

Situation Critical

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The northern white rhino may be losing its battle against extinction. Its final stronghold, Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, has seen a dramatic escalation in poaching in the last year. An aerial survey in July found that numbers had fallen by half in just 14 months, and now only 17-22 rhinos are thought to remain. "This is the last stand," says Tom Foose, Program Director of the International Rhino Foundation. "If emergency efforts don't succeed in the next three to four months, the northern white rhino will become extinct."

What makes Garamba's rhinos so special is that - bar a handful in zoos - they are the last survivors of a unique subspecies. The white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) actually occurs in two genetically distinct races, separated by two thousand kilometres of Africa. Those in southern Africa belong to the southern race (*C. s. simum*), whereas those in Garamba belong to the northern race (*C. s. cottoni*). Scientists believe that they diverged at least two million years ago, when the rainforest that spread across central Africa separated the grasslands of the north from those of the south.

To the untrained eye, these tank-like, two-and-a-half-tonne grazers look pretty similar. But their fortunes during the 20th century could not have been more different.

By 1903, when the northern white rhino was first discovered in central Africa, the southern race teetered on the brink of extinction - reduced to a mere 50 animals in Zululand. Its subsequent recovery, reaching today's peak of over 11,000, is one of conservation's great success stories.

Meanwhile the northern race was in freefall. In 1960 there were estimated to be 2,250 spread across five central African states. By 1980 the population had plummeted to just 15 individuals, entirely confined to Garamba.

Poaching has long been a problem in Garamba. The park lies in one of the most volatile regions in Africa. For years different factions have invaded the park and plundered its natural resources. But this latest outbreak marks a disturbing new trend. Before 2003 most poaching was for bushmeat, and generally on a smaller scale. Now the poachers are systematically targeting rhino horn and ivory, and have penetrated the Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) that was established for the rhinos. The latest reports describe heavily-armed raiding parties of Sudanese horsemen sweeping through the park, slaughtering the wildlife and carrying out their booty on pack donkeys. As well as rhino, a staggering 1,000 elephants are also estimated to have died in the last year.

This sorry tale of violence and greed is depressingly familiar to rhino conservationists around the world. It is driven by a lucrative international market - rhino horn destined for dagger handles in Yemen or medicine in the Far East can fetch up to \$1,300 per kilo. But Garamba's plight has been exacerbated by war. For the past decade, brutal civil conflicts in both the DRC and neighbouring Sudan have seeped relentlessly through the park's porous boundaries. In 1998 it was Ugandan rebels who moved in, looting, poaching and taking over the park headquarters. In 2001, as the Sudanese civil war spread west to the DRC border, it was the turn of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Today's horseback raiders appear to have links with the government-backed militia currently ravaging Sudan's western Darfur province.

The northern white rhino might have disappeared twenty years ago had it not been for the heroic efforts of a few dedicated individuals. In 1984 Fraser Smith and his wife Kes Hillman-Smith launched the Garamba National Park Project in partnership with the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN). With the valiant support of local colleagues - notably Muhindo Mesi, long time warden of the park until his death in 2002 - they gradually turned the situation around. Despite numerous setbacks, including the hijacking of park headquarters and the tragic death of several rangers, their reward was to see the rhino lumber back from the brink. By 1990 the population had risen to 32 animals. But now their work is vanishing before their eyes in a hail of bullets. "This", say Fraser and Kes, "is the toughest challenge Garamba has ever faced."

The beleaguered authorities at Garamba desperately need help. An emergency action plan drawn up in August 2003 identified immediate practical priorities, including the recruitment and training of rangers, more equipment, more vehicles, a new radio network and another light aircraft. It also called for urgent diplomatic efforts to persuade the Sudanese government to rein in its rampant militia.

In the long term - if the northern white rhino lasts that long - the solution must be an international one. A coalition of NGOs currently providing support to the ICCN includes UNESCO, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Frankfurt Zoological Society, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), Save the Rhino International, the US Fish and Wildlife service and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). An emergency meeting of Garamba stakeholders was held in Nairobi in August 2004, followed in September by a conference held in UNESCO's Paris headquarters entitled 'Congo: Heritage in Danger'. "Both conferences have generated much new support for the effort," says Tom Foose, "and

we are modestly optimistic that the situation can be reversed."

Ultimately, no rhino on the planet is entirely safe while there is still a market for rhino horn. "We must all accept our responsibility for what is going on," says Jenny Hawley at IFAW. "While the shocking bloodshed in Garamba has been facilitated by the political chaos in DRC, it has been fed by the worldwide demand for rhino horn and ivory."

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The story of the southern white rhino at least offers a beacon of hope. In southern Africa, tourism revenue has played a vital role in rhino conservation, and Garamba - designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1980 - could be a jewel in Africa's safari crown. As well as elephant and rhino, its five thousand square kilometres of undulating savannah and lush gallery forest are home to buffalo, lion, hippo, chimpanzees and rare Congo giraffes. Today you won't find Garamba on any tour itineraries: luxury lodges and armed militia make poor bedfellows. But peace and stability restored to the region would release a vast, untapped potential.

The late lamented Douglas Adams described his own visit to Garamba in the book *Last Chance to See*. "The point is," he concluded, "that we are not too late to save the northern white rhino from extinction." He may have been right. But time is running out.

Quote from *Last Chance to See* by Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine (Pan Books, 1991) reproduced by kind permission of Pan Macmillan Ltd.

Total estimated population of Northern White Rhinos in the Garamba National Park, 1984 - 2004

1984 - 15
1985 - 18
1986 - 19
1987 - 21
1988 - 22
1989 - 26
1990 - 27
1991 - 30
1992 - 30
1993 - 29
1994 - 28
1995 - 28
1996 - 29
1997 - 27
1998 - 29
1999 - 29
2000 - 30
2001 - 30
2002 - 30
2003 - 30
2004 - 17

Rhino factfile

Rhinos first evolved in Asia over 45 million years ago. Today there are five species: two in Africa and three in Asia. Poaching and habitat loss have reduced their combined population to fewer than 18,000 individuals.

White rhinoceros *Ceratotherium simum*

Status: conservation dependent

Distribution: southern Africa (primarily South Africa); central Africa (DRC only)

Population: 11,100

Subspecies: northern and northern white rhinoceros

Description: 1,800-3,000kg (the largest rhino); grey and hairless; massive head, with wide muzzle and two horns; grazes in savannah woodland.

Black rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis*

Status: critically endangered

Distribution: southern Africa (primarily South Africa and Namibia) and East Africa

Population: 3,610

Subspecies: western, eastern, south-western and south-central black rhinoceros

Description: 800-1,350kg; grey and hairless; two horns and narrow, hook-lipped mouth; browses in woodland areas.

Indian rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis*

Status: critically endangered

Distribution: eastern India and southern Nepal Population: 2,400

Description: 1,800-2,500kg; grey-brown and hairless; folds of skin resemble armour plating; one short horn; semi-prehensile upper lip; browses in woodland and grazes in flooded grassland.

Javan rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus*

Status: critically endangered

Distribution: Indonesia (Java) and Vietnam

Population: 60 (the rarest rhino)

Subspecies: Indonesian and Vietnamese Javan Rhino

Description: 900-2,300kg (Vietnamese subspecies about one-third smaller than Indonesian); grey-brown and hairless, folds of skin resemble armour plating; males have one short horn, females may have none; browses in tropical rainforest.

Sumatran rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*

Status: critically endangered

Distribution: Sumatra, Malay Peninsula and Borneo

Population: 60

Subspecies: western and eastern Sumatran Rhino

Description: 600-900kg (the smallest rhino); reddish-brown skin with long, shaggy hair; fringed ears and two short horns; browses in tropical rainforest.

Making a difference

There are many organisations dedicated to protecting the northern white rhino and other rhino species. The following are each involved with Garamba directly, and would welcome your money, membership or support.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare

(www.ifaw.org) is an international animal welfare and conservation organisation that has recently become involved in funding the Garamba project. Visit their website for a full range of fund-raising activities and awareness-raising campaigns.

The International Rhino Foundation

(www.rhinos-irf.org) manages intensive protection programmes for rhino species all around the world and has primary responsibility for co-ordinating the rhino project at Garamba. Schemes include 'Adopt a Rhino', and zoo, school and community projects.

Save the Rhino International

(www.savetherhino.org) works closely with communities in wildlife areas to provide direct support for rhino conservation projects in Africa and Asia. Fund-raising activities include talks, lectures, musical events and fun runs. Training and advice - and rhino costumes - are offered to marathon runners wishing to lend their support.

Get out there

There are currently no volunteering opportunities at Garamba, but several other rhino projects around the world welcome willing hands.

Earthwatch (www.earthwatch.org) welcomes participants to join their black rhino work in Kenya.

EcoVolunteer (www.ecovolunteer.org) needs volunteers for black and white rhino protection work in South Africa.

Mokolodi Wildlife Reserve in Botswana (www.mokolodi.com) welcomes volunteers. The reserve contains white rhinos.

SOS Rhino (www.sosrhino.org) currently need volunteers for their work with Sumatran rhinos in Borneo.