Proceedings of an International Conference

RHINOCEROS BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

Oliver A. Ryder
Editor

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SAN DIEGO 1991

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Preface

The International Conference on Rhinoceros Biology and Conservation was organized as part of the activities surrounding the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Zoological Society of San Diego. Remarkably, it was the first international conference to consider the biology and conservation of the five extant species of rhinoceros.

The Conference was attended by nearly 300 participants coming from over 30 countries. Plenary sessions were organized around the widely varying issues that are relevant to gaining a better understanding of rhinos and their environments and the efforts underway to conserve rhinos at the population and species level, often within the context of national conservation strategies.

The Conference was opened by local schoolchildren welcoming Michael Werikhe, whose efforts in drawing attention to the plight of rhinos and gaining public support for increased efforts in support of rhino conservation serve as a dramatic illustration of what one concerned individual can accomplish.

The cause of the decline in rhinos in Asia over the last four centuries and in Africa, most dramatically in this century, is the action of a single species, our own. Human fascination with rhinos, their horns, hides, flesh and blood has reduced their numbers within the last century by something approaching 99%. Whether rhinos can survive this population crash and recover to live in their natural environment again is similarly up to the expression of human values, human intentions and human actions. Rhinos could recover immediately were it not for the agency of human destruction that has brought them to the brink of extinction. Nonetheless, if rhinos are to be saved it will be because enough people are concerned about their future and act upon that concern.

To the poachers who are the primary cause of depletion of especially African black rhinos, rhinos are their livelihood and the means whereby their families are supported. Clearly, rhinos can have an economic value as wildlife and, as well a value beyond their appeal to viewers of wildlife. How this value may be realized is a current focus of controversy that was presented and discussed at the Conference. Rhinoceros horn continues to be in demand for medicinal purposes. Interest in hunting rhinos is viewed in many countries as a potential force for conservation. The de-horning of rhinos in Namibia and Zimbabwe has been undertaken in an attempt to reduce poaching pressure and harvest a commercially valuable commodity that might be used, it is argued, for underwriting increased conservation efforts.

Through the precipitous decline in rhino populations it has become abundantly clear that previous efforts in conserving rhino populations through much of their range have failed to achieve their goals. Given the intensity of poaching efforts, it has been too ambitious to try to protect and conserve rhino populations over their formerly wide range. At the present, it appears that rhino sanctuaries offer the best available option for preserving rhinos and their gene pools.

The current status of each of the five species of rhino and the state of conservation planning and action in support of their conservation was presented at the Conference and is included in this volume. Nationally based conservation plans and the geographic variation in rhinos suggested by morphological studies have focused attention on the conservation of rhino subspecies. The issue of subspecies of black and Sumatran rhinos was addressed in some detail, but it also became clear that some additional studies are desirable. Health and disease issues affecting translocated wild rhinos and for rhinos in zoological parks is an area of great importance that was given its most thorough discussion to date at the conference. Similarly, improvements in reproductive assessment and monitoring were discussed as well as problems and opportunities for future advancements.

The perception of a dichotomy between efforts in rhino conservation through captive breeding and research involving captive populations in contrast to efforts to conserve wild rhinos in their habitats was discussed in sessions considering strategic planning for rhino conversation. The intensity of the these discussions made it clear that significant differences of opinion exist. Nonetheless, it was possible to identify a variety of ways that conservation science, conservation policy and conservation action can be strengthened by increased cooperation and coordination of *in situ* efforts with *ex situ* conservation efforts for rhinos. The appearance of this material is important beyond its implications for rhinos alone.

The issues presented and discussed at the Conference continue to reflect the significant issues in conservation of rhinos. Increasingly, the generation and implementation of action plans for conservation of threatened species is inextricably imbedded in discussions of population management, habitat protection and management, potential for utilization and economic benefits at the local, national and international level. Concern for rhinos has propelled consideration of their plight into the international arena. Progress made with the diversity of biological, political and economic issues involved in ensuring a secure future for the charismatic rhinos will inevitable stand as a measure of our own species capabilities. The future the five species of rhinoceros and much more clearly hangs in the balance.