

Decline and fall of the Garamba National Park?

Cathy Dean, Director

The Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo was placed on the World Heritage List in 1980, primarily for its important populations of great mammals, in particular since it was the last stronghold of the Northern white rhino and the Congo giraffe. In 1984 the Park moved onto the List of World Heritage in Danger, following a rapid decline of the rhino population to approximately 15 individuals. This triggered a joint international rescue action by a number of international agencies, and the rhino populations slowly started to recover. By 1994, the population had grown to approximately 30 individuals and the World Heritage Committee decided to take it off the Danger List, only to reinstate it in 1996 as a result of the impacts of the Sudanese Civil war and ongoing conflicts within the DRC.

The rhino population remained more or less stable until July 2003, since when poaching pressures from Sudan increased significantly, leading to a renewed decline of the rhino population. At a stakeholder meeting in July 2004, new partners joined the effort to conserve the Park and an emergency action plan was established, focusing on reinforcing law-enforcement activities.

However, by December it had not been possible to halt the decline, and a proposal was made to the DRC Government to translocate a small group of five rhinos to a safe temporary home, possibly in Kenya, in order to prevent extinction of the subspecies. Although the Government at first agreed to this proposal, it finally declined the proposal following widespread protest by ill-informed politicians. This, together with increasing insecurity and serious management problems in the Park,

led to a suspension of all conservation support for Garamba.

Save the Rhino has supported Garamba for many years, although at a much smaller level financially than the International Rhino Foundation, the US-based charity with which we often partner. As a result of the collapse of the rescue plan, the IRF decided to discontinue its involvement in Garamba. A statement by the IRF's President, John Lukas, issued in March 2005, when between 5-10 Northern white rhinos were thought to survive, included the following explanation:

This position has developed with great agony and regret but is based on a number of realities.

One reality is that IRF has exhausted all of its financial resources trying to help save the rhinos and the Park. Moreover, the unfortunate state of affairs is preventing IRF from recruiting further funds from its donors.

Another reality is that IRF no longer has human resources to contribute to the program. Fraser Smith, one of IRF's Chief technical Advisers has resigned. Kes Hillman-Smith remains committed to the Park as she has heretofore been, along with Fraser, for the last 22 years, but her ability to operate in the Park in the future is problematic.

A third reality, perhaps the most relevant of all, is that the documented and credible evidence available to IRF indicates there are, or soon will be, insufficient rhino surviving in Garamba to represent a viable nucleus to permit recovery of this population, even if the political and operational conditions improve. The

paramount goal of the IRF is to conserve rhinos and their ecosystems. However, when rhinos no longer occupy an ecosystem with no realistic prospect of a rapid or even ultimate reestablishment, the IRF cannot justify continued commitment of its limited resources to such a program. There are far too many programs where critically endangered rhinos still exist precariously in their ecosystems and require IRF resources if they are to survive.

For the same reasons, and as Save the Rhino International had always funded Garamba through the IRF, it no longer made sense for us to continue to award grants to the projects. With great sadness, we too have withdrawn.

We can only hope that, somehow, a few Northern white rhinos will survive and that the population may recover against all the odds.

My thanks to Tom Feose, Program Director of the IRF, for his additional information.

ALL IMAGES: KES HILLMAN-SMITH

Stop press:

An August 2005 survey did observe four rhinos, but the estimate is still that fewer than 10 survive. It also indicated that, right now, there is virtually no protection in place in the Park.

