.

Not only because the aircraft had just driven an indignant family of warthogs off the airstrip and avoided a group of vultures before landing but also because we were accompanied by two passengers who had set out on an intriguing mission.

### Conservation efforts

Roger Parry and Jessica Dawson, wildlife veterinarians and managers of the Wild Horizons Wildlife Trust, a non-profit organisation in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, decided to visit this remote area in Matusadona National Park to attach a satellite collar — a GPS-tracking device — to a bull elephant.

The Wild Horizons Wildlife Trust was established to rehabilitate orphaned and injured wildlife.

The trust takes care of antipoaching and veterinary needs, and educates the community about wildlife conservation.

### Cross-border charity

Elephants Without Borders, a Botswana-based non-profit wildlife charity — which operates in Angola, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe — donated the collar for this bull elephant. While its tusks

were impressive, they also meant that it was also under threat from poachers. The collar serves as a deterrent and as a research tool.

Satellite collars are used to monitor the seasonal movements of elephants. These devices also help determine the size of their habitat and in identifying their wildlife corridors.

Contrary to popular belief, some areas in southern Africa have a high population of elephants. This poses a huge challenge for wildlife conservationists.

Farming, poaching and expanding settlements are just a few factors that contribute towards blocked elephant trails. As a result, these animals enter human territory in search of food and water, giving rise to human-elephant conflict.

### High-tech monitor

Tagging elephants with satellite collars makes it easier to understand their ecology and behaviour, and helps alleviate the negative impact of an increased elephant population.

Steve Edwards, a guide since the 1980s and the owner of the Musango Safari Camp, was the first to identify the bull elephant.

He showed it to Larry Norton, a conservationist, Wild Horizons Wildlife trustee and well-known Zimbabwean artist.

Parry prepared a tranquillising dart filled with etorphine and shot the animal. Within five minutes, the five-tonne elephant was unconscious.

The team — which included eight tourists between 9 and 69 — had been briefed earlier and got down to work instantly.

One of them checked the elephant's pulse rate as Parry began attaching the 8kg collar (containing a global-positioning unit, which receives satellite signals, and a VHF radio transmitter).

### People with a purpose

Others cooled the elephant by pouring water on it. Yet others counted the breaths per minute, measured the tusks, took photographs and collected essential data, assisted by armed guides of the Matusadona National Park. After the final blood sample was collected by Dawson, the elephant was given an antidote. Within two minutes, the animal was up on its



feet, and soon, it wandered away into the woods.

Edwards also had another issue that needed immediate attention — snare damage. Poachers kill wildlife in prohibited areas, such as national parks, with snares (wire nooses) that are strategically placed in bushes or on the branches of trees.

### Clutch of death

When the animals are trapped, the snare tightens around the part of the body to which it is attached. Poachers want to catch an

animal around the neck so it dies of strangulation but this doesn't always happen. Any injury to the animal is always horrifying.

Edwards asked the veterinary conservationists to help animals caught in snares.

In the past few years, Edwards has changed his approach towards poachers. Instead of chasing, fining or imprisoning them, he works with them — and they, with him. Educating the locals of the Msampa fishing village to stop set-

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ting snares is key, he said.

In return, Edwards has provided a borewell, built a church and shown them ways of becoming more self-sufficient.

He wants to provide solar power facilities for them and wants to put up an electric fence for their security. At least three villagers were killed every year by wild animals, he added.

### Change of heart

One of the former chief poachers has become a member of the local community liaison council and Edwards is also employing him in antipoaching activities such as snare removal from the bushveld.

National parks do have antipoaching patrols but these are seriously strapped for cash. So the Musango antipoaching efforts are supported by the park authorities.

The team of tourists helped the vets remove a snare that was cutting into the head of a baby elephant. Both the baby and its mother had to be tranquillised (there was no way the mother would have just stood by and watched).

### Soothing touch

After the animal was freed, its wound was washed, antibiotics were administered and more samples were taken for research. This was just one of the three snares we saw dangling from animals during our three-day stay — a skittish impala still wears one on its ankle and a buffalo was in pain from the snare gripping tighter around its upper body.

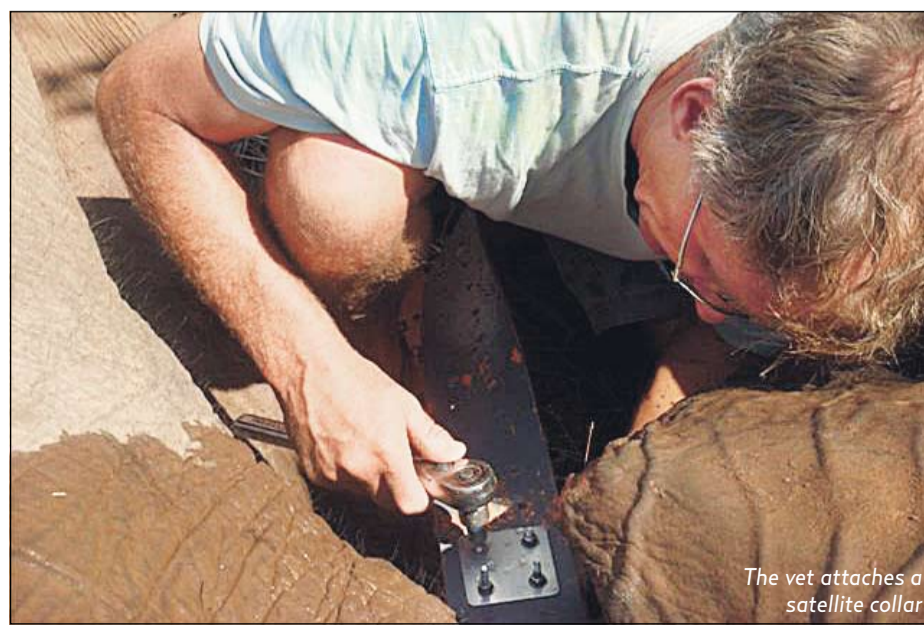
Although Edwards removes as many of these he finds, it still remains a difficult and dangerous task. Zimbabwe's history has

not been good for tourism but things are changing. The recession has led to an increase in visitors from the West, who are attracted not just by Zimbabwe's low-priced safaris (at Musango it costs around \$300 or Dh1,104 per person, per night, inclusive of taxes) but also because of its exclusivity — no hordes of tourists in minibuses — and the possible stability from the recently formed government and the legislation of foreign currency.

### Optimistic note

Tourism providers are welcoming visitors, putting the problems of the past decade behind them. Wildlife is Zimbabwe's greatest asset and it is encouraging to know that someone out there is looking after it.

— Cheryl Robertson is a Dubai-based freelance writer



The vet attaches a satellite collar