



The last refuge of the northern white rhino

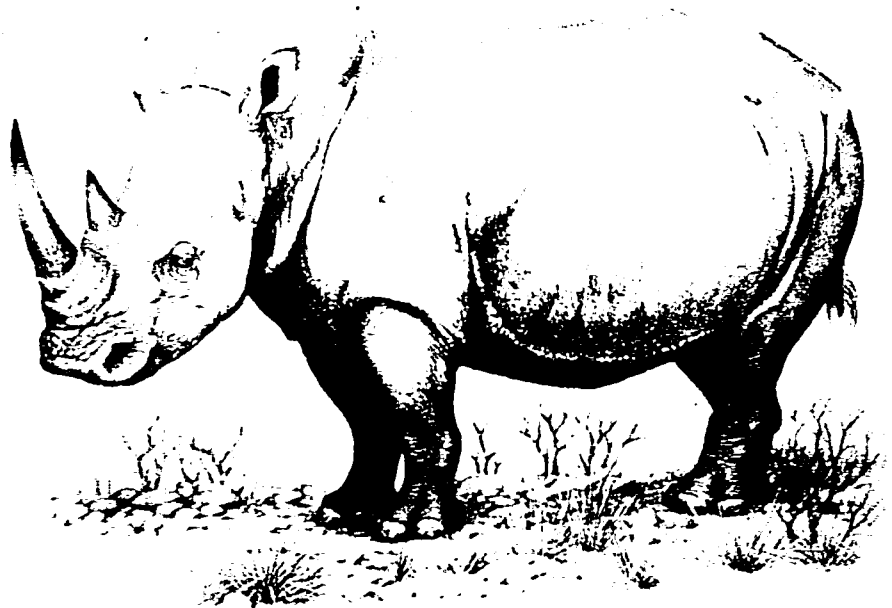
In the September/October 1983 issue of Swara, Dr Kes Hillman, a member of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group, reported on the plight of the northern white rhino and described plans for a project in Zaire's Garamba National Park to conserve the only viable population of the subspecies still living in the wild. She reports here on the project's progress during 1984.

Garamba National Park, which was established in 1938 for the rhino and the Congo giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis congoensis*), consists of 4,900 sq km of sparsely-treed, long-grass savanna in the south, grading to more densely bushed savanna and woodland towards the north. It is very well watered by numerous rivers and has an average annual rainfall of 1,500 mm. The north-eastern boundary is the Sudan border, where it partly abuts the Lantoto Game reserve. In Zaire the park is completely bordered by Hunting Reserves, with theoretically limited settlement. The park also contains nearly 8,000 elephants of a mixed savanna/forest type (*Loxodonta africana africana* and *cyclotis*) and about 53,000 buffalo, also showing characteristics of both the Cape and forest types (*Synceros caffer caffer* and *nanus*).

The park is far more sparsely wooded than the surrounding area and there is evidence that there has been reduction of some woodland in the recent past. Fire appears to be the main controlling factor at present, but elephants must also have had an influence. Woodland reduction would tend to be disadvantageous to the giraffe. There has been considerable work on the invertebrates in the past, limited work on mammals, and none on the ecology. It is clearly a system which needs investigation, monitoring and all action possible to save the rhinos, especially in the context of an aid project to rehabilitate the park management.

Work is being carried out at the request of the Institute Zairois pour la Conservation de la Nature (IZCN) and of the IUCN African Elephant and Rhino Group to assess exactly the number of rhino and

HILLMAN



White rhino.

WWF/Helmut Diller

evaluate possible approaches to improve their conservation. It is supported by the Kenya Rhino Action Group, the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society and IUCN/WWF. Particular thanks are due to the backing and promotion by Major Ian Grimwood and Dr David Western. All work is done in close collaboration with the park biologists.

The primary aim is conservation of the northern white rhinos in the ecosystem. The immediate objective is to establish as far as possible the exact numbers and age and sex ratio of the rhinos and evaluate possible alternatives for improving their conservation. The long-term objective is to establish a monitoring programme for the ecosystem with primary emphasis on the rhino and secondary on the elephant, giraffe, buffalo and the effects of fire.

From January to March 1984, 313 days were spent on patrol by 37 guards in eight groups in the southern section of the park, specifically on rhino surveillance. 35 sightings of rhino were reported. Some rhino tracks were recorded and measured. An aerial search aimed at locating rhino and at obtaining an idea at least of minimum

numbers was carried out at the beginning of June. Some 1,100 sq km were searched, south of the Garamba river and to 3 km north of it.

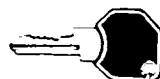
From a combination of all the ground and aerial work, we can so far account for at least 13 individuals. We have not covered all the areas thoroughly, especially north of the Garamba river, and certain individual identification is difficult from the air, except in some cases, so there are almost certainly likely to be a few more. Those known so far comprise:

- 4 adult males
- 4 adult females
- 2 unsexed adults (but thought to be a male and a female)
- 1 unsexed sub-adult
- 1 juvenile male of less than 1 year
- 1 unsexed juvenile of less than 1 year

There was far less evidence of poaching in 1984 than in the previous year south of the river, where a number of fresh carcasses had then been seen on the aerial survey. In the north, the incidence of poaching noted from the air appears similar to that seen last year. No freshly dead elephant or rhino were seen, but there were two sightings of freshly dead buffalo with the meat being cut and dried, and three or four sightings of camp sites. All these were in the north. No gunshots were heard, and these apparently were a common occurrence in the past. This reduction of poaching in the south may have been due to the increased patrolling that was possible with the funds for guard rations provided by IUCN, WWF and FAO.

However, it is believed that four or five rhinos have been poached since March 1983. One was reported poached south of the Garamba river in June 1983. A poacher

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claimed to have killed two last year at unspecified times or places, and two in June this year north of the river.

It would seem that although there is better control of the poaching south of the river, there has been little or none north of it. It had for some years been thought that almost no rhino existed north of the river. We did not see any last year, but neither did we search thoroughly there. This view was perpetuated largely because no-one went north of the river. The pontoon has been broken or non-existent for 20 years. The loss of five or so rhino in two years represents about a quarter of the then population.

With the arrival of vehicles for the rehabilitation project and funds for guard rations, improvement in the over-all anti-poaching can now begin. Anti-poaching in Garamba is by foot patrols. About 50 of the guards are based at the two stations, Nagero and Gangala na Bodio. The rest are at patrol posts around the periphery. With improved communications, leadership and rations, some of these are now becoming far more effective. All successful anti-poaching activity by patrol posts will benefit the rhino, but certain specific activities might particularly benefit them and have been discussed with the conservateur and project officer.

The situation for the rhino is very grave and has been for some time. Biologically, there are enough for them to build up a reasonable population again, given enough time and adequate protection. There are ample examples of populations building up from very low numbers, such as the southern white rhinos; the six black rhinos introduced into Akagera National Park, which increased to a population of 20-40; Himalayan thar,

which increased from eight to become a pest; and Pere David's deer, of which the present world population of some hundreds developed from three individuals. If one assumed a starting population of 15 animals, and allowed for only a very pessimistic rate of increase with 10 per cent annual natural mortality, they could more than double in 10 years.

But the big question is whether or not they can be adequately protected. The rate of loss per year should not exceed 10 per cent per annum when the aid project is putting maximum resources into the control of poaching. At a meeting of all those at the

park directly concerned with the future of the ecosystem, it was agreed that the only thing that could be done immediately was to build up the effectiveness of anti-poaching, and that is now starting. However, this by itself is not the long-term solution. The latter depends upon the decisions of the Zairis. Clearly if the rhinos are to be saved in the wild there needs to be long-term input, both national and international.

At least, the rhino are backed up by a captive breeding group and all effort should be made to augment this rapidly.



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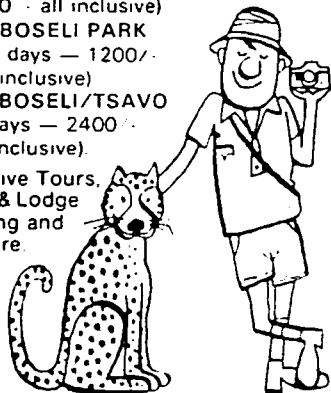
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