



## The De-horning Dilemma

**A**LL FIVE SPECIES OF RHINOCEROS ARE IN TROUBLE (SEE "Rhinos at Risk," September/October 1993). During the past 25 years, 85 percent of the world's rhinos have been killed for one thing and one thing only, their horn. Rhino horn is in great demand for use in traditional Asian medicines to cure fevers and other ailments and in Yemen, where the horns are prized for ceremonial dagger handles. A single horn can fetch as much as \$7,000 per pound.

In recent years, the black rhino (above) has been the hardest hit: In the early 1970s as many as 65,000 ranged throughout the African savannas; today, only about 2,500 are left. Several years ago, in desperate attempts to discourage poachers and save their black rhinos, Namibia and Zimbabwe embarked on programs to de-horn the few survivors. No one knew what effects cutting off their horns would have on the rhinos' behavior (Could mothers protect their young? Would bulls still fight for dominance?). But the grave situation demanded quick action.

In 1991, we went to Namibia to study the de-horned rhinos with support from NYZS/The Wildlife Conservation Society and other organizations. We made a number of disheartening discoveries there: Rhino horns grow back at the rate of nearly three and a half inches a year. To be effective, the horns would have to be removed on a yearly basis at a cost in Namibia of about \$1,400 per rhino. In areas with predators such as spotted hyenas and lions, all the calves born to de-horned mothers died before the age of one; whereas mothers *with* horns were 100 percent successful in rearing calves. In

addition, the calves of mothers with the shortest horns had a tendency to be missing tails or ears, indications of unsuccessful predation. It may be premature to extrapolate beyond Namibia, but it appears that de-horning cannot help save black rhinos unless other measures, such as killing or removing predators, are taken. Such measures could, however, upset the ecosystem.

In a similar study on southern white rhinos in Zimbabwe, Janet Rachlow of the University of Nevada found that 95 percent of the 100 animals in Hwange National Park were killed by poachers during the past two years; 80 percent of the rhinos in the park had been de-horned. Much of the slaughter took place after the government ran out of funds to pay anti-poaching patrols.

American conservation organizations are advocating various steps to try to stem the precipitous decline of black rhinos, ranging from putting the remaining animals in heavily protected reserves to urging Congress to impose trade sanctions on countries like Taiwan and China, which continue to trade in endangered species and their products. Donations to support the Wildlife Conservation Society's efforts to conserve rhinos can be sent to Rhino Rescue Fund, c/o Public Affairs, NYZS/The Wildlife Conservation Society, 2300 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, NY 10460. For more information on the trade in rhino and other wildlife products, please write to Dorene Bolze, Policy Analyst, NYZS/The Wildlife Conservation Society, at the above address.

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