MISCELLANY

The White Rhinoceros EEP

White rhinos in the wild suffered a great decline, and at the beginning of the 20th century numbered only 30 to 100 animals. Intensive management has resulted in a huge increase, with more than 18,000 now found in South Africa alone. Translocation of southern white rhinos from South Africa to countries such as Kenya, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe has created substantial populations in other countries as well. Despite an increase in poaching of white rhinos, the population in South Africa is still growing, and 50 to 100 animals are auctioned each year for money that is primarily used to support wildlife management and conservation. Most of the animals sold go to game ranches where they are killed by rich trophy hunters. There are many wildlife traders available who can arrange export of these animals to other countries. Because white rhinos are odd-toed ungulates they do not face the same restrictions in importation to Europe that even-toed ungulates do.

Poor record-keeping historically has made it difficult to gain much understanding of the white rhino population in European zoos prior to the 1970s, when many were imported, mostly from Hluhluwe National Park in South Africa. Initially not much was known regarding the species' social needs and reproductive strategies, and while some of the animals imported in the 1970s are still alive, not many reproduced. Analyses of the 2006/2007 EEP population indicated that more than 30% are over 35 years old, but that only 26% of the rhinos imported since the 1950s ever bred, and only 13% of the F1 generation has bred to date.

More recently, a much better understanding of the natural history of these animals has resulted in improved management. Zoos holding white rhinos within the EEP are now strongly encouraged to hold larger groups, and zoos that do not have the room to hold larger groups are advised to switch to solitary species. The realization that reproduction by daughters is hormonally suppressed in the presence of their mothers has led to transfer of female offspring to other zoos, increasing their chance of breeding.

There are a number of European zoos that are willing to invest in constructing enclosures suitable for holding and managing these rhinos properly if they know that they will receive the animals to fill the enclosures. However, it is currently impossible to assure them of this, given that much of the population is aging and not much breeding is occurring. For this reason, a proposal for some zoos to import animals from South Africa is under discussion. While there are many opponents to importation of wild animals, the white rhino EEP coordinator and species committee feel that importation is justified in this case, because they are confident that – with the improved understanding of the management needs of these animals now available – it would be possible to develop a more viable population of white rhinos with additional founders. Furthermore, these surplus animals would otherwise only go to game ranches, and it is clear that their export can be professionally undertaken.

English summary of article by Lars Versteege in *De Harpij* Vol. 29, No. 1 (2010)

Tool use in an octopus

Until now, tool use has been considered the preserve of the 'higher' mammals and a few birds. In a report in *Current Biology* (Finn *et al.*, 2009), Australian scientists Julian Finn and Mark Norman have now recorded the first case of tool use in an invertebrate – a tropical octopus that selects, stacks, transports and assembles coconut shells as portable armour.

Many octopuses use available objects (such as shells, rocks or discarded cans) for shelter, but these behaviours are not considered as tool use. However, the veined octopus (*Amphioctopus marginatus*) goes a step further, preparing, arranging and carrying pairs of coconut shells up to 20 metres to reassemble as a shelter when required.

Finn and Norman spent more than 500 hours diving in remote Indonesian waters to observe and film these animals. They watched octopuses dig out coconut shells from the ocean floor, empty the shells of mud using jets of water, stack two empty shells hollow-side-up, and carry the shells underneath their bodies in a unique lumbering gait they call 'stilt-walking'. This series of actions are among the most complex ever recorded for octopuses.

The veined octopus probably evolved this behaviour using clam shells as shelter. However, once humans began discarding large numbers of coconut shells, they inadvertently created a steady supply of lightweight portable armour – the perfect tools to protect the octopuses against fish attackers.

Reference

Finn, J.K., Tregenza, T., and Norman, M.D. (2009): Defensive tool use in a coconut-carrying octopus. *Current Biology* Vol. 19, No. 23, 1069–1070.

Fighting the problem of exotic animal theft

For the last four years John Hayward has administered the National Theft Register (NTR), a British scheme to coordinate records of animal thefts, on behalf of BIAZA, the Parrot Society and the British Chelonia Group. This was a previously unmet need, as the police do not maintain any national index of stolen exotic animals. The main target for the thieves continues to be birds and reptiles from zoos and private collections.

Much of the register's success in tracing stolen animals comes from press and publicity appeals, informants and connections within the whole zoological community, including private breeders, dealers and specialist club members. Anonymous information about the location of stolen animals is regularly received from people who are reluctant to talk to the police or other authorities, and the scheme therefore fills a void in this respect.

Last year the NTR dealt with 21 parrot thefts throughout the U.K., including red-vented cockatoos from a zoo in the West Country which were recovered locally. In addition it operates on an international basis and assisted in the dissemination of information concerning the thefts of rare birds in the Netherlands and Israel. The U.K. thefts were generally 'one-offs' and not directly related to any identifiable pattern or linked series. There has been a reduction in this category of crime, no doubt due to added security by breeders and an awareness of the vulnerability of external bird-houses and aviaries.

There was a tremendous upsurge in tortoise-related crime in 2009, with 44 thefts referred to the Register compared with 29 the previous year. The thieves are fully aware of the value of such animals, and teams committing parrot thefts are diversifying into stealing small monkeys, birds of prey and tortoises to supply the lucrative trade in endangered species.

A typical case with a successful conclusion concerned the theft of a large number of tortoises from a collection in Cornwall, open to the public. The thieves entered on two occasions and stole many animals. Press releases were immediately put out appealing for information from the public, who were invited to call a 24-hour confidential hot-line. Within a day or so the NTR was told of the location of one of the stolen tortoises, a large *Geochelone sulcata* valued at £4,000 be-