

**DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF RHINO SANCTUARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA:  
THE EFFECTS OF SOCIO ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHANGES  
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA ON DEVELOPMENTS**

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Historically, the demise of some species of wildlife can be directly linked to the economics, politics, and social upheavals of a specific time.

There is an interesting parallel between the fate of the American bison and the rhino species. The American bison population which roamed the southern and western plains in millions survives now only in relatively small numbers in managed sanctuaries like Yellowstone National Park, other parks, and on private ranches. Political upheavals followed by economic and social change virtually sealed the fate of the vast majority of the American bison in the 19th century. Moving westward in their bid for a new life and new economic possibilities the American frontiersmen and women, through time and military pressure, displaced the environmentally compatible native Americans. The latter's economy was primarily wildlife and natural resource based and because of this they naturally practiced conservation of the species important to their economy, the bison. The demise of the bison through commercialized hunting by westerners and their inability to assimilate the western culture led ultimately to the native Americans' problems.

In South Africa it was no different. The African people, especially the Zulu speaking people, had an environmentally based economy. They used and exploited the wildlife and natural resources only as needed for food, clothing, or currency. Had there not been severe social upheavals caused by the infiltration of western based cultures followed by locally based political upheavals causing wars, we would not be standing here wondering how to save the black rhino. In a way the rhinos, like the American bison were safe under one cultural group who did not exploit its commercial value but are in danger from another group who do. The demise of the black rhino and to an extent the white rhino and the African elephant stems in large measure from past and current social, political, and economic problems in South Africa. Because the commercial value of the rhino horn was not recognized long ago, it survived in viable numbers from south of the Sahara to the eastern seaboard of South Africa until this century. Why, after decades of environmental education and commitment and excellent park management by successive governments has the situation deteriorated? The reasons are many and varied.

In the third world, the answer lies partly in depressed economies and escalating low key civil conflicts. Worse still, successive colonial administrations must share some of the blame for excluding blacks from higher echelons of conservation management, thus ensuring that when they left, the administrations collapsed behind them for the want of expertise. Excluding local people from conservation initiatives was also a serious mistake. It simply does not make sense to assume an animal carrying thousands of dollars of highly saleable merchandise on its nose can be ignored by persons whose per capita income in most areas is \$500 per month. It makes no sense in a land where semi-automatic weapons can be purchased for \$400, and where there are estimated to be hundreds in one province alone, to assume we can necessarily win the fight to save what is left of these rhino populations unless we face up to the harsh realities.

The development of Game Reserves and parks in southern Africa for the conservation of endangered species is now much more complex than it was over the last 30 years. At that time there was no intense pressures on the rhino for its horn per se. Poachers invaded the parks in numbers from 4 to 25 but they were mostly armed with traditional weapons, the spear and the knobstick and were supported by large packs of dogs. They were not

specifically targeting the rhino species and the number killed was negligible. Even when they did kill rhino they took the horn merely as an object of curiosity. They were not really aware of its economic value because most of them were illiterate anyway and hadn't heard of its real value. Staff in a park in those days lived a fairly good life, inspired by the occasional skirmish with poachers who invaded the area. In the early years this is roughly what a field officer's life was like- the good life, lots of excitement, the occasional danger. What they are now facing in southern Africa bears little resemblance to what has been described. To succeed today the field officer and game scouts need intensive paramilitary training. The rhino species is now the victim of intense negative pressure and its custodians, the men and women who conserve it, are similarly coming under intense pressure in some areas.

Let me give you one example in my own area which is not dissimilar to what is happening more widely. Adjacent to the Southern Mozambique border with South Africa lies the Ndumo Game Reserve. The total area of Ndumo is 10,000 sq hectares or 100 sq kms. On the northern border a civil war ebbs and flows, the combatants making raids into the reserve from time to time to replenish their larders or to try to kill rhino. Not infrequently these raiders clash with our scouts. Their fire power is roughly equal, semi-automatic weapons on both sides. In specific skirmishes between poachers and scouts up to 140 shots may be fired in a few minutes at ranges as close as 200 meters, sometimes closer. On the western, southern, and eastern boundaries of the reserve economically deprived rural people live in huge numbers. Inside the park there are 30 well trained officers and scouts backed by modern radios and vehicles. In dire emergencies a helicopter can be in support within an hour. Eternal vigilance and nerves of steel are required to protect the 25 black rhino and the 60 white rhino in the small park.

I do not think Ndumo Game Reserve is the exception to the rule. I think that as the economy slows and unemployment rises, this situation will be general. Worse still, security experts estimate that in a few years the number of illegal weapons in the rural areas alone could double. *Quo vadis* the black rhino then? What are the solutions? I believe we will have to consider the following:

1. The black rhino must be seen as a national and international monument belonging to both the international and national community- no more should its custodians regard their respective populations as theirs to manage and dispose of as they like.
2. Dynamic, parallel and complementing strategies are urgently needed to ensure success
  - a) in the rhinos natural habitat
  - b) on the illegal trade routes
  - c) in the end users areas
  - d) in the political arenas and
  - e) in the extension field.

It is our experience in KwaZulu/Natal that winning the ground war, so to speak, is not possible unless the illegal trade and end user system are not dealt with simultaneously. There is also no point in spending endless time and money on controlling the clandestine trade and end-use if there is no ground support. Nor, let me say, is it sensible to expend funds on biological research unless the other threats are overcome. Fortunately we do have in South Africa an inter-organizational advisory body called the Rhino Management Group, chairman of which is Dr. Martin Brooks. This group facilitates the collection of information, the standardization and co-ordination of ground cover, anti trade, biological research and extension and communication between department and department and non-government custodians of black rhino. In my view it has value. However, it is purely advisory and has no legal standing.

Conservation in general and wildlife parks in particular have every chance of survival into the future in South Africa as a new political and constitutional era emerges.

We have conservation organizations full of dedicated and well motivated staff, we have realistic budgets and we are technologically and scientifically well equipped to meet the challenges. What we need to do in the short term is secure our parks against the depredations of illegal hunters, diminish the illegal trade, and make everyone accountable for the rhino and other wildlife. In the medium to long term we need economic and social prosperity. Therein lies our best hope for saving the wildlife of southern Africa.