

Poaching escalates in Garamba

For anyone that needs reminding, Garamba is home to the extremely rare subspecies of white rhino, the northern white, or *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*. There are only around 30 individuals remaining in the wild.

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As broadsheet readers (or viewers of ER) will know, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has suffered from incursions by neighbouring states and its own civil war for years. Garamba National Park, which is in the northeastern corner of DRC, is most strongly affected by the war in adjacent Sudan. Although a peace process is now under negotiation for the Sudan, and getting underway for the DRC, the situation in Garamba is desperate. The poachers have entered the southern sector, home range of the rhinos and elephants, in force!

During the second half of 2003, there was a massive upsurge in killing of elephants and at least three rhinos in the southern sector of Garamba. What is most worrying is that, rather than poaching for bushmeat on a subsistence level, gangs have switched to focusing on ivory and rhino horn, which allows for far more animals to be killed in a shorter space of time. (Bushmeat poachers must stop and smoke the meat before carrying it out.) It appears that this may be associated with both the lack of other activities for the military based on the border, and a rush to gain as much profit as possible before the Sudanese have to move out of DRC. Ivory and horn is being sold illegally in order to fund the purchase of arms. Diplomatic approaches to Sudan have therefore become an important part of the conservation strategy and emergency plan.

When the extent of the situation was revealed by a survey in August 2003 an emergency strategy was

immediately drawn up, agreed with the ICCN Director and put into force. Here follows a brief summary of our activity over the last six months:

Guard recruitment: Following retirements of older guards and some deaths (see The Horn, Spring 2003), and in order to expand the patrol coverage, we recruited 22 people (from 123 applicants) for the first intake in September and October and they were given a 6-week basic training course

Guard training: This is one of the key approaches to helping ICCN staff counteract the situation and develop new strategies. We have built a training centre with local materials in the middle of the anti-poaching area. In February the Director of African Field Ranger Training Services arrived to work with ICCN and the Project to develop new strategies and train effective high level groups and trainers in conservation law enforcement within the ICCN staff. This training and re-training of all staff, implementation of new approaches and active field action will continue long term, both to regain control of the whole of Garamba and save the last rhinos and the whole ecosystem and to benefit guards from other World Heritage Sites in DRC by developing a central and mobile training unit - if we can raise sufficient funds

Guard equipment: With funds from Save the Rhino International and others, we have bought 120 tents,



National Park

which has enabled deployment of at least 6 small patrol groups at any one time and increased coverage and effectiveness. We have also bought backpacks and a complete set of uniforms for all the staff

Radio network: The looting and destruction of the radio relay system twice during the wars had been a major setback to anti-poaching, as no radio communication between patrols, HQ and aircraft was possible. We have now built a new radio tower and installed a new relay and power unit in a protective housing. All patrols and senior personnel have walkie-talkies and solar power charging units

Vehicle: A secondhand Toyota Hilux immediately proved its worth in November, when it was the vehicle that could be deployed most rapidly to get a team of guards to the scene when a group of poachers was seen from the air in the process of killing an elephant

Aerial support: In such a remote savannah area aerial support is crucial. We had use of two aircraft, the Garamba Project Cessna 206, belonging to Frankfurt Zoological Society, excellent for load carrying, logistical support, guard movements and long distance survey, and which also needed to support the Ituri Forest and Virunga, and our own small Piper, which was vital for the recce work over the park, monitoring the rhinos and surveying the poaching and supporting the anti-poaching. But, in August our small plane crashed, thankfully with no loss of life. However this was a major blow to the rhino and anti-poaching survey and reconnaissance. We had temporary support from another light aircraft in November, when the survey results were so shocking and the back up to anti-poaching proved of major value in increasing patrol coverage and doubling the rate of contacts with poachers. But a longer term solution is needed to counter this loss.



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We have made very many diplomatic approaches and meetings through all channels to also try to tackle the problem at high level.

A project is underway, working with the local people to involve them more positively in the broader conservation and help protect them from harassment by the Sudanese dissidents.

These activities have undoubtedly had an effect on deterring poachers, and with the peace process in DRC underway, it is now possible to try to re-develop really effective conservation. We have fought for 20 years to save these unique rhinos (all of whom are known and named individually and I have followed all their families over the years) but this combination of wars has put us in a situation where now is really the last chance. We MUST succeed. We still urgently need more funds. Please help by making a restricted donation to us via Save the Rhino International (cheques to "Save the Rhino" with a note saying "for Garamba").



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