

## BEHIND THE SCENES

By John G. Robinson



**RHINOS AT RISK:** With only about 800 left in the wild, the Sumatran rhino is one of the most endangered mammals.

**C**LAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS IN HIS CLASSIC BOOK *SAVAGE MIND* POINTS out that in many cultures, it is believed that a person can acquire the characteristics of an animal by consuming it. It is this belief that drives the far eastern trade in wildlife, an illegal traffic in animals that are large, powerful, phallic, fecund, and long-lived. With the increased affluence in countries such as China, Taiwan, and South Korea, the demand for rhino horns, tiger bones, elephant tusks, pangolin scales, and bear gallbladders has skyrocketed. Wild populations of pandas, tigers, and rhinos, already beset by habitat loss and fragmentation, have been systematically killed for their parts. Field conservationists of the Wildlife Conservation Society now argue that the single biggest threat to wildlife in Asia is hunting for the wildlife trade. And the depredations by the wildlife traffickers are spreading to Africa and the Americas.

Alan Rabinowitz's article on the Sumatran rhino, "On the Horns of a Dilemma," is an especially poignant reminder of the predicament confronting today's conservationists. How do you protect an animal whose population is thinly scattered across the landscape and the focus of a concentrated hunt? Many people throw up their hands. Some argue that certain species are doomed, and that we should focus our efforts elsewhere. *Triage* is the word they use. Others make the pragmatic argument: Legalize the trade and at least make some money (for conservation) from the demise of a species. I believe such arguments are irresponsible. Cutting the lifeline that holds up any species changes the question from How do we save this species? to Which species should we save? We humans do not have the moral authority or the vision to make those decisions. And the history of conservation is still a successful history. In the face of an unprecedented alteration in and destruction of, the natural world in this century, the extinction rate for the 13,000 or so species of birds and mammals is only about one species a year. Committed conservationists and the natural resilience of wild species can make a difference in keeping this number down. Even for animals such as the Sumatran rhino, Rabinowitz argues, we can still succeed.

*John Robinson is vice president of International Conservation at the Wildlife Conservation Society.*

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