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AFRICA

Geographic

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**LIFE AT 0
RAINFOREST
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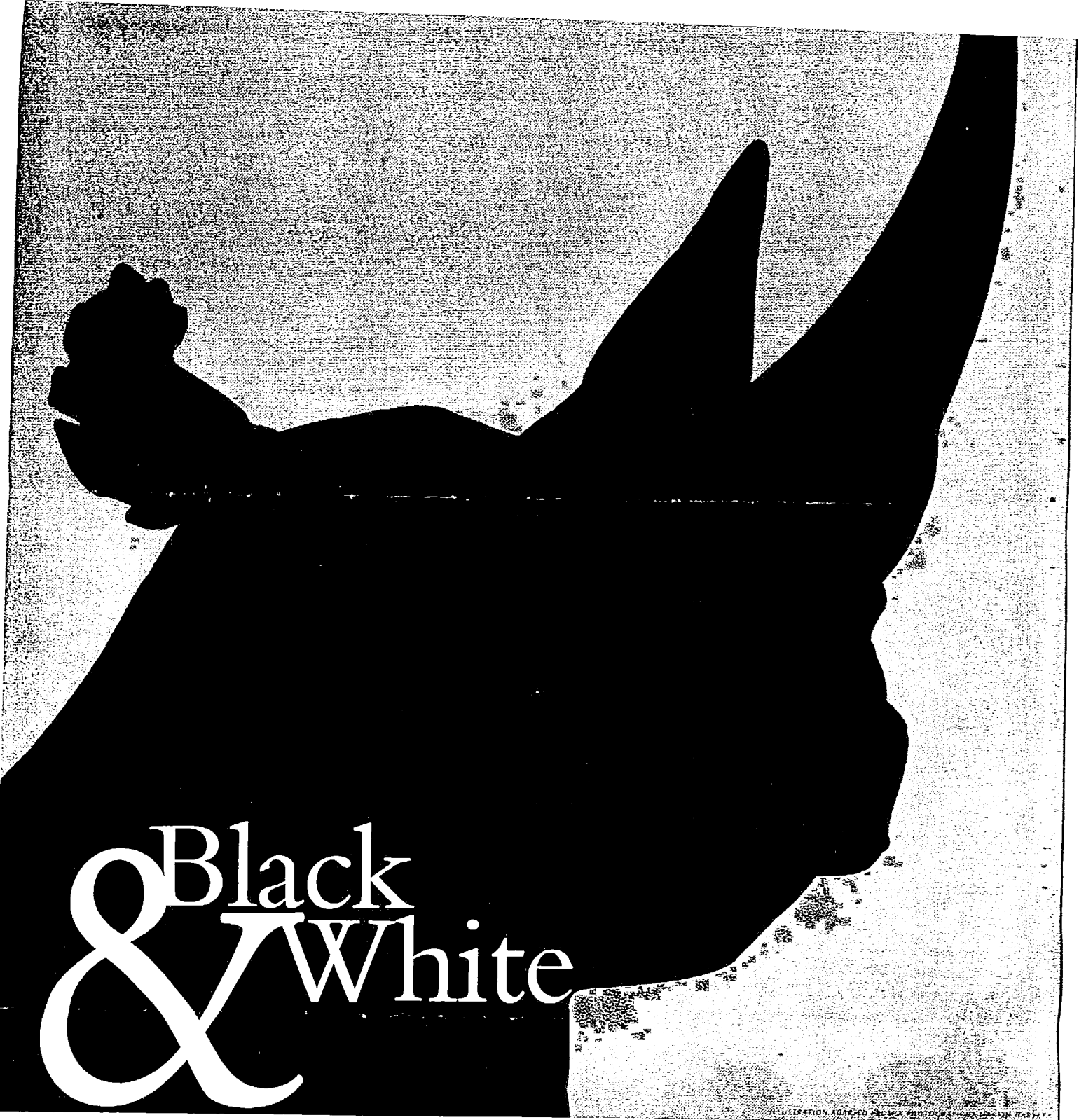
The Indian Ocean islands of Comoros were once
a favourite tropical getaway for sun-seekers,
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**GREAT GAME PARKS OF AFRICA:
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Only a handful of travellers make it each year
to the remote and untamed paradise that is
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Sharna Balfour were two of the lucky ones.

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Black & White

ILLUSTRATION: ADRIAN PAULI

IS RHINO POACHING UNDER CONTROL IN AFRICA?

YES ... AND NO, SAY ESMOND MARTIN AND LUCY VIGNE, AS THEY EXAMINE THE CRISIS THAT HIT AFRICA'S RHINOS THREE DECADES AGO, THE MISTAKES THAT WERE MADE IN DEALING WITH IT, AND THE SUCCESSES ACHIEVED.

It is easy to forget that, as recently as 1970, an estimated 65 000 black rhinos were dispersed throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and about 3 500 white rhinos were still alive on the continent, mostly in its central parts. Then the poaching crisis erupted, and the situation changed dramatically. Black rhinos were being obliterated and the northern white rhino populations were almost entirely destroyed. In the 1970s and '80s conservationists and the media bombarded the public in many countries around the world with information about the catastrophic situation that was suddenly facing rhinos in Africa. NGOs were established, especially in America and Europe, and major appeals for financial assistance were made. Disastrously, much of the funding was squandered through either corruption or bad policies, and many countries in Africa lost their rhino populations entirely.

Nor was the crisis confined to Africa. By 1992 the total world population of the five rhino species (black, white, Indian, Javan and Sumatran) had hit an all-time low – an estimated 10 585 according to the IUCN. Incredibly, since then that total has bounced back by a phenomenal 67 per cent to 17 605! In Africa, the number of black rhinos has increased from an estimated 2 475 to 3 100; and of white rhinos from 5 820 to 11 640, almost all in southern Africa. In India and Nepal, the tally of rhinos has risen from 1 800 to 2 500; the number of Javan rhinos has remained



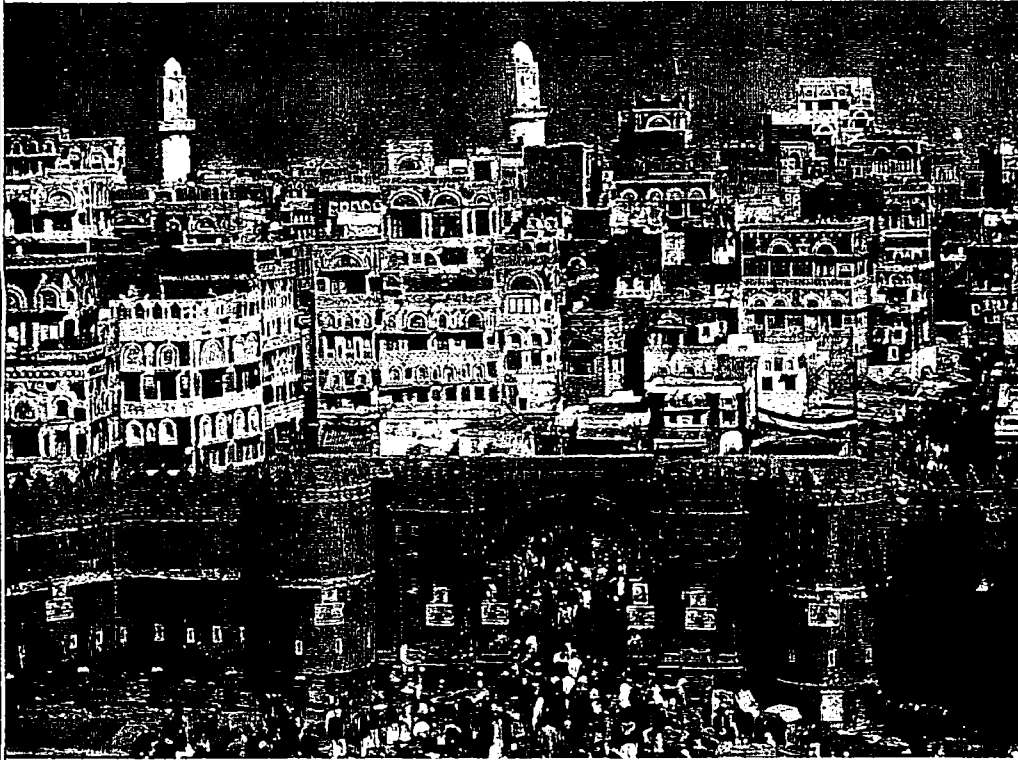
ESMOND MARTIN

stable at approximately 65 animals; and only the Sumatran species has declined in number, from about 425 to 300. In Africa, at least, we can celebrate that rhino conservation has been largely a success over the past decade.

It is not all good news, though. The past two years have seen serious rhino poaching in Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya which can be linked to a breakdown ►

In 1990 the Kenya Wildlife Service took the extraordinary, and controversial, step of burning 281 rhino horns, and five years later burned another 59 horns, along with ivory.

In the 1970s the demand was huge – an average of 3 000 to 4 000 kilograms of rhino horn legally entered North Yemen each year!



aren't claimed as trophies are, we think, being smuggled through South Africa and on to eastern Asian markets, mostly for traditional Chinese medicine.

In Kenya there was extremely little rhino poaching through the 1990s, but it escalated in 2002, threatening the country's black (around 400) and white (approaching 200) rhinos once more. According to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), at least eight black and six white rhinos were poached in 2002. Four of the black and all six white rhinos were snared on a private ranch near Mount Kenya, where they died a slow and painful death. Nakuru National Park lost two of its black rhinos, also in snares, and the remaining two were killed in Tsavo National Park.

Tsavo has had a particularly troubled rhino-poaching history. In the 1960s it was home to the largest black rhino population in Kenya – more than 7 000 – but during the following two decades poachers almost eliminated them. By the early 1990s Richard Leakey, then the director of KWS, decided Tsavo East was once again safe and he re-introduced free-ranging rhinos. There were 50 of them by 2001, but in that year at least four were shot dead. Two more were killed the following year and their horns taken. Gangs of five or six Somalis armed with modern rifles were coming into Tsavo and staying for up to two months at a time while they searched for rhinos and elephants. They carried just an axe and a few provisions so that they could move unhindered through the bush, and had such outstanding bush skills that KWS staff rarely caught them.

The gangs earned about US\$200 a kilogram for the horn (averaging US\$600 for an adult poached rhino). Either the poachers themselves or middlemen carried the horns through the bush to Somalia or to the Kenyan coast to sell them. From Mombasa the export price was about US\$550 a kilogram. Traders then smuggled the horns by boat to Djibouti, the main entrepôt for eastern African horns, very

The old part of Sanaa, Yemen's capital. Behind the medieval gateway lies the *souk* where craftsmen still carve rhino horn into *jambiya* handles.

in law and order and a lack of patrols. In Zimbabwe, between January 2002 and September 2003 poachers killed at least 36 black and white rhinos, the most in Africa for these two years. Sinamatella in the north lost 18, mainly blacks, while three more blacks died from poaching in Matusadona National Park, and there were perhaps 15 black rhinos killed in the so-called rhino conservancies (private ranches that have banded together to form a single entity). Poachers in the north of the country, mainly Zambians and a few Angolans, use guns, while on conservancies further south 'war veterans' have been snaring rhinos.

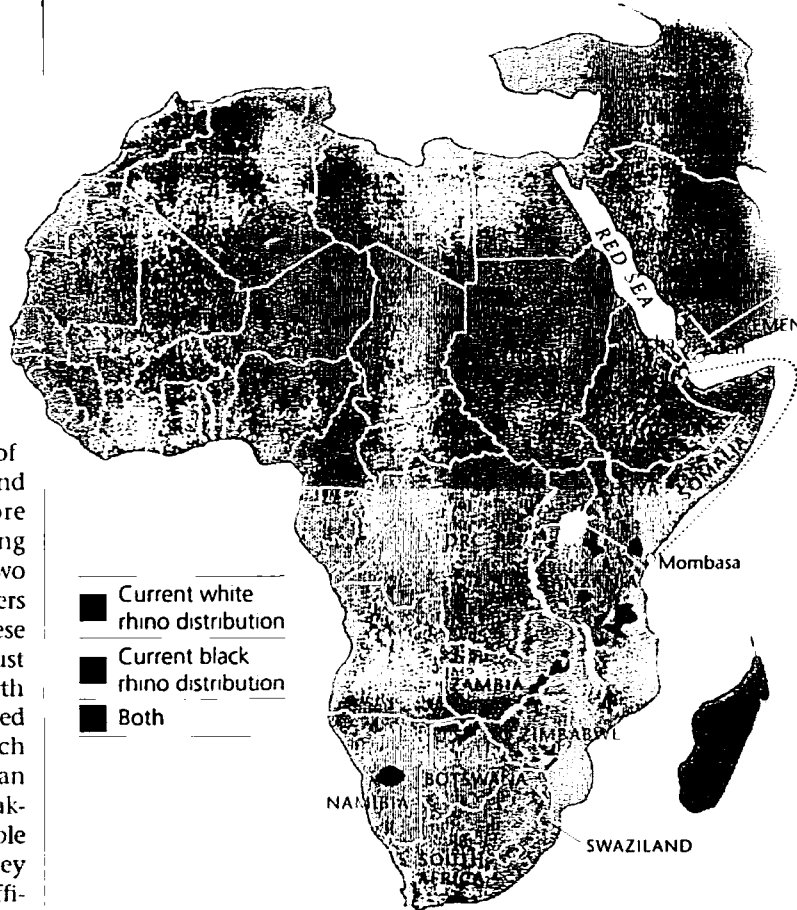
The remaining 500 black and 200 white rhinos in Zimbabwe are still worryingly vulnerable. A new threat is being posed by sport hunters, some South African, who have started shooting rhinos for trophies and profess to have obtained legal documents permitting them to do so. The horns that

where they sold for US\$750 a kilogram. From there, the horns moved to their final destination, Yemen.

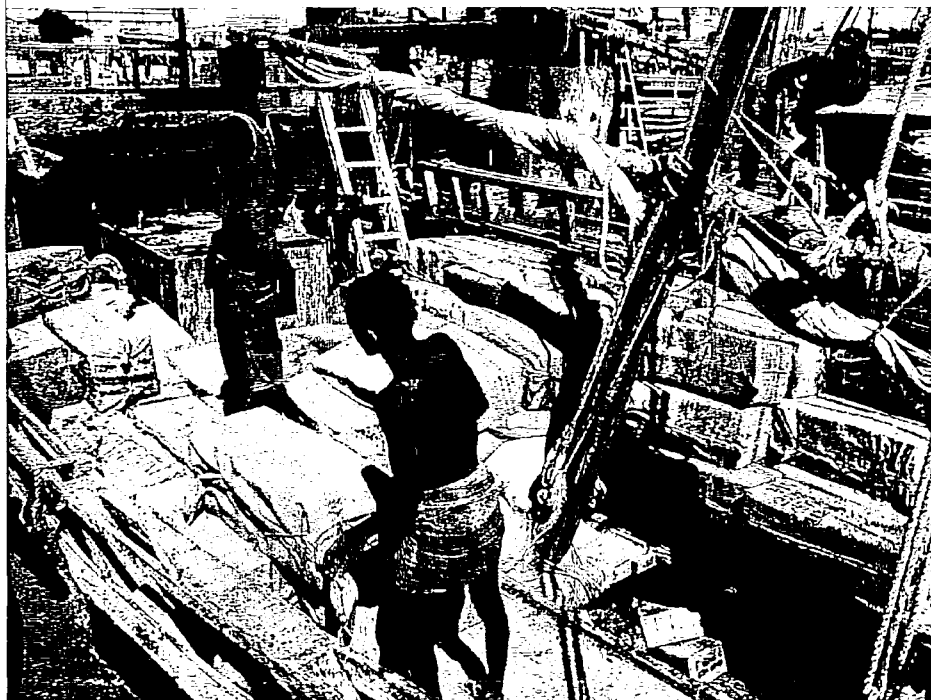
In northern DRC, we think the situation in the remote Garamba National Park is now the most critical for rhinos. The last known population of northern white rhinos occurs here, and in April 2003 it stood at about 30. A reconnaissance in August 2003 in the southern part of the park, where the rhinos live, found only 22 individuals, although more may have been obscured by the long grass. We know that poachers shot two in 2003, and it is probable that others also fell victim to them. The Sudanese People's Liberation Army has camps just to the east of the park and to the north in southern Sudan, and in 2003 armed Sudanese entered Garamba to poach primarily tusks and horns rather than bushmeat as they used to. As the breakdown of law and order in this unstable area continues, without more money and manpower it is proving very difficult to protect the highly endangered northern white rhino.

So where does the rhino horn go? Traditionally, traders have sold horn from southern Africa to eastern Asian countries. There was also demand for rhino products in Central and eastern Africa, but this has now dwindled to virtually nothing and almost all the horn from rhinos poached there ends up in Yemen, where it is used in the crafting of traditional dagger (*jambiya*) handles. In the 1970s the demand was huge – an average of 3 000 to 4 000 kilograms of rhino horn legally entered North Yemen each year! It has since decreased – between 1993 and 2002, imports fell to less than 70 kilograms on average per year – but there is still enough trade in horn in Yemen to be a major threat to the rhinos of Central and eastern Africa.

The poached horns are smuggled into Yemen via Djibouti, where they are loaded onto local dhows known as *zarooks* and ferried across the Red Sea to the quiet coastal waters around the Yemeni port of Mocha. From there they are transported by motor vehicle to the capital, Sanaa. In the city's old *souk*, about a hundred artisans work on *jambiya* handles. Nowadays, of the thousands of handles crafted each year, very few – less than one per cent –



Thanks to focused conservation efforts, black and white rhino populations have recovered significantly from the poaching induced lows of the 1970s and 1980s. In the past two years, however, Kenya, the DRC and Zimbabwe have experienced a surge in poaching activities. And, although demand has decreased, rhino horn continues to find a market in Yemen – and is smuggled there in dhows via Djibouti (below).



ESMOND MARF



Jambiyas, sheaths and belts are sold separately and then assembled by the salesman for his customer.

are made from rhino horn. Most are made from the horn of domestic water buffaloes, which is imported cheaply from India, and a few from wood, camel hoof and stone. Rhino horn, however, still carries the greatest kudos; the average retail price for a new medium-sized *jambiya* with a rhino-horn handle is US\$446 compared with US\$15 for one with a water buffalo-horn handle.

The drop in demand for rhino-horn *jambiya* handles is part of Africa's rhino conservation success story. In Yemen, conservationists worked with government officials to place bans on the import and export of rhino horn, and on domestic trade. At the same

time, they explained to Yemenis that rhinos are now endangered and encouraged *jambiya* craftsmen to use alternative materials. A help to their cause has been a fall in the Yemeni economy; the average citizen can no longer afford the high price of a *jambiya* with a rhino-horn handle. Those who are wealthy enough tend to choose a *sayfani jambiya*, one that has a handle made of old rhino horn that has developed a rich texture and colour. Conservationists are far from complacent, though; they know that an improvement in the Yemeni economy brought about by increased oil revenues could mean that more of the country's poor may be able to afford new rhino-horn dagger handles again.

In eastern Asia, too, conservationists' efforts to persuade governments to ban international and domestic trade in rhino horn have been largely successful. They advised traditional medical associations that their demand for rhino horn had driven rhinos close to extinction, and advocated the use of substitutes. Traditional doctors and pharmacists have mostly complied.

So with the drop in demand, the price of rhino horn has fallen. In Yemen, if inflation is taken into account, the price of East African rhino horn has decreased since 1991 in real dollar terms by about 25 per cent to the 2002 wholesale price of US\$1 200 per kilogram. In eastern Asia the wholesale price for southern African horn peaked in 1990 at US\$2 000 per kilogram, but has dropped since then by perhaps also 25 per cent. And as prices have fallen, so the poachers have become less hungry for rhino horn.

What else have rhino conservationists done right to increase the numbers of the African species since 1992? To begin with, they have persuaded governments on the continent to become more interested and involved in rhino conservation, and they have promoted the private management of rhinos. South Africa has the most rhinos in Africa (about 11 000 whites and over 1 000 blacks), followed by Namibia (about 170 whites and 900 blacks), Zimbabwe, Kenya and Swaziland. These countries deserve praise for making rhino conservation a high priority in the past decade, the recent poaching problems in Kenya and Zimbabwe notwithstanding.

About a quarter of the continent's entire rhino population is privately managed

The authorities have saved the lives of many rhinos in vulnerable areas by transporting them to safer places. For example, in Kenya, KWS has rescued isolated rhinos and put them into fully fenced sanctuaries within national parks. In Zimbabwe, the government has created four intensive protection zones in their parks. Patrols and other anti-poaching efforts are more concentrated within these smaller protected areas, and are thus more effective.

The governments of Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland have increased the penalties imposed for rhino poaching and trade in rhino products. For killing a rhino in Namibia the penalty is now N\$200 000 (US\$28 500) and up to 20 years in prison, while in Swaziland the jail term is five years, without bail. In addition, intelligence-gathering networks have been improved, especially in Namibia and South Africa, where the governments regularly pay money for information about rhino poachers and traders in horn. This has been extremely effective in Namibia, where officials have managed to arrest almost every rhino poacher and trader.

The private management of rhinos has proved to be a third weapon in the conservationists' arsenal. Over the past decade the national governments of South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Swaziland have permitted the private sector to become involved in rhino management, giving concerned individuals the go-ahead to raise, and breed, rhinos on their well-secured properties. It is surely no coincidence that these countries have the largest rhino populations in Africa. Today all of Swaziland's rhinos are privately managed, as are 60 per cent of Zimbabwe's. In fact, about a quarter of the continent's entire rhino population is privately managed.

In South Africa, a positive boom in white rhinos has been driven by economic incentive; rhino owners earn money from tourists who pay to see the rhinos, and from hunters who pay to shoot them. The country is now home to 94 per cent of Africa's white rhino populations. Overall for the whole continent, the white rhinos outnumber



Nairobi National Park's black rhinos have been breeding so well that many have been translocated to other parts of Kenya.

the blacks by four to one – a considerable turnaround since 1970, when there were 18 times more black rhinos!

We have learned a lot about rhino conservation since the 1970s and '80s. In those days, governments and NGOs wasted a lot of money on hopeless causes such as trying to protect large rhino populations spread over huge areas in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya. A great deal of donor money was also squandered in Sudan, Cameroon, Uganda and Mozambique, among others, while their rhinos virtually disappeared. And more emphasis should have been put on tackling the consumer markets. By the 1990s, conservation efforts were working at last. Rhino experts and officials were implementing the right strategies, thanks to their willingness to learn and share ideas and experiences. For the future, these strategies must continue and evolve, and rhino conservation must remain a high priority. Conservationists and government officials must continue to work together so that surviving rhino populations can grow. ■

AFRICA *Geographic online*

Philip Briggs considers the plight of Tsavo East's rhinos in his journey around Kenya in the December 2000/January 2001 issue of *Africa - Environment & Wildlife* while Daryl Balfour takes an overall view of Africa's rhinos in the February 2001 issue. Mike Kock describes his search for the western subspecies of the black rhino in the February and March 2002 issues of *Africa Geographic*. Also in March 2002, Ian Michler reports on the return of white rhinos to Moremi in Botswana.

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