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The Saga of the Northern White Rhino in the Wild

By Tom Foose, International Rhino Foundation, USA

The story of the Northern white rhino (Ceratotherium simum cottoni) in the wild and particularly in Garamba National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo, is a saga of fluctuating fortunes and precarious survival. Although there are recurrent reports (or rumors) that some Northern white rhino may survive in Sudan, Garamba has been the only known population for the last two decades. In the mid-20th century, the Northern white rhino may actually have been more numerous than the Southern white rhino (which continues its explosive recovery from a low of 20-40 in 1900 to almost 8,000 today). However, commencing with the independence wars of the 1960s, the populations of Northern white rhino have declined inexorably, with some interludes of recovery, toward extinction.

The lowest point (to date) was in 1984 when only 15-16 individuals were known to be alive in Garamba. From then until this year, the Northern white rhino once again recovered under strict protection of a project jointly conducted by WWF, the Frankfurt Zoological Society, IUCN-The World Conservation Union, UNESCO, and more recently the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), which since 1995 had been providing all the salaries and field incentives for the guards. The high point during the last one and a half decades was attained in 1994-1995,

when the population was estimated at 32 rhino.

However, despite this apparently "miraculous" recovery, the extreme vulnerability of such a small, single population was of great concern to many conservation organizations including IUCN, IRF, and WWF. During the early 1990's, a series of meetings under auspices of the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) were conducted, culminating in a workshop at White Oak Conservation Center.

a few rhino to be translocated from Garamba, but only if all Northern white rhino in captivity were moved, together, to a new location. Representatives from the two captive institutions stated that they desired to retain their rhinos and declined to consolidate their rhino at a new site. Instead they proposed that Zaire provide two male rhino from Garamba, one each to Dvur Kralove and San Diego, for added stimulus to reproduction. Both zoos have been conducting an intensive programme of reproductive research and management, including hormonal therapy, to induce reproduction, but to date there have been no new calves.

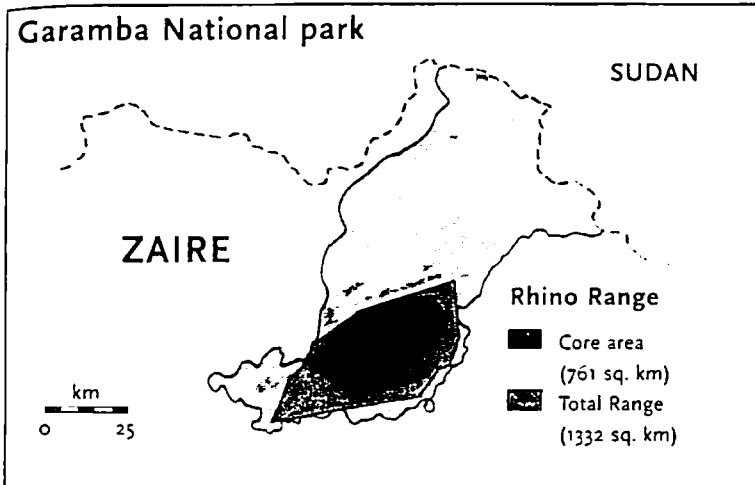
In the aftermath of this workshop, the catastrophes or stochastic events occurred which many had believed to be inevitable. There were inklings of a deteriorating

situation in early 1996, when for the first time in a decade rhino (in this case two) were lost to poachers. Local military members were involved; the central government in Kinshasa did move immediately to transfer and discipline those involved. However, then the big bang occurred: the recent civil war in Zaire which has resulted in a new government and name (Democratic Republic of Congo) for the country. For a while, it appeared that there had been no dramatic impact on Garamba, even though Eastern Zaire was the major theatre of war. However, by early 1997, the situation deteriorated rapidly. The infrastructure in the Park was destroyed,



The goal was to develop a more viable metapopulation strategy for the Garamba population including the possibility of establishing a second population by translocating a few rhino from Garamba and perhaps consolidating them with some of the captive population which consists of only nine individuals at Dvur Kralove Zoo (2.3) and the San Diego Wild Animal Park (2.2). This population has not reproduced since 1989 and there is concern that many individuals, especially females, may be reproductively senescent or nearly so. Unfortunately, the workshop concluded in a stalemate. The representatives of the Zaire Government stated they would permit

Garamba National park



mostly by looting, and the protection system collapsed with many guards now engaging in the rampant poaching (which is mainly for meat, but has included at least one rhino). Among the items lost were the vehicles

including the one donated through the IRF by a coalition of 16 institutions worldwide including five which are members of EAZA (Antwerp Zoo, Burgers' Zoo-Arnhem, Safari Beekse Bergen, Noorder Dierenpark-Emmen

and Marwell Zoo). The most recent aerial survey (June 1997) suggests that a maximum of 24 rhino survive and that more rhino have been and certainly will be lost to poachers beyond the one confirmed lost this year. It appears that the only immediate hope for the rhino is military intervention by the new government to re-establish an effective protection system. In the long term, many believe that the only hope for the Northern white rhino is to relocate some animals from Garamba to a secure location and perhaps combine them with some of the rhino surviving in captivity. But with so much turmoil in Congo and the different opinions among custodians and supporters of the rhino, the prospects are not hopeful.

New Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations founded by French Zoos

By Marc Boussekey,
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Following a meeting in Paris with R. Wirth, H.J. Adler, J.O. Heckel and J. Pferdekamp members of the Zoologische Gesellschaft für Arten- und Populationsschutz (ZGAP) on 2 April 1997, a constitution and ground rules were approved by ten French founder zoos for a sister organisation of the ZGAP named CEPA: "Conservation des Espèces et des Populations Animales". CEPA, which has the same logo and general "philosophy" as ZGAP, was launched by Beauval, Clères, Doué-la-Fontaine, Mulhouse (J.M. Lernoald, chairman), La Palmyre, Paris Ménagerie, Peaugres (C. Bargues, treasurer), Romanèche,

St. Martin la Plaine (M. Boussekey, secretary) and Villars les Dombes to actively contribute to conservation of highly endangered but often "forgotten" species. French overseas territories like New Caledonia will be a particularly

high priority for CEPA. A leaflet for institutional and individual membership will be produced soon.

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CEPA Meeting in Paris



Photo: CEPA