



Rhinos: Running Battle

The African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) of the Species Survival Commission has decided that better information flow and the possibility of involving Interpol in the battle against poachers and illegal traders may offer new hope for threatened elephants and rhinos.

The suggestions come in a list of resolutions issued from Group's 21-22 September meeting at Victoria Falls, on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. They call for promoting the dissemination of information and expertise to implement and support the International and National Rhino Conservation plans. Members also called for the formation of a Wildlife Division within Interpol or the formation of an equivalent organisation linking wildlife law enforcement agencies.

Members say the main focus of conservation action for elephants in Africa has been on anti-poaching and on attempts to halt the ivory trade. While these may be the most appropriate actions in some cases, there are many circumstances, the group says, where positive management of elephants as a valuable aesthetic and economic resource may be more successful. "African governments and wildlife agencies need to be made more aware of the options available to them."

As a result, members want more management and appropriate harvesting but increased monitoring of elephant populations; better legal and administrative frameworks; and they want to help provide information on law enforcement and the ivory trade. They also urge an investigation of the discrepancies between reported declines in rhino population and the amount of horn appearing in trade. Specifically, they call for encouragement of efforts to coordinate the breeding of existing captive white rhino and the development of a conservation strategy for black rhino.

The black rhino now has priority because of its rapid decline in most parts of its range and the fact that many viable populations do still exist in the wild.

The organisation recommends continued monitoring of elephant populations in Mali, Mauritania and Namibia, and the convening of an AERSG branch in West Africa as well as the re-assessment of the status and distribution of elephants within West Africa.

Rhinos reintroduced

In a joint project undertaken by the governments of India and Nepal, four female rhinos have joined several others in a reintroduction programme in Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh state in northeastern India. Indian government spokesmen say the aim of the project is to create a new and viable breeding population for the species which is under threat in its natural habitats in the states of Assam, West Bengal and in neighbouring Nepal. The first four rhinos obtained under the programme have been initially released into stockades to acclimatise them before they join others obtained last year.

Taiwan leads the way

In a swift response to a letter from IUCN Vice-President and WWF President Prince Philip to Minister Chang Feng-Shu of Taiwan, a total ban on future imports of rhino horn has been imposed there, TRAFFIC (Japan) Director Tom Milliken announced recently. The initiative is the first breakthrough in a broader initiative aimed at encouraging similar bans in North and South Korea and in Singapore, where major trade in rhino horn still continues.

Besides Prince Philip, IUCN President Dr M.S. Swaminathan and many other prominent figures are involved in the campaign.

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Boxing the Rhino Trade

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The rhinoceros has declined more rapidly over the past fifteen years than any other large mammal. From 1970 to 1985 there was an almost 80% decrease in the numbers of rhinos, from around 71,000 to only about 13,500 today. The most spectacular decline has been that of the black rhino — from 65,000 to 7000 in the past 15 years. Whole populations of black rhino have been almost totally eliminated over the past ten years in Mozambique, Chad, Central African Republic, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Angola. In the past two years, Mozambique has lost the white rhinoceros for the second time in this century — a dubious achievement indeed.

The main reason for this catastrophic decline since 1975 is due to the illegal killing of the animal, mostly for its horn. In the early 1980s about one half of the horn put onto the world market went to North Yemen where it is used for the making of attractive dagger handles, while the remaining half went to eastern Asia where it is used mostly to lower fever, not — as often supposed — as an aphrodisiac.

In an attempt to close down the trade in rhino products to save the remaining rhinos in Africa and Asia, the World Wildlife Fund initiated a one-year project which started in July 1985. The principal consultant is Esmond Bradley Martin, Vice-Chairman of IUCN's African Elephant and Rhino Group, who will be travelling to many African and Asian countries in late 1985 and 1986. Specifically, Dr Martin will try to encourage four Asian countries — South Korea, Brunei, Singapore and Macao — to bring in legislation prohibiting the imports and exports of rhino products. He will strongly encourage several countries which already have laws prohibiting the trade in rhino products, especially North Yemen, to enforce the law. In addition, he will be contacting the various traders, owners of chemist shops, and directors of traditional doctor associations to encourage the use of substitutes for rhino horn, especially saiga antelope horn which is fully acceptable as a fever-reducing drug in most parts of Asia.

Efforts will also be made to monitor the trade, both legal and illegal, in rhino products in Africa and Asia to ascertain the latest smuggling routes and present-day prices. And finally, a public awareness campaign in both Asia and Africa will be set up with special emphasis on the major decision makers in each country to alert these people and the general public to the importance of using substitutes for the various rhino products in international trade (horn, skin and hooves) to prevent the remaining populations of rhinos from being totally decimated. If the demand for rhino products does not decline soon, there will be no future for the rhinos in the wild in most parts of Africa and Asia.

Esmond Bradley Martin