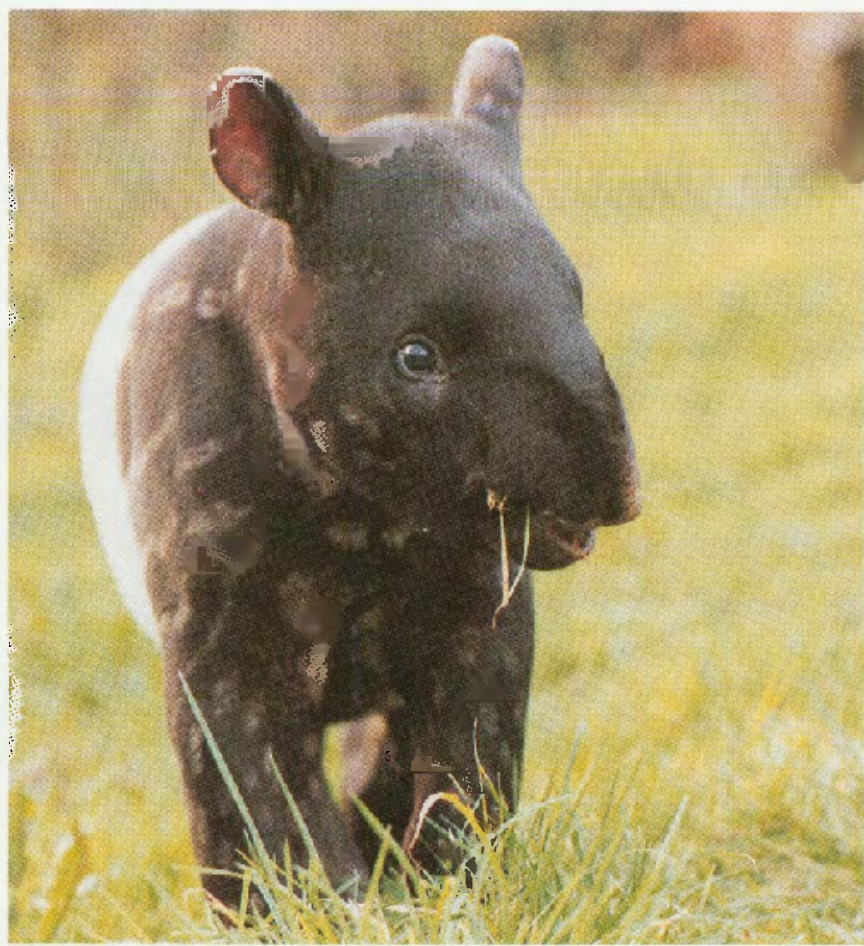


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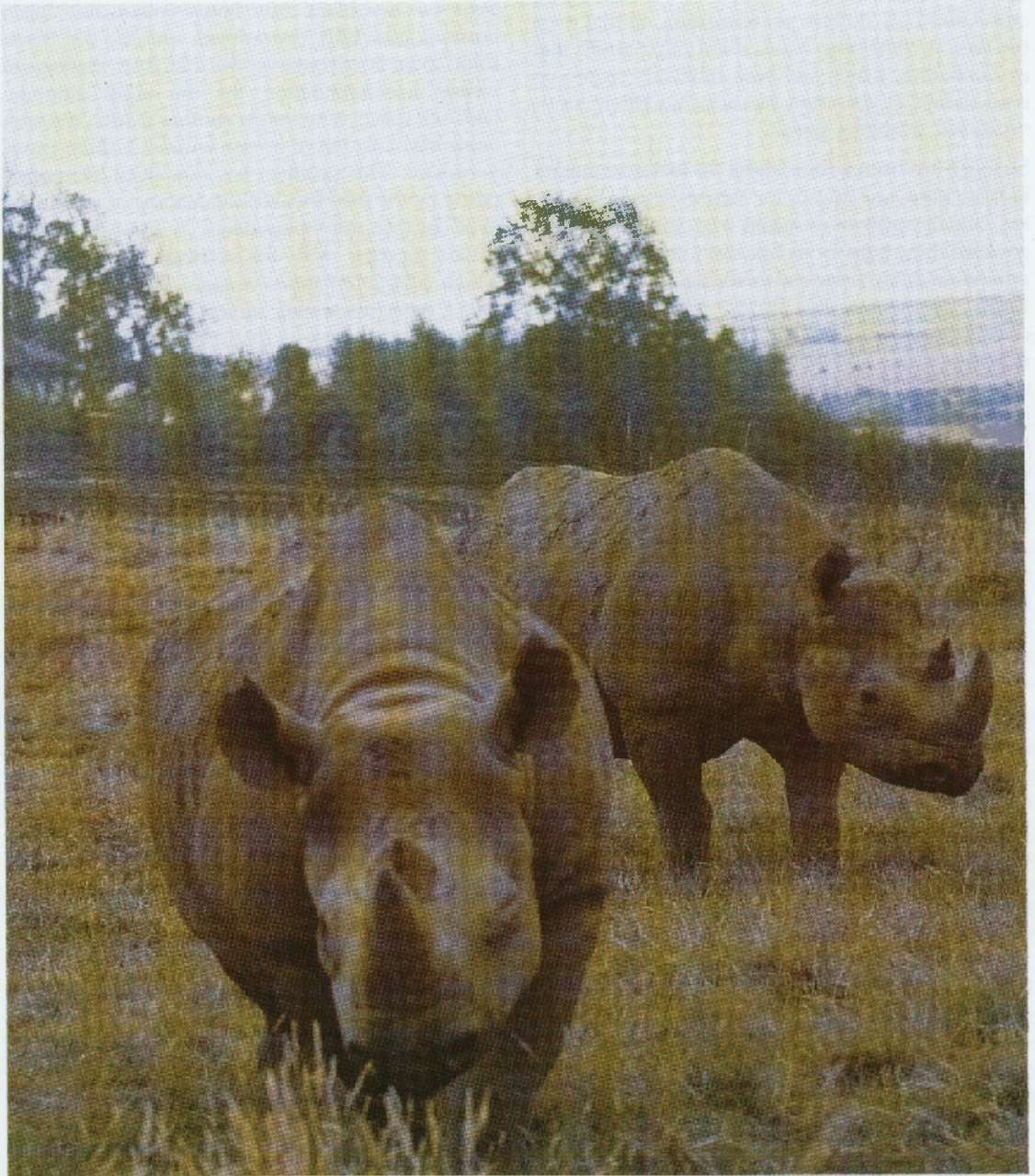
*Help Newsletter No 11*



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# BLACK RHINOCEROS — A DYING BREED?

by Mike Lockyer



*Diceros bicornis*, the black rhinoceros, once considered to be a pest in many areas, with a distribution ranging from the southernmost tip of Africa all the way up to the Sudan, and from west

to east in a belt from Guinea to Somalia, has tragically been brought to the very brink of extinction. Originating in the Eocene period, some 50 million years ago, it is now found only in a few

*Rukwa and Naivasha*

(Photo: Gordon Clayton)

isolated pockets and, quite apart from poaching, these small fragmented groups could be further endangered by genetic and demographic problems. From a population in the 70's of 60,000, the number is now down to perhaps only 3,500. In Taipei the price of African rhino horn has rocketed to between 2,500 and 3,500 U.S. dollars per kilogram, so that even the largest remaining black rhino population, that in Zimbabwe, which had been relatively secure up until about five years ago, has been hard hit by well-organised poaching gangs.

So much has been written about the lucrative market in rhino horn, and its uses for Yemeni dagger-handles etc., and the millions of Asians who continue to prize powered rhino horn for its legendary but scientifically groundless aphrodisiac and medicinal properties, that I will not reiterate this further. But one thing is certain: land-hungry Africans — some 20 million in Kenya alone, and increasing at a rate of four per cent a year — mean that there will be ever-increasing pressure by encroachment on areas 'reserved' for game. Settlements are being built on the very fringes of national parks, and indeed sometimes inside them, even in marginal areas where traditional crops cannot flourish. Admittedly a few rhino sanctuaries, such as the one run by Anna Merz at Lewa Downs, have been created by erecting thousands of fenceposts with insulators carrying mile upon mile of electric wire, but even these areas complete with trained guards are not 100 per cent secure against heavily armed raiding parties.

Meanwhile the population trend of captive black rhinoceros is equally gloomy, with numbers steadily in decline. The census of 1987 recorded 81 males and 94 females living in 65 locations. Half of these 175 specimens are past the breeding age, and with an average annual birth rate of six individuals, as opposed to a death rate of nine, the picture is anything but encouraging, and drastic action is obviously needed. With admirable foresight and generosity the Zoological Society of London's Director of Zoos, David Jones, offered to send us a proven breeding male from Whipsnade, plus a female from London who was an experienced mother. These animals were thus effectively pooled for breeding purposes with the six we already have, namely the Dublin-born

male Baringo, his two 'wives' Naivasha and Rukwa, and their three offspring who were bred here — a male, Basha, in 1977 out of Naivasha, a female, Arusha, in 1983 from the same mother, and another male, Kingo, also born in 1983 to Rukwa.

Since our new black rhino house with its four loose boxes is now fully operational, and the old black rhino house is still quite serviceable, there is adequate indoor accommodation for the eight animals. Paddock space, however, is another matter, the area being available but of no use without a rhino-proof perimeter. This problem has now been overcome, partly by the steel box-section fencing of what used to be our roan antelope paddock, but also by running rhinos together with the African black buffalo, which, after a few snorts of aggression, have settled into a most interesting mixed exhibit. We cannot of course compete with the truly wild habitat: there local populations of black rhino rarely exceed two or three animals per square mile, due probably to the fact that the density of accessible browsing food is lower than is the case for grazers — one result of which is that wild black individuals occupy fairly large ranges and seldom come into contact. This means that males can more easily avoid potentially risky encounters with other more powerful males who are claiming the females. Our system, however, seems to be working well enough, and at the time of writing it seems quite certain that both Rukwa and Naivasha are into the last quarter of their gestation period, and Mama Kidogo and Arusha could also be pregnant, with Bwana M'Kubua being the sire in all cases.

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#### Approximate World Rhinoceros Population

Black ( <i>Diceros bicornis</i> )	
	Total in 17 countries (1985) — 8,800
White ( <i>Ceratotherium simum</i> )	
	Total in 9 countries (1985) — 3,937
Great Indian ( <i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i> )	
	Total in 3 countries (1985) — 1,893
Javan ( <i>Rhinoceros sondaicus</i> )	
	Total in 1 country (1987) — 50
Sumatran ( <i>Dicerorhinus sumatrensis</i> )	
	Total in 3 countries (1987) — 680

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