

RHINOS IN AFRICA - THE PRESENT SITUATION

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Abstract - Africa has seen the collapse of the black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) from various estimates of between 65 000 and 100 000 in the 1960s to less than 3 000 today. By contrast, the white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) numbered less than one hundred in 1929 in South Africa. The remarkable recovery of the species reveals numbers in excess of 6 000 today.

INTRODUCTION

In 1929, probably less than 100 white rhinoceroses survived in the Zululand reserves of the Umfolozi/Hluhluwe Complex. Those were all that remained of the once great numbers of rhino inhabiting the South African bushveld regions. Shot to the brink of extinction by hunters, traders and sportsmen, rhino nevertheless miraculously survived in this small pocket and once protection was in place, their numbers crept up to an estimated 437 by 1953. That same year, Ian Player, today a patron of the Rhino & Elephant Foundation and at the time employed by the Natal Parks Board, carried out an aerial survey in the Umfolozi Game Reserve which revealed that there was a danger of too many of these great creatures inhabiting the sanctuary. His recommendation to begin removing some eventually led to the translocation of more than 3000 white rhino to government and private reserves in Southern Africa and to many zoos around the world. This very effort ensured the survival of the white rhino and, at the same time, placed an economic value on the animal. Today, one can expect to pay up to R50 000 for a trophy bull or breeding cow.

After an 86-year hunting ban, the authorities allowed the species to be placed back onto the South African hunting licence. Since then, more than 300 have been taken by trophy hunters, some of whom are willing to pay upwards of a premium R130 000 for the best trophy head. There are many people who find this thought detestable, but do not forget that the decision to hunt rhino was based on the excellent recovery of the species. There are over 6000 white rhino in government and private reserves within South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Zambia and Kenya.

By contrast, let's look at the black rhinoceros. The fate of the black rhino in Africa over the past three decades is well documented. From an estimated 100 000 in the 1960s to less than 3 000 today. Why have we in Africa allowed this to happen? The answer is not that simple and even less simple when trying to pin the blame on 1,2 billion faceless individuals in the East who frankly have never seen a rhino and in most respects are totally oblivious of its existence. There is no need, however, for the arrogance of the West to blame them entirely for the rhino's demise, seeking as we do to treat the cause and not the symptom.

The Chinese have been using rhino products for thousands of years. We in the West instituted the ban nineteen years ago, refusing to seek meaningful solutions by talking to the consumers. Yes, a great deal of money has been spent in trying to ban the trade and encouraging substitutes. If your child was desperately ill and rhino horn medicine balls helped, would you seek a substitute in the face of risking your child's life? We in Africa applied the only method we knew. We threw up rings of steel in ever-determined efforts to prevent poaching and we even reached the point where people lost their lives in the effort to halt the onslaught. The winds of change throughout Africa since the sixties embodied in affirmative action, corruption, greed and mismanagement set

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the stage which brought the black rhino down to catastrophic levels. To be honest, the problem was right on our doorstep. The demand was there. We did not meet it, the middlemen stepped in, the price rose enormously and the rest is history.

What of the future for the rhino in Africa?

The IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group (ARSG) report (in August 1994) that for the first time in 20 years, the population of the black rhino has remained stable, which can be attributed to intensive management of the remaining populations, although the threat of poaching remains high in certain areas.

With the exception of Zimbabwe (381 black rhino), all the countries with large populations report increases - Kenya (417), Namibia (583), South Africa (897).

The northern white rhino increased from 31 to 32, while the southern white rhino (which has its greatest number in the Hluhluwe/Umfolozi Game Reserve), increased from 5 789 in 1992 to 6 752 in 1993. More than 6 300 of these rhino occur in South Africa.

In spite of the satisfactory report, there is no need for complacency and the situation will continue to remain of grave concern. Ongoing vigilance must be maintained. What are the practical steps we have left?

Present rhino populations in government reserves will continue to require enormous funding and serious commitment to security and monitoring. The state must recognise the precious asset these creatures represent.

Establishment of rhino populations in small privately-owned sanctuaries and government reserves as in Kenya, Zimbabwe and more recently in South Africa has great merit. In small areas, round-the-clock surveillance and monitoring are possible and practical, if still expensive. It is essential that animals in such sanctuaries be well away from human settlement and one must have staff who are primarily concerned with rhino. Close co-operation at official security level is essential. One other option - one that a few years ago was subjected to wide criticism - is to translocate rhinos to sanctuaries in far countries such as the United States or Australia. Many people felt that in situ rhino conservation should come first, but let's face it, we have not done well in Africa by any stretch of the imagination. Here again, the case of the white rhino is a good example.

We need a major public relations programme to highlight the situation and urgently promote new, bold and optimistic ideas for rhino conservation. We need to make rhinos relevant to people and make people understand and aware of the benefits of sustainable use. We need to make rhinos easily accessible and desirable to tourists. (Look at what's been done for gorillas.) We need to encourage private sector involvement, try to ensure that private rhino owners do not suffer from the financial and bureaucratic restrictions of government. Look at what people have been prepared to pay for the privilege of owning black rhino, and look what happened when private ownership of white rhino placed a value on them. White rhino are traded like race horses, and hunters can bag one at enormous cost. You and I might not like the idea but it does make a lot of economic sense.

One can rely on the private sector operators to develop strategies for rhino conservation. One should also be prepared to view it in a business light. It has been said that there are no perfect men in this world, only perfect intentions. If someone's intention is to make money breeding black rhino and success leads to the enhancement of the status of the species, then so be it. Business-minded people are amazed that one does not trade in rhino horn. If the illegal trade in rhino horn is the root cause of the problem and gravest threat to rhinos, then why not deal with the symptom? Talk to the consumers, give them an incentive to ensure the long-term supply of their needs.

CONCLUSION

It would indeed be a sad day (and there are those who believe it will come) if we were so preoccupied with keeping rhinos alive at all that we would not even consider trade in their horns. Trade in horn might help the species survive. It seems there are some perfect men with perfect intentions in this world who are determined not to let either of these options get much of a hearing. We should not accept that. We need to press for bold new initiatives and explore every means at our disposal on behalf of both species of Africa's rhino.

Rhino face a grave crisis and those who purport to hold the survival of the five species above everything else must be prepared to examine all available options with open minds and a will to seek lasting solutions. Zimbabwe's black rhino population, and probably those of most other countries, is likely to see the next century only through a massive regime of dehorning, concentration in sanctuaries, conservancies or intensive protected zones, and increased anti-poaching and law enforcement efforts in the field, supported by a concerted strategy to understand and impact rhino horn supply and price factors in consuming countries, including acceptance of the possibility that restricted avenues of trade may be part of the solution. As the rhinos enter perhaps their final hour, to let the dictates of dogma foreclose on any option before it has been thoroughly examined would be irresponsible and will certainly abet the rhino's further slide into oblivion.

The Decline of the Black Rhino in Zimbabwe
Tom Milliken, Kristin Nowell, Jorgen B Thomsen
c 1993 Traffic International

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REFERENCE

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