Political conflict

Poaching is the main threat to rhinos' survival, whether motivated by the Yemeni dagger handle trade or by the demand for rhino horn in traditional Chinese medicine. Conservationists obviously try to prevent poaching from occurring, whether by mounting intensive anti-poaching patrols and maintaining high visibility, by fencing sanctuaries, or by incentivising locals to pass on intelligence.

In some locations, where normal law and order has broken down – particularly in war zones or where there is political instability – it has become much easier for the poachers to kill rhinos and other endangered species. Particular examples of places where political conflict has been matched by a rise in poaching include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and Nepal.

The Democratic Republic of Congo
The Northern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) is Critically Endangered in ironic contrast to the status of its relative, the Southern white rhino, which is the most abundant of all rhino taxa known today. Once ranging in large numbers throughout north-central Africa south of the Sahara, today wild Northern white rhinos are, or were, only found in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Situated on the northern border of DRC with south Sudan, the biggest threat to the park's ecosystem has been illegal hunting linked to the proliferation of arms and ammunition and displaced persons from the 40-odd years of civil war in Sudan and exacerbated during the last six or seven years by the civil wars within DRC. In the 1970s and 80s, poachers reduced the number of northern white rhinos, from 500 in the mid 1970s to 15 in 1983. Strict protection then permitted the rhino population to recover so that numbers had doubled to more than 32 rhinos by the early 1990s. However, since then, poaching pressure intensified and has recently become intolerable, probably fatal, to this rhino population.

Monitoring systems of the Park and hard evidence recovered from poachers show that commercial bushmeat and ivory poaching, which has been on the increase since 1991. Involved were trans-border movements of southern Sudanese, often from Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) camps near the border; Sudanese refugees, of which over 80,000 entered the area in 1991; local Congolese and a group of SPLA regulars that had been based in DRC in the Reserve east of the Park since 1999, despite orders to return to Sudan. In this first phase of the war, guards were disarmed, anti-poaching patrols stopped, people in the surrounding areas suffered harassment and coercion by armed military, and over half the elephants, hippos and buffaloes were slaughtered.

Nevertheless, with the major support from the UN Foundation through UNESCO and

the Garamba National Park Project (supported by NGOs like International Rhino Foundation, Save the Rhino International, ZSL, Frankfurt Zoological Society) for the guards in the field, anti-poaching patrols were re-established and large mammal numbers were maintained stable or increasing until 2003.

However, from June 2003 poaching shifted from bush meat plus ivory to strictly ivory and rhino horn, and gangs swept through the southern sector of the Park, which held the main concentration of rhinos and elephants. In early April 2004, for the first time, there was an incursion in the west of much more organized heavily armed gangs, northern Sudanese horsemen from Bar el Gazal near the Darfur region. These horsemen, the janjaweed militia, were much better armed and equipped with donkey trains. The involvement of these pack animals to transport the rhino horn and ivory back to Sudan and of these tough northern horsemen, marked the start of the systematic elimination of the elephant and rhino populations, as well as other species. They are almost certainly major contributors to the large quantities of ivory passing through Khartoum.

By September 2004 the situation had worsened to such an extent that rhino numbers were thought to have been reduced down to around 20; the number falling each month. Rhino numbers were so low (by January 2005, only around 10) that translocation of some animals for safekeeping was deemed an urgent necessity to ensure their survival.
An agreement was to be drawn up with the DRC government to govern the capture, translocation and future repatriation of five rhinos (two males, three females), and to commit the parties concerned to increased support for conservation activities at Garamba itself. This two-fold approach was felt critical to ensure that the rhinos could be returned to Garamba when security was properly in place, so that the DRC's natural asset could be restored to its rightful home. Logistical planning and recruitment of a team of experts for the operation was underway in DRC and internationally. Ol Pejeta, a wildlife conservancy in Kenya, was selected as the temporary safe haven on the basis of security, habitat, and management support and proximity. Discussions were initiated through the Kenya Wildlife Service to expedite the necessary approval and support from the Kenyan authorities.

But political infighting intervened, and factions within the DRC government began to campaign against the temporary removal of the five Northern white rhinos to another country. Discussions broke down; the agreement was never signed; and the Northern white rhinos remained where they were in Garamba: unprotected and under threat.

It seems highly probable that the Northern white rhinos will become extinct in the next few months, if they have not done so already. The further tragedy is that Garamba may lose its World Heritage Site status, and thus lose funding that helps ensure the survival of other species that share the Northern white rhinos' habitat,

such as elephant and okapi.

(With thanks to Kes Hillman-Smith for her supporting information.)

Zimbabwe
When Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, its black rhino population numbered around 2,000 animals, of which around 1,300 were concentrated in the Zambezi Valley.
Serious cross-border poaching then flared up. In response to the ongoing poaching pressures, which steadily spread to the other Zimbabwean rhino strongholds of the Sebungwe and Hwange regions and Gonarezhou National Park, a national rhino conservation strategy was launched with the following main components.

Creation of four IPZs (Intensive Protection Zones) within National Parks. These received significant donor support and the more effective patrolling that was achieved within them, combined with an extensive de-horning campaign, stemmed the poaching by 1995
Export of more than 30 black rhinos to overseas captive breeding facilities
Development of a rhino custodianship scheme, whereby 190 rhinos were moved to a number of areas of private land where the landowners undertook to look after them on behalf of the state. Although there were some poaching problems, by 2000, black rhino populations in several of these conservancies (in Zimbabwe's Lowveld region) had doubled, after achieving some of the fastest growth rates ever recorded for rhino populations

The successful rebuilding of Zimbabwe's black rhino population (from a low point, after the heavy poaching, of about 370 in 1993 to a current level of over 500), along with the establishment of innovative conservancy projects, earned Zimbabwe considerable acclaim within the international conservation community. Almost 70% of Zimbabwe's black rhinos are on commercial farms and conservancies, with over 200 in the Lowveld conservancies of Save Valley, Bubiana, Chiredzi River and Malilangwe.

However, since early 2000, the situation has become much more serious again. The rhino custodianship scheme has been greatly undermined by the large-scale land invasions throughout Zimbabwe and the deteriorating economic and political situation. The reported failure of the harvest, the break-up of formerly successful food-producing farms, and the breakdown of law and order, are having a detrimental effect on Zimbabwe's wildlife.

In most wildlife areas on private land (such as the Lowveld conservancies) the occupation of land for growing crops has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in snaring activity. In the affected areas, the perimeter fences to the conservancies have been dismantled by the occupying farmers.

Much of the wire from these fences has been used to make wire snares – loops of wire secured to trees in the bush to trap and kill antelope species. When a rhinos encounters such snares the wire tightens around either the leg or neck but is then broken free from the tree and is carried away in the flesh of the rhino. If such snares are not detected early the snare embeds deeply (sometimes into the bone) causing severe injury and requires surgery to remove the wire. Of course, snaring on such a massive scale is also depleting populations of antelope, which in turn impacts on predators such as lion, leopard, cheetah, hyena and wild dog.

Prior to the land invasions, anti-poaching units patrolled these wildlife areas. In many areas, these anti-poaching units are no longer conducted due to the land invasions. Those anti-poaching units that are still operating are having to contend with much increased poaching. For both reasons, more rhinos are being lost.

This situation is further aggravated by the increased movement of rhinos caused by home-range disruption. The clearing of fields for cropping and the dramatically increased human and livestock activity inside the conservancies has disrupted the home ranges of many rhinos causing them to change their patterns of behaviour and shift home ranges. Sometimes this leads to the animals moving outside the conservancy or into the home ranges of other rhinos. This movement into other home ranges can lead to fighting. On at least three known occasions this had lead to the death of rhinos through injuries sustained in fights.

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Nepal

Nepal's Rhino population has suffered a catastrophic decline of more than 30 per cent in the last five years. The number of greater one-horned rhinoceros in the country's Royal Chitwan National Park has fallen from 544 in 2000 to just 360 in 2005. At least 104 have been killed by poachers.

As the country's political situation has deteriorated since the last survey in 2000, the National Parks have seen less protection from the military. Unarmed National Park guards have had little chance to protect the animals against heavily-armed poachers.

The upsurge in poaching is almost certainly due to Nepal's military reducing the number of soldiers assigned to protect the park - which is home to the vast majority of Nepal's rhinos - from 32 to 8. Nepal's army is currently struggling to deal with the Maoist insurgency that has led to increased violence throughout the country. A security post has to be manned by ample number of personnel or else it cannot function effectively, and the poachers have been clever enough to exploit the weak security situation.

Income from wildlife tourism has been important to help Nepalese conservation organisations do their own work and encourage local communities to pass on intelligence about poaching gangs. More tourism is needed but less is occurring as European and other governments advise against all non-essential travel to Nepal.

Cathy Dean and Tom Foose

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