

AFRICAN ELEPHANT AND RHINO GROUP - THE NEW LOOK

David Western

Elephants and rhinos have a great deal more in common than size. Both occur widely throughout Africa, from coastal flats to alpine meadows and from parched deserts to wet equatorial forests. Both are hunted for trophies and their products traded throughout the world; both are threatened over much of their range by over-utilization and by agricultural expansion. Both too are widely viewed as a monitor of how well our conservation efforts are succeeding - the logic being that if we cannot save the biggest and most dramatic of Africa's animals, what hope is there for the rest? Whether this is a valid assumption or not is immaterial; indisputably the fate of elephants and rhinos has helped to alert our conservation consciousness and redouble our efforts to preserve natural areas vast enough to contain them.

The similarities between elephants and rhinos inevitably led to parallel efforts to conserve them and to considerable duplication of effort and competition for funds, with the more beleaguered rhinos losing out to the more glamorous elephant. This at least seems to have been the thinking of IUCN's SSC African Elephant and African Rhino Specialist Groups at a joint meeting held in Wankie, Zimbabwe, in 1981. The upshot of the week-long gathering was an impressive document spelling out the conservation priorities. By using a variety of biological, economic and political criteria, the Wankie meeting established the areas and populations which should receive most attention. The outcome was a synthesis of the Pan African surveys conducted by the elephant and rhino specialist groups over the previous few years, and a formula for defining a continental conservation strategy, since published in an IUCN/WWF summary document, Elephants and Rhinos in Africa - a Time for Decision.

The success at Wankie led the SSC to combine the elephant and rhino specialist groups. By August 1982 the author had been appointed the new Chairman, and in September the first meeting of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) was held in Nairobi.

The Problems

There were many good reasons for combining the elephant and rhino specialist groups, but it created some rather daunting problems. SSC's specialist groups are made up of volunteers, but with elephants and rhinos international concern over their imperilment gave added urgency, and to speed the process NYZS and WWF had provided funds for a secretariat for both African elephant and African rhino groups, headed respectively by Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Kes Hillman. Both Chairmen devoted their entire time, and that of a small staff, to the task. Largely because of their efforts the Wankie meeting was able to synthesize the results of their surveys and produce a conservation plan for Africa.

The newly appointed single group, however, is faced with twice the work of the previous groups, but without the benefit of a full time executive. Furthermore, the urgency for rhinos and certain elephant populations is greater than ever, while the impetus established by the former elephant and rhino groups and by the Wankie meeting has slackened. To regain the lost momentum we have re-organized AERSG.

The group has a Chairman, David Western, who initiates and coordinates activities, a Deputy Chairman, Robert Malpas, who coordinates all activities in our Nairobi office, two

Vice-Chairmen, Esmond Bradley Martin and Richard Bell, who provide technical and scientific guidelines, and regional representatives Anthony Hall-Martin (Southern Africa), Dr Ngo-Nje (Central West Africa), and David Cumming (South Central Africa) who coordinate localized activities and provide a regional perspective. Two other regional representatives will be added shortly to cover West and Central Africa. Members number over 30 plus a number of consultants. With this structure the group should be able to meet more regularly and reassess priorities more frequently. The first meeting was held in Nairobi in September 1982, and a second scheduled for 17 April in Harare, Zimbabwe, with the intention of reviewing the trade in rhino and elephant products prior to the CITES meeting in Botswana immediately afterwards.

As with the two separate groups, the New York Zoological Society is helping once again by supporting the chairmanship, the salaries of the deputy chairmen and one full-time researcher, and the facilities of their Nairobi office, including secretarial and computer services and administrative costs.

At the Nairobi meeting the group decided that most of our efforts in the first year should be devoted to implementing the priorities established at Wankie. Although most emphasis was placed on implementing conservation programmes there was a clear recognition that we must also continually revise data on the status of species, and monitor the trade in their products, if we are to understand more about how ecology, politics and commerce will affect elephants and rhinos in Africa in the coming years. The meeting also stressed the need to study the biology of species and subspecies, and to ensure that captive breeding programmes provide a failsafe to biologically important races, such as the forest elephant and the northern white rhino.

Practical Action

In 1981 the Wankie meeting had recognized that the northern white rhino Ceratotherium simum cottoni presented the most urgent conservation challenge, yet, in spite of funds already allocated by WWF, no action had been taken. The Nairobi meeting of AERSG made a conservation programme its first priority. Pat Rogers of UNDP Zaire had already contacted IUCN over the plight of white rhinos in Garamba National Park, and Ian Hughes and Kes Hillman were sent on an emergency mission. They reported members down from over 400 in the 1960s to the low tens. As a result of their report and the urgent pleas from the Zaire government, anti-poaching equipment was sent to Garamba. Kes Hillman is also engaged on a much larger survey, recommended by AERSG, to assess the status and recommendation to conserve the northern white rhinos in the two countries where they still occur, Zaire and Sudan. Numbers may be under 300. (See page 16).

An equally vital project is Esmond Bradley Martin's recent survey of the trade in rhino horn in the Far East. His findings form the basis of decisions to be made at the Harare meeting to close the remaining avenues of trade. There is good reason to think that concerted action now could soon eradicate most of the remaining trade. The African Wildlife Foundation recently spearheaded a publicity campaign that led North Yemen to ban the import of horns. In the late 1970s over 40% of all horns traded found their way into North Yemen. Bradley Martin advocates that similar diplomatic and press campaigns would work in Far East countries.

Rhinos on private ranches, are another problem. In Kenya many of the remaining 1000 or so rhinos are protected by landowners on private ranches, at some expense, and not unreasonably they expect support from conservation bodies. This raises many issues, and we have been helping to formulate ideas for a policy that would enable Kenya to promote rhino conservation on private lands, yet still guarantee that the state, which legally owns all wildlife, could

ultimately benefit and would safeguard rhinos should a rancher no longer want to preserve them. Incentives for private conservation efforts must be recognised, but so too must the rights of conservation organizations who help with funds.

We are also discussing a similar situation in the United States where a number of Texas ranchers are trying to obtain and breed African black rhinos. What responsibility the rancher has to ensure that rhinos obtained under the guise of conservation are appropriately managed is an issue we are much concerned about. The American Association for Zoological Parks and Aquaria is presently preparing guidelines that should, we consider, be the prerequisites for breeding rhinos on private land in the US.

For elephants our first priority has been to help direct conservation efforts to priority areas, such as the Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania and the Garamba National Park in Zaire. The results of an analysis of the statistics on the volume, source and destination of ivory coming out of Africa by the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit in Cambridge and Esmond Bradley Martin and Ian Parker will be presented to the Harare meeting where conservation action will be decided upon.* Early indications are that extremely large consignments have been leaving Sudan in the last two to three years and that mean tusk weights have fallen substantially, signalling over-utilization.+ Informants in South Sudan report that large poaching gangs are decimating elephants and rhinos in a manner reminiscent of Kenya in the mid-1970s, and aerial counts in Western Equatoria suggest that between 1976 and 1980 the elephant population dropped by a half. Since Sudan is a member of CITES and actively seeking outside support for its conservation efforts, our next task is to consider what emergency measures can be used to curb illegal hunting.

As Ian Parker showed in his ivory report to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, we can glean a great deal about the status of elephants in Africa by monitoring the trade in ivory. However, we still do not know what ivory parameters are most reliable, or how sensitive they are to changes in elephant populations. To explore the potential of trade statistics more thoroughly, Tom Pilgram of the University of California, Berkeley, has embarked on a statistical analysis of what a piece of ivory can tell us about the elephant from which it was extracted, and thus what trade statistics ultimately tell us about the status of the population from which a given consignment was drawn. We hope eventually to formulate guidelines for regulating the ivory trade in countries which intend to manage their herds on a sustainable basis.

We also hope to initiate a study of the forest elephant Loxodonta africana cyclotis, a subspecies that is still somewhat of an enigma. We do know from the substantial volume of ivory assigned to cyclotis that it must be numerous. But how numerous, and how widely it is distributed, is uncertain. We know even less about its basic biology, ecology and social organization, yet it could play a key role in maintaining the patchwork of equatorial forests and the high faunal diversity associated with them. It is exciting to think that such a large and important animal is still virtually unknown biologically.

Finally, we are in the process of launching a new Pan African survey of elephants and rhinos, a process we hope to complete later this year, one that should enable us to review the trends of the last three years, and that will help us to define a new conservation strategy some time in 1984.

* A report of this meeting will be in the next Newsletter.

+ See the report on page 16