
The Need for Cross-border Monitoring of the Mara Rhinos

Matt Walpole¹ and Philip Bett²

¹Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE), c/o PO Box 57046, Nairobi, Kenya, ²Masai Mara National Reserve, PO Box 60, Narok, Kenya

In the last issue of *Pachyderm* we reported an apparent decline in the Masai Mara black rhino population. However, recent observations of an unknown female with a very young calf suggest that more rhinos than are regularly recorded are surviving, either within or adjacent to Masai Mara National Reserve (MMNR). During August 1999 the female was sighted by the MMNR Rhino Surveillance Unit and several times by balloon pilots in an area close to the southern border of MMNR. It is suspected that the female may be an eight-year old which was last seen as a sub-adult in the same area in April 1997, and which *may* have crossed into the northern Serengeti in the intervening years. However, close observation to affect a positive identification has not yet been possible.

This sighting is significant for the MMNR population in two ways. Firstly, this is the first newborn calf to be recorded in MMNR since 1997, when four calves were born to resident females. Secondly, the possible re-appearance of a “dispersed” female rhino suggests that individuals may be surviving to reproductive age outside MMNR.

There has been increasing concern over declining numbers of observed individuals within MMNR in recent years, and it has been suspected that many individuals were crossing into northern Tanzania and areas east of MMNR and failing to return (although there may be explanations other than dispersal for the apparent decline in MMNR rhinos, see *Pachyderm* 26, p.123). Without an equivalent monitoring program across the border in Tanzania, the MMNR Rhino Surveillance Unit has been unable to confirm the location or continued existence of many individuals suspected to have moved south out of MMNR.

This recent sighting is an encouraging sign that the apparent decline in the Mara rhino population may not be as severe as current monitoring records suggest. It also clearly emphasises the need for co-ordinated surveillance efforts across protected area and international borders, in order to address the issue of suspected ‘dispersal’ from MMNR, and to identify the true range and size of a population that may not remain conveniently within protected areas or national boundaries.