

Wildlife and humanitarian crises in Sudan and the DRC

The last wild population of Northern White Rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) is going through possibly its most threatening crisis ever.

Once Northern Whites were found in five different countries. Now they remain only in Garamba National Park in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Dr Kes Hillman Smith, Garamba National Park Project

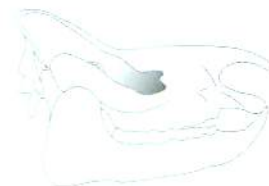
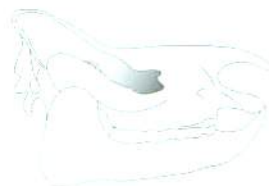
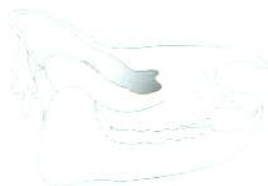


Since 1984, as the Garamba Project we have worked with the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) to conserve these rhinos and the whole ecosystem of the park, which includes the endemic Northern Savannah Giraffe and one of the densest elephant populations, which has also been found to be genetically unique. Not only are these rhinos the most endangered large mammals on earth, they are also key to conservation of a very valuable ecosystem and a National Park that is a World Heritage Site because of them. Save the Rhino International has long been a partner in the project, which is currently led by the International Rhino Foundation.

Civil wars and armed conflict, with general lawlessness and easy access to arms and ammunition are the bane of many protected areas in the region. In the Simba rebellion of the 1960s, the rhinos went from 1,000-1,300 to 100-200. Numbers rose again with protection to 490+270 in 1976, but then were brought down to 15 by the time the Garamba project started in 1984. Rhino and elephant numbers doubled in the first 8

years of the project, until the Sudan war came to and across the border. We were able to keep the population stable, though not growing despite many births of baby rhinos, until last year. By mid 2003 all large mammals had been poached out of the north and centre of the park, leaving no buffer for the vulnerable southern sector where the rhinos and elephants live. Poaching switched from meat plus ivory and horn to only ivory and rhino horn. This poaching, which had been perpetrated using many SPLA weapons and ammunition, may have accelerated to make the most of easy access before the Sudan peace process took effect.

Then in April and May we had the first invasions of Northern Sudanese horsemen. These people, well armed, very mobile, disciplined and trained, are skilled at killing elephants and rhinos and are extremely brave and motivated. They are the same as those employed in the janjaweed militia to kill civilians in Darfur. It has even been suggested by many that this wildlife massacre may be contributing to supporting the human





ALL IMAGES: KES AND FRASER SMITH, GARAMBA NATIONAL PARK PROJECT



massacre. This is why it is so serious. Numbers are already low. There are no animals elsewhere to be poaching prey and the guards are naturally daunted by this enemy, despite years of brave and active anti-poaching.

The aerial rhino survey I did in April 2003 revealed a minimum of 30 individuals and no fresh signs of poaching. By August I could only find 22 rhinos, but 47 fresh elephant carcasses. In November only 19 individuals were seen and 53 fresh elephant carcasses, with the poaching sweeping through the southern sector. We repeated the full intensive survey in July 2004 and found 15 individual rhinos in the park and there were 2 more reported out in the Domaine de Chasse to the south. Shortly after that another rhino, Kondo akatani, M3, the oldest territorial male was found dead. So there are a minimum of 16 rhinos, maybe 16-20 remaining alive at Garamba. This includes four new baby rhinos born this year to the females Minzoto, Pacque, Oeuf de Pacque and Noel, and two were born last year after the April count. It is wonderful still to see new rhinos constantly being born, but it means that 15-20 rhinos must have been killed in the last 14 months, including all the territorial males. Elephants are being killed daily, often whole groups gunned down at once. During the survey we found a young female rhino who must have been killed the day before, the 5th or 6th of July. Her lower jaw had been smashed by AK47 bullets and she had fallen mid-run in escaping from her killers. Although her horns and ears had gone, her teeth told me she was 7-9 years old and must have been either Kasi, Aligaru or Kito.

We are determined not to let this be the end of the rhinos or Garamba. At the Rhino Mayday arranged by the UK Rhino Group and Save the Rhino in May this year, there was a lot of publicity for the Garamba situation and several more organisations and individuals are stepping in to help support the Park. At a meeting of all the major potential Stakeholders in July we agreed on a priority Emergency Strategy for the year starting September 2004. It needs over a million dollars to achieve but already much of it has been pledged:

- Key is training to build the capacity of the ICCN personnel. The surveillance training and application will be led by experienced francophone trainers who have been up against the same poachers in the Central African Republic
- The technical section will be re-habilitated and a trainer brought in to assure that old and new vehicles are maintained for constant action, that roads, airstrip and observation patrol posts are re-opened. Vehicles, equipment and aircraft will be replaced after recent losses from wars and accidents
- Community relations will be strengthened and informer networks developed and diplomatic initiatives continue
- A new coalition is being developed to expand the Garamba Project and manage all the new inputs

A proposal even emerged from the meeting for temporary removal and holding of three female and two male northern white rhinos, with a guarantee that this would not detract in any way from the active in-situ support, and that they and their progeny would be returned to Garamba as soon as possible. It remains to be seen whether this will be agreed by the DRC government, as only three representatives were part of the meeting, but it would be one way to help ensure a long term future for Northern White Rhinos in Garamba.

The Zoological Society of London and Save the Rhino International both made emergency grants of £2,500 to Garamba in May 2004. Thank you to the individuals who made restricted donations for the Northern White Rhinos; we are sending your contributions over in the next transfer.