



Conservation of the

THE STRATEGY OF THE NATIONAL PARKS BOARD OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Photographs by the author



Kruger National Park

Dr minor

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Introduction

The National Parks Board is normally concerned with the conservation of entire ecosystems – the soil, landscape, vegetation and animal life – for the benefit of the people of South Africa. When crisis situations arise, however, and a particular species becomes threatened or endangered, the Board follows a course of action aimed at alleviating a specific problem situation. Such was the case with the bontebok, the Cape mountain zebra and the Addo elephants. Such now is the case with the black rhino. The threat is, however, on a continental scale and is not only limited to South Africa.

The problem

The concern for the survival of African rhinos is very real and is based on the staggering rate of decline of these animals in recent years. A comparison of numbers of black rhino in Africa over the past seven years alone is sobering, clearly indicating that the species is heading for extinction over most of its remaining range.

Within the past three years, the continental black rhino population has declined by more than 50%. Within the span of seven years, Africa's black rhino declined by 75% and the species probably became extinct in Somalia, Ethiopia, Chad and Uganda. There are few, if any, black rhino now left in CAR, Mozambique, Sudan and Angola. In some countries, the decline has been spectacular with decreases of 93% in Tanzania, 96% in Zambia, 66% in Kenya, 95–100% in CAR and 93–100% in Sudan. The only countries in Africa which reported an increase in black rhino

black rhino

between 1980 and 1986 are Namibia and Zimbabwe (partly due to better counting). Within the last two years, however, the Zambezi Valley populations in Zimbabwe have been hit by poaching and their numbers declined between 1984 and 1987. The total number of black rhino in South Africa has declined due to a dramatic fall in the Hluhluwe Game Reserve population. In 1985, the Natal Parks Board reported 500 black rhino in the Hluhluwe/Umfolozi/Corridor complex. After an intensive year-long survey by Peter Hitchins, this figure is now given as only 200 animals as the Hluhluwe

population has declined to 69 due in part to translocations, but largely to extensive habitat changes partly brought about by management programmes (culling of plains game, fire). The numbers of black rhino in areas controlled by the National Parks Board of South Africa increased from 66 in 1980 to 157 in 1986. This increase was due to 33 translocated animals from Natal, six translocations from Etosha and 53 births. By 1988, this figure had climbed to 190 due to more births and the translocation of a further six animals from Namibia in late 1987.

Numbers of black rhino in African countries 1980–1987 as estimated by the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group of the IUCN

Country	1980	1984	1986	1987
Tanzania	3 795	3 130	400	255
Zimbabwe	1 400	1 680	1 625	1 775
Zambia	2 750	1 650	190	95
South Africa	630	640	548	572
Kenya	1 500	550	381	511
Namibia	300	400	440	440
CAR	3 000	170	150	?
Mozambique	250	130	130	?
Cameroon	110	110	60	30
Sudan	300	100	20	?
Somalia	300	90	–	?
Angola	300	90	50?	?
Malawi	40	20	25	20+
Rwanda	30	15	20	15
Botswana	30	10	<10	2
Ethiopia	30	10	–	2
Chad	25	5	–	–
Uganda	5	–	–	–
Total	14 795	8 800	4 049	3 717



Augrabies Falls National Park

Db bicornis





The reason for the decline in black rhino numbers

Black rhino are being poached for their horns. Rhino horn fetches up to \$9 000 per kilogram in the main trading areas of the Far East and north Yemen. In Yemen, the horns are used for carving into dagger handles – a dagger with a rhino horn handle stuck in his waistband constitutes the average north Yemeni yuppie's idea of being well dressed. In the Far East – and predominantly among the many expatriate Chinese communities – rhino horn is a valued ingredient of many traditional medicines. In particular, rhino horn is regarded as a fever-reducing drug. It is only in parts of India that rhino horn is used as an aphrodisiac.

The demand for rhino horn, and the astronomic prices paid, has led directly to the poaching of rhinos in Africa. The poaching epidemic started in East Africa, but has steadily moved south as rhino populations have become depleted. Zambia was a major hunting ground from 1980 to 1985, during which time the black rhino numbers were dramatically reduced. The July 1987 estimate of the number of rhino in Zambia is now down to 95 animals. With rhino becoming scarce in Zambia, the poachers moved south into the Zambezi Valley areas of Zimbabwe which still holds the largest black rhino population left in Africa – about 1 000 animals. Over the past year, poachers have killed 250 rhino in Zimbabwe. Anti-poaching activities by the national park authorities backed up by security forces have killed 35 poachers over the past year alone – but this has not stopped the poaching.

South Africa has not yet been hit by large-scale rhino poaching though there have been a few incidents in the Natal reserves and the Kruger National Park. There have also been several recent cases of trading in, and smuggling of, rhino horn – both illegal activities. Cases of rhino poaching have also been reported in Etosha and Damaraland in Namibia.

The South African rhino

The black rhino occurred throughout South Africa in the past, except for the plains of the Orange Free State. They were recorded by Jan van Riebeeck's settlers at the Cape, and there is the well-known story of a black rhino upsetting Governor van der Stel's coach near Piketberg. However, rhinos were regarded as dangerous animals, as good eating, and as good sport and their persecution began. By the middle of the 19th century, the species had been exterminated except for a few animals in Hluhluwe, Mkuze and the area which later became the Kruger National Park. The Hluhluwe and Mkuze populations survived and became the source for translocations to other areas in South Africa where the black rhino has now become established. The indigenous black rhino of the Kruger National Park had died out by 1940.

Addo

The National Parks Board reintroduced black rhino from Kenya to the Addo Elephant National Park in 1960 and 1961. These animals are of the East African subspecies known scientifically as *Diceros bicornis michaeli*. They have increased well and now number 19 animals – eight animals more than can now be found in Kenya's famous Amboseli National Park.

Kruger

The Kruger National Park received 20 black rhino as a gift from the Natal Parks Board in 1971. These formed the nucleus of a new population. A further gift of 12 rhino from Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) followed in 1972 and later more animals were translocated from Natal. A total of 70 animals had been introduced by 1982. These animals have also bred extremely well and they now (1988) number about 160 animals and will soon be the largest black rhino population in South Africa. The Kruger black rhino belong to the subspecies *Diceros bicornis minor*.



Addo Elephant National Park

Db michaeli

Augrabies

During 1985, the first phase of a co-operative project involving the translocation of black rhino from Etosha to South Africa was undertaken. This was a joint project of the National Parks Board of South Africa and the Directorate of Nature Conservation and Tourism of South West Africa/Namibia. Of special significance is the fact that these rhino belong to the same subspecies as the original Cape rhino of South Africa. This subspecies is known as *Diceros bicornis bicornis*. The first group of rhino were moved to the Augrabies Falls National Park where they have settled down well and the first South African calf was born in late 1987. This operation was sponsored by a number of leading firms and friends of the National Parks Board including the Division of Nature Conservation of the Orange Free State which presented 12 buffalo to the National Parks Board. These buffalo were

swopped with South West Africa Namibia for black rhino.

Vaalbos

The Vaalbos Project, which involved the translocation of six black rhino from Etosha to the Vaalbos National Park, was carried out in 1987. This project was also generously supported by commerce, fellow conservation authorities and non-governmental organisations. Vehicles on loan, fuel, fencing and funds were all generously provided.

The sponsors were: Cargo Carriers, Mercedes Benz, Shell, Consolidated Wire Industries, Camel (R J Reynolds), Endangered Wildlife Trust, Avis, Gypsum Industries, Rhino & Elephant Foundation, Bophuthatswana National Parks, SWA Directorate of Nature Conservation and Tourism and OFS Division of Nature Conservation.



Vaalbos National Park

Dicotyles bicornis

The six animals moved to Vaalbos were five females and one male – a sex ratio which should result in a good rate of population increase. Sadly, an 18-month-old calf was killed by lightning about six weeks after the release of the animals at Vaalbos. To minimise any possible genetic problems, bulls will be exchanged with the Augrabies population in the future, and it is hoped that more animals from Etosha could augment the population.

The future

The National Parks Board is the only conservation authority in the world which is now the custodian of populations of three of the four recognised subspecies of black rhino. The Board will endeavour to conserve these animals in co-operation with other conservation agencies. It is envisaged, therefore, that animals

of the East African subspecies at Addo will be exchanged for captive animals from the USA to ensure genetic outbreeding. Ultimately, it may be possible to return some of these animals to Kenya.

The south-eastern subspecies found in Kruger and Natal will also be managed in concert with the other small populations in Natal, Bophuthatswana and the Cape to ensure maximum genetic exchange.

The Augrabies and Vaalbos populations, and possibly others which may be established in the arid regional national parks, are seen not only as a valuable asset for South Africa, but also as a source of breeding stock to ensure the viability of other small populations in South West Africa/Namibia which may be established in the future. ♀