

Specialist Group Exchange



African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). © Alex Cortes

African Elephant SG

Supporting policy decision-making

The African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG) continues to work closely with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), to provide sound scientific advice and support to its decision-making processes. In June 2008 and March 2009, AfESG supported the CITES-led African Elephant Meetings in Mombasa and Nairobi respectively, at which African elephant range states took significant steps forward for continental collaboration on behalf of elephant conservation. AfESG facilitated the development of a Strategic Framework for the African Elephant Action Plan. This serves as the foundation for the African Elephant Action Plan, a draft of which was completed in March 2009 and is currently being finalized by a Working Group of range State representatives.

Another exciting initiative is the development of the African and Asian Elephant Database (AAED), a joint project of the AfESG and the Asian Elephant Specialist Group. The AAED, funded by the CITES MIKE (Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants)

Programme and the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), will be a server-based, spatially enabled database which will house and analyse population, range and other data on African and Asian elephants. As the official repository of MIKE data, it is a huge step forward in helping provide a central home for data on both African and Asian elephants. And, in the future, the database will extend to additional species. The AAED will allow much greater functionality than the previous African Elephant Database (AED), such as time series comparisons which will be a very useful tool for both researchers and policy makers.

In other AfESG news, members are facing serious challenges in Central and West Africa. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Dr John Hart and his wife Terese are working closely with government officials to build support for conservation initiatives in the Congo Basin (<http://www.bonoboincongo.com/>). Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton's Save the Elephants is working with the WILD Foundation and the Ministry of Environment in Mali to save the last desert elephants in West Africa. Located Mali's Gourma district of the country, these elephants are suffering from the worst drought in 26 years (<http://www.savetheelephants.org/>).

Diane Skinner

African Elephant Specialist Group

African Rhino SG

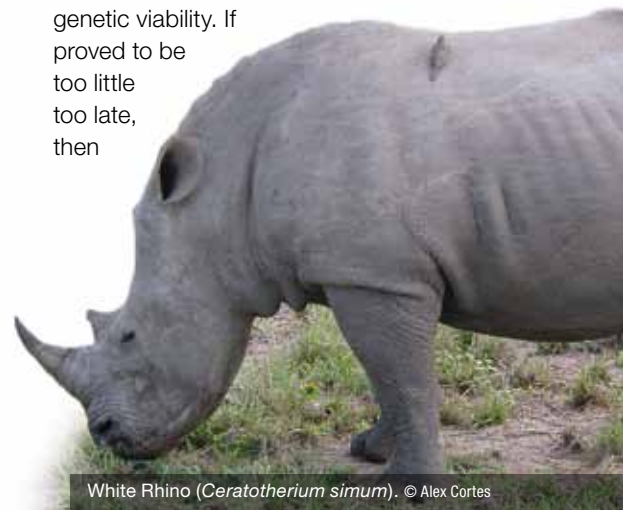
A survival strategy for northern white rhino and black rhino in Zimbabwe

Two of the most important strategic initiatives that the African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) are currently involved in are the survival strategy for the Northern White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum ssp. cottoni*), and the management of the Black Rhino (*Diceros ssp. bicornis minor*) in Zimbabwe.

It is increasingly likely that the future of the northern white rhino will rest on the efforts of the Dvur Kralove Zoo and its partners to enhance the breeding prospects of a small number of currently captive rhinos. This belief has arisen from surveys of the last known range of wild rhinos in and around Garamba National Park, DRC, which have failed to locate any sign of the four individuals known to have been present in 2005.

The AfRSG's Scientific Officer attended a workshop in the Czech Republic (2008) aimed at identifying the best options for ensuring the survival of the Northern White Rhino. It was agreed that attempts to artificially inseminate the captive females, and other interventions, should continue while potential locations in Africa to which they could be translocated are evaluated. The principal strategy would involve their relocation on a custodianship basis to a safe location, with suitable habitat in either Kenya or South Africa. This rationale is based on opinion that artificial social and habitat conditions are considered to be key factors in their failure to breed in captivity; this is further supported by experiences with captive Southern White Rhinos.

However, success is not guaranteed – even if the four or so potential breeders from captivity were to breed, they would still be on the borderline of genetic viability. If proved to be too little too late, then



White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*). © Alex Cortes



Ranita Dorado Amphibian Reserve. © Alex Cortes

the outcome could be tragic given that feasible strategies for their survival, involving translocation of founder populations out of the Garamba NP population from as early as the 1980s, were recommended by the AfRSG but never adopted.

The situation for the black rhino in Zimbabwe is critically balanced following an escalation of poaching in recent years, and the very low arrest/conviction rates are a serious cause for concern. This could nullify the growth in the population which has taken place over the last decade. Zimbabwe is one of the major range states for black rhino and has a number of populations regarded by the AfRSG as key to the survival of the taxon. It was also one of three countries flagged for attention at the CITES Conference of Parties 14, due to concerns over the status of its rhino and the control of poaching and illegal trade.

The AfRSG has been mandated (with TRAFFIC) to report to the CITES Secretariat on, *inter alia*, the status and security of African rhinos. An assessment of the status of Zimbabwe's 14 Black Rhino populations was carried out in May 2009, with excellent cooperation from the Zimbabwean authorities. The results, combined with those from TRAFFIC, will be submitted to the CITES Secretariat and CoP 15 for consideration. It is hoped that this will contribute to a significant improvement in the situation for rhinos in Zimbabwe. The AfRSG also hopes to assist the Zimbabwean National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority by providing training in some key aspects of rhino management.

These AfRSG activities are generously supported by WWF, the International Rhino Foundation and Save the Rhino International.

Martin Brooks

Chair, African Rhino Specialist Group

Amphibian SG

Amphibian reserve launched in Colombia

An exciting new partnership between the IUCN/SSC Amphibian Specialist Group, IUCN Netherlands, Dendrobatidae Nederland, Conservation International-Colombia and Fundación ProAves, has led to the launch of a new amphibian reserve to protect spectacular poison frogs in Colombia.

Colombia has more threatened amphibians than any other country, largely restricted to highly fragmented subtropical and montane forests which are unprotected and at threat of agricultural expansion. Within Colombia the hotspot of threatened amphibians is the Central Cordillera, which also has the greatest concentration of coffee production in South America and is almost denuded of natural forests.

After extensive searches of the Central Cordillera for amphibians, herpetologist and Fundación ProAves President, Alonso Quevedo, with ecologist Oscar Gallego, discovered one of the largest surviving forest fragments, a mere 200 acres of forest on its eastern flank. Not only did Alonso discover that the 200 acres contained many threatened amphibians, but that it held many previously undescribed species including two spectacular poison frogs, recently named as the Swainson's Poison Frog (*Ranitomeya doriswainsonae*) and Little Golden Poison Frog (*Ranitomeya tolimense*).

Sadly this last 200 acres was in the process of being cleared for avocado and coffee plantations and would almost certainly seal the fate of countless amphibians and other unique biodiversity.

"In an urgent bid to save this unique island of amphibian diversity" said Alonso Quevedo, "I negotiated with different land owners of the 200-acre forest to stop clearing forest and sell the land to the national conservation

NGO, Fundación ProAves. The owners agreed, so I immediately approached the IUCN/SSC Amphibian Specialist Group and IUCN Netherlands for emergency support."

The two groups promptly provided the support necessary to purchase the land and resources for the long-term protection and management of the area. In early December, the newly named "Ranita Dorada Amphibian Reserve", named after the Little Golden Poison Frog, was launched.

This action comes at a crucial moment when conservation measures are urgently needed for this highly sensitive group. Amphibians' dependence on clean freshwater and sensitivity to deforestation and climate change gives added urgency that we take greater care of them as our own health and survival depend on the same resources.

Robin Moore

Amphibian Specialist Group

Antelope SG

Conserving West African Giraffes (Giraffa camelopardalis peralta)

Currently, the last 200 surviving representatives of the West African Giraffe, (*Giraffa camelopardalis peralta*), are largely restricted to a non-protected area of about 100,000 ha in the Kouré region of Niger, about 60 km east of the capital Niamey. Under the auspices of the *Ministère de l'Environnement et de la Lutte contre la*

Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*). © Rick Brenneman