

THE BLACK RHINOCEROS IN SOUTH AFRICA

a storm in a teacup?

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The recent and highly successful Black Rhinoceros fund raising and awareness campaign has been the source of much criticism including a blatant attack on the campaign and the campaigners at a meeting of public relations practitioners in Johannesburg recently. While it would seem that most of this criticism is probably a case of sour grapes, various questions and accusations need to be answered.

Is the Black Rhinoceros an endangered species in South Africa, is the question which tops the list. Next is whether the acquisition of land for new and expanded sanctuaries is necessary? It has been stated that the Black Rhinoceros does not deserve R3 million; there are far more important environmental issues that need addressing in terms of funds and awareness; and that we cannot devote too much energy to "animal rights" when people are suffering.

Of the approximately 3 500 black rhinos surviving on the continent of Africa, South Africa is home to some 646. Of these, 612 are sub-species *Diceros bicornis minor* and are found in the game reserves of Natal/KwaZulu and the Kruger and Pilanesberg National Parks. Fourteen are sub-species *Diceros bicornis bicornis* and are located at Augrabies Falls and Vaalbos National Parks and Addo Elephant National Park is home to 20 sub-species *Diceros bicornis michaeli*.

By widely accepted scientific criteria, 612 animals of sub-species *minor* do not represent a genetically viable population, not to mention the small number of the other two sub-species. This fact, coupled with the wave of poaching that first began in Kenya in the 1970s, spread west to Uganda and the Central African Republic, south to Tanzania, Zambia and currently rife in Zimbabwe, is a very real threat to South Africa's populations.

The World Conservation Strategy, first published in 1980 by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), advocated that 10% of the land mass of every country be established as protected areas for national parks and wilderness sanctuaries. South Africa's protected areas comprise a meagre 5.9%.

At the present rate of decline, it seems likely that the Black Rhinoceros will become extinct in most African countries. Populations are likely to survive only in Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa and perhaps Kenya. With the current political progress being made in this country and changing attitudes towards us, it is probable that South Africa will become an increasingly attractive destination for tourists from Europe, America and the Far East, and tourists visiting Africa want to see our wildlife and particularly want to see rhinos as one of the "big five".

Our existing national parks and game reserves are filled to capacity as it is – when did you last try and book accommodation in the Kruger

National Park? A growing tourist industry can create thousands of job opportunities and earn South Africa millions of rands in foreign exchange.

Ultimately the establishment of new and expanded national parks and game reserves will provide habitat for not only the Black Rhinoceros but also other species of fauna and flora including elephant. It should be noted that a relatively small area of land (1 600 ha) will cost in excess of R1 million which brings us to the next bone of contention that black rhinos do not deserve R3 million.

Consider the amount of money spent on sport sponsorship in this country? In 1985 sport sponsorship amounted to R63 million and the 1989 figure is expected to be in the region of R148 million (excluding advertising and promotions). In relative terms, R3 million is not a lot of money and represents just 10 cents per South African. What is stopping our critics from launching their own campaigns to raise funds for, and promote awareness of other issues?

"Conservation" is applicable to every aspect of life on earth and covers a multitude of issues from species conservation and the establishment of game reserves to sustainable development, pollution and population control. The overriding cause of all environmental issues is human over-population – more people eat more food, need more land, need more houses, need more building materials, use more energy, want more television sets, buy more hamburgers, need more cattle, need more pastures, cut down more trees, etc, etc. This being the case, do we disregard the abused children, the mentally handicapped, the hungry and poverty stricken, deforestation and the environment and concentrate all our efforts on manufacturing condoms and encouraging people to use them? You can't compare apples with grapes!

Promoting and implementing the wise use of natural resources, whether those resources be soil, water, air, trees or rhinos, will ultimately ensure our future and create a better world for man. Species conservation and protection is important – for economical, ethical, aesthetic and scientific reasons. What sort of society would consider otherwise? 

