

# RHINO NOTES

## Project Black Ghost

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The status of the western black rhino (*Diceros bicornis longipes*) was uncertain until the late 1980s, when Dr Hubert Planton brought evidence that some 60 individuals still remained free ranging in northern Cameroon. The international community was formally informed of the situation between 1989 and 1992 (San Diego rhino conference 1991 and African Rhino Specialist Group 1992). The subspecies was recognized at the 1996 Cincinnati rhino conservation meeting by WWF, IUCN and its AfRSG affiliate, and presently it is rated as *Critically Endangered* on the IUCN Red List. The population over the last two decades has been reduced by poaching from a few hundred individuals to its present estimate of fewer than 10 animals scattered over an area 25,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

Of the four subspecies of black rhino in Africa, *D. b. longipes* represents the most distant, and thus the most important, genetic population of the species *D. bicornis*. No individuals are known to exist in zoos or parks anywhere in the world today, thus emphasizing the importance of conserving the last remaining population.

After several detailed action plans drawn up in the last decade, little progress has been made for the long-term protection of these animals. In 2001, following a major multi-stakeholder mission to Cameroon to develop a recovery plan for the subspecies, WWF conducted a location and identification project in collaboration with IUCN/AfRSG and other NGOs. Over 40 signs and tracks of these rhino were logged using a global positioning system (GPS) in northern Cameroon, but no sightings were confirmed, although incidental sightings were and are still being reported.

Unfortunately, as no rhinos were seen and positively identified in the 2001 survey, it failed to establish and confirm the viability of a minimum founder population. Being able to do this was a prerequisite for continuing with the next stage of the agreed recovery plan. As a result of failing to get direct sightings of sufficient numbers of rhino, IUCN and WWF decided that they could no longer support efforts in Cameroon, as conservation funding is limited in general and any western black rhino recovery programme would be very expensive, requiring major funding over an extended period, and without having a reasonable likelihood of success. However, if the existence of sufficient numbers of rhino could be confirmed then the recovery plan could again proceed to the next stage provided sufficient funds could be raised to consolidate and protect the remaining animals successfully.

Dr Hubert Planton, who has spent 12 years in northern Cameroon working with local communities and wildlife, is recognized as the authority on these rhinos. Together with other top field wildlife veterinarians and rhino capture experts on the continent, we intend to put together for 2003 a private expedition—Project Black Ghost. We are calling upon adventure travellers to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and through this effort, to help fund the expedition. The expedition will give them the opportunity to participate in the capture of one of the most endangered large mammals alive today and to contribute to what may possibly be the last effort to find and fit radio transmitters on the remaining individuals.

Earlier this year, I was fortunate to read an article published in *Africa Geographic* by Dr Mike Kock on his expedition last year in northern Cameroon while he was on the trail of the elusive *D. b. longipes*. The first thing that struck me was that this is the type of adventure all young naturalists must dream of, just to have the opportunity to explore an area like northern Cameroon, and to have a mission while doing so.

Well, I was sold, and I am convinced that there are people out there in the world who will and can pay for such a unique experience. Perhaps I am an optimist, but there are more people who can afford to participate in such an expedition than there are donor organizations. So having convinced myself, I contacted appropriate people, and it wasn't long before I had joined forces with Dr Hubert Planton.

Project Black Ghost this far has been fortunate to attract interest from a variety of people dedicated to its cause. One such individual is Coenraad Vermaak, a well-known and respected hunting operator in South Africa. Through him we have been able to connect with two of the largest international hunting clubs, Dallas and Shikar Safari clubs, who are very supportive of the idea. Another key organization that will prove integral in the project is Conservation Force, a US-based foundation bridging conservation and hunt-

ing. Through its president, John Jackson III, we are able to operate the project through the foundation, which has various advantages, one being the tax benefit to the potential participants, making it even more attractive.

We have now passed the halfway mark in our preparations for 2003. We have a memorandum of agreement between Conservation Force, the Cameroon Wildlife Department, the African Rhino Specialist Group, the International Rhino Foundation, and the IUCN French Committee, and we have the support of various other organizations. We are now on an extensive marketing campaign through the various hunting clubs and publications and through various wildlife Web sites. We intend launching this expedition in April 2003 and are hoping to raise around USD 250,000 through Project Black Ghost (total needed is USD 500,000.) This amount, with additional funding, will allow us to have a good go at finding these animals.

The second phase of the project has always been a major issue, as merely finding the animals is only the beginning towards a long-term solution. We hope that through this initiative, and with the people who join us, Project Black Ghost will pave the way towards a long-term survival plan.

## African rhino numbers continue to increase

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### Status and trends in African rhino numbers

This short note summarizes the main points to emerge from AfRSG's compilation of continental rhino statistics (as of December 2001). The compilation was undertaken at AfRSG's last meeting, held at Malilangwe, Zimbabwe, in June 2002. As with previous continental statistics, speculative gues-timates are not included in the country totals. Nor are individual population totals presented here—for security reasons and to respect the wishes of some range states. Country totals are given by subspecies in table 1.

### White rhino

Southern white rhino, *Ceratotherium simum simum*, numbers have continued to increase to an estimated 11,640 in 2001, up from 6784 in 1993, 7532 in 1995, 8441 in 1997 and 10,377 in 1999. Northern white rhinos remain limited to Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo but have fared better in the second civil war. Surveys estimate there were 30 northern white rhino (*C. s. cottoni*) in 2002.

The status of the two white rhinos that were seen alive in Mozambique and that were probably escapees from Kruger is unknown, and they are presumed dead. White rhino numbers in Zambia have remained stable.