

Chairman's Report

Putting Elephant and Rhino Conservation Plans into Action

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Ozone holes, the greenhouse effect, acid rain, desertification and an extinction spasm have become household words in the 1980s. *Time* magazine featured our battered planet in place of 1988's Man-of-the-Year to alert us to a crisis more inevitable than a nuclear winter. Whether the environmental crisis is real or imagined is a question of when and how it will affect us. Is it surprising that West Germans are more worried about acid rain than Pershing missiles when industrial pollution has already killed 4 million ha. of forest in Europe? Ozone thinning and global warming, though decades away, give more pause for thought among the delicate skinned in Europe and drought-prone farmers in America than among African peasants, for whom the basics of life health, education and progress are paramount. The more immediate and personal the threat, the more it rivets our attention.

Wildlife, a tangible threat to many Africans is, to the great majority, a distant and immaterial factor. If talk of an extinction spasm in the technology-weary West seems a little far-fetched and irrelevant to African peasant farmers, it is understandable. Wildlife has been ubiquitous and troublesome to farmers and herders throughout the continent until the present generation. And, unlike the Americas and Europe, extinction is a stranger. The Pleistocene overkill which put paid to three quarters of the large mammals of the western world left Africa's megafauna almost intact. Little wonder, then, that talk of an extinction crisis seems alien and contrived, more especially because the overwhelming majority of candidates for the evolutionary trash heap are the millions of nameless forest critters that nobody except biologists care about anyhow.

The extinction threat needs to be authenticated and personalized in African terms, just as the case histories of the bison, the great whales, the tiger, the panda and the California condor have done elsewhere. A first hand, gut-wrenching threat to a revered and respected African creature will do more to awaken sensibilities and arouse indignation than any mind-numbing statistics of how many millions of invertebrates might be lost can ever do. If any species fit the bill, it is our largest and most charismatic species, the elephant and rhinos.

There can no longer be any doubt about the threats. Black rhinos are down to around 3,800, northern white rhinos to under 30. Even the elephant, in excess of 700,000, is in trouble over much of the continent. Numbers across the board are halving every ten years. In East Africa the figures are far more alarming. The Kenya population is down from 140,000 in 1970 to 22,000 today, and falling fast. Similar drops have been reported from the Central African Republic to Somalia and most countries south to the Zambezi.

Neither can there be any doubt about the rising public outcry. Where a decade ago the slaughter of rhinos and elephants in East Africa got passing mention locally, in the last year the press has become downright raucous about poaching. You know it has become a personal matter when the tourist associations in Kenya, with 400,000 dependants at stake, take umbrage at the slaughter, and a political issue when MPs start raising merry hell in parliament at the threat to the country's \$350 million tourist industry. But you know it has become more deeply emotional when wildlife clubs begin calling for an ivory export ban and Michael Werikhe, a young Kenyan, raises a million dollars walking through East Africa and across Europe to save the rhino.

Elephants and rhinos are becoming Africa's conservation flagships as the public wakens to the reality of declining numbers and raises its voice in protest at what Africa is losing.

Where should AERSG stand in all this? Should we stick fast by the biological facts, or should we become advocates willing to show our passions and express our consciences.

Science and conscience are not, as I see it, incompatible. Every warden and wildlife biologist is told to stick to policing and research and leave the real issues to others, as if we are devoid of broader concerns and compassion. The truth is that most of us are in conservation because of our feelings for wildlife and a commitment to save it. We should neither shy away from nor be denied our advocacy just because we see sense in making the case tangible to those who do not share our sensibilities. A conscience about nature helps stimulate a rigorous look at the problems and solutions. It is when science is abused in support of conscience and when conscience denies the facts that we run into trouble. The mandate of AERSG is to protect the interests of the species by looking at the facts and figuring out how to alleviate the threats.

AERSG has made its position quite clear in recent years that the rapid slide in rhino and elephant populations, while attributable to several causes, is overwhelmingly due to illegal trade, largely for overseas markets. The entire rhino horn trade and on the order of 90 per cent of the ivory trade is fed by poaching. AERSG, following its 1987 meeting in Nyeri, submitted a strong statement to CITES calling attention to the problem and to the need for urgent action. The results of the Nyeri meeting, to appear as an IUCN publication, are summarized in this issue of *Pachyderm*.

The question is, having laid out the threats and the urgent need for action, what next? This is where we must set aside our personal emotions in the interests of finding widely acceptable solutions. AERSG is in an excellent position to look at the issues, see what drives the commercial trophy trade, suggest how to regulate the markets and take strong protective measures to conserve elephants, rhinos, and the ecological role they play in Africa. That there is no single panacea is obvious. Africa is too big and its cultures, economies and policies too diverse to expect that. We must accept instead a measure of pluralism.

Again, that is what AERSG tried to do at its Nyeri meeting. The result was a series of plans for trade and field action. Unfortunately, these were not quickly or widely disseminated. Meanwhile, many governments and conservation bodies have had to respond to an upsurge in elephant poaching as ivory prices have risen to new highs of \$150 to \$200 per kg. Fortunately, the overall strategy was incorporated into a fund-raising plan entitled the African Elephant Conservation Co-ordination Group (AECCG), put together by a coalition of organizations (including IUCN, EEC, WCI and WWF, in collaboration with CITES). The African Elephant Working Group (AEWG) of CITES subsequently invited submission of the plans, which will be further revised.

AERSG must adapt as the priorities change from identifying the problems to enacting the solutions. Clearly, there was a lack of follow-up action after the Nyeri meeting. This raises the question of whether AERSG's role should end with planning, as it has done in the past, or should go further to include hands-on conservation.

The answer is clear. AERSG has neither the sovereign powers over wildlife nor the fund-raising brief to engage directly in conservation. That is the role of governments, NGOs and donor agencies. The unfilled role we should adopt is that of action broker an agency working between government and NGOs to see that plans lead to action.

With that in mind we have made several changes. First, we have setup regional group the Central and West African, East

African and Southern African to draw in more national participation and make plans more responsive to the diversity of conditions across Africa. Second, we have begun to work more closely with other agencies, such as the CITES African Elephant Working Group, to include more official government representation. Third, we have forged much closer links with NGOs and donor agencies in the hopes of closing the gap between planning and action. Finally, we will, starting with the next issue, change the format of *Pachyderm* to be a more useful medium for conservation.

Several steps have already been taken. The most urgent part of the Nyeri conservation plan concerned black rhinos. By early 1987 both Wildlife Conservation International and World Wildlife Fund had adopted the key features of the Nyeri plan and launched major fund-raising drives. This has led to direct support for rhino conservation in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and Cameroon and renewed efforts to close trade loopholes, including Taiwan.

The regional groups have also been formed. The Central and West African Group met in Gabon last November to shape its own conservation priorities. The Southern and East African Groups will meet mid-year.

Follow-up action on elephant plans began in earnest in mid-1988, when the African Elephant Conservation Co-ordinating Group was formed. The European Community, WCI and WWF are presently fund-raising for the integrated plan, elaborated in this issue of *Pachyderm*. Other organizations are expected to

join the effort shortly.

In May 1988, AERSG also initiated the Ivory Trade Review Group, detailed in this issue of *Pachyderm*. The aim of ITRG is to review all aspects of the ivory trade and to recommend to CITES and AEWG trade options for conserving the African elephant.

AERSG's role status surveys, conservation strategies and the newly added action-brokering is firmly in the realm of hard-nosed conservation. But there are also grounds for venturing into the emotional realm with which I began. If elephants and rhinos can do for Africa what the whales, tiger, and panda did for conservation in the western and eastern world, why not give substance to the idea of African flagship species? This is precisely what we intend to do. Through a series of studies, partly undertaken by ITRG, AERSG is trying to assess the tangible and intangible values of elephants and rhinos. If pachyderms can alert us to the threat of extinctions in Africa, and raise public sympathy for conserving them, then elephants and rhinos become valuable symbols worth a great deal more than the monetary value of tusks and horns. Link to that the notion of pachyderms as keystone species, animals which play a significant role in creating and maintaining biological diversity, and one has a compelling couplet of emotional and ecological reasons worth exploring and developing.

Pachyderm will increasingly become a forum for discussion and debate centering on, but going well beyond, elephant and rhino conservation. We hope the forthcoming issues will elicit a wide range of views and debates, as well as keep up with current news.

Elephants going off to browse in Amboseli, Kenya.

