

THE BLACK RHINOCEROS

By Peter Hitchens

Today the black rhinoceros, represented by seven sub-species, is one of the most critically endangered large mammals in Africa. Prior to the 1970's rhinoceros populations were affected by the advancement of agricultural pressures and their incompatibility with man. Since the early 1970's there has been international concern about the status and future of rhinos when a devastatingly high level of poaching became apparent in many countries, but particularly in East Africa; it has been estimated that Kenya lost 90% of its black rhino.

From the early part of the century to 1975 there was a gradual increase in the wholesale price of African rhino horn. However, since 1975 there has been a dramatic 21 fold rise, one of the greatest increases in the world for any product over so short a period of time!

Rhinos in South Africa and South West Africa have not been excluded from the poachers' bullets. In 1981 poaching of both black and square-lipped rhino took place in the Hluhluwe-Umfolozu game reserves in Zululand, although not of great magnitude, it nevertheless occurred. South West Africa's black rhino, a different subspecies from those in Zululand, suffered a greater impact —

especially the unusual desert-adapted rhino of Koakoland and Damaraland. These succumbed to both illegal hunting and the ravages of drought. It is estimated that between 1970 and 1983 some 160 black rhino, or 72% of the population, disappeared from this majestic arid environment.

In Zululand since 1962, the Natal Parks Board has been implementing conservation measures to ensure the survival of both black and square-lipped rhino. This involves translocations within Africa and to other parts of the world. The ex-African translocations have until recently been square-lipped rhino to zoological gardens and safari parks. This species

has also been successfully re-established in game and nature reserves and private ranches throughout most of its former range. As a result of sound conservation measures, this species, once on the brink of extinction, has been restored to abundance and its name has therefore been taken out of the IUCN's (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) Red Data Book.

Translocations of black rhino have been on a much smaller scale but have resulted in the establishment of six new populations in areas where the species had long been extinct. Recently five black rhino were sent to two private ranches in Texas to estab-



Darted black rhino.

lish a breeding nucleus of Zululand black rhino in a 'safe' area.

The Department of Wildlife in Kenya is in the process of creating black rhino sanctuaries; some of these will be situated inside national parks and others on private ranches. Remnants of Kenya's former large rhino populations will be caught and relocated into the large electrically fenced, man-proof sanctuaries.

Of greatest concern in our region is undoubtedly the future of the remaining desert-adapted black rhino of Kaokoland and Damaraland. Man's greed and vanity have condemned a beast that has walked the earth for millions of years. South West Africa, like the rest of Africa, faces great challenges because of the increase and spread of the human population and the necessity to improve living standards. Governments are urged to take political decisions NOW on the conservation of rhino in the light of the prevailing socio-economic situation and future development plans before their options are closed. It would indeed be tragic if the marketers financing the rhinos' destruction wipe out all traces of this magnificent creature of the wild.

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