

CONSERVATION

304

Saving the Rhino – the Final Push

In April WWF launched a campaign to end, once and for all, trade in rhinoceros horn, still the greatest threat to four of the world's five rhino species. In spite of the CITES ban on the trade, four countries continue to import the horn in significant quantities – South Korea, Thailand, China and Taiwan – and the new campaign aims to make them the target of concerted international pressure. Ironically, it was recently discovered that the traditional belief in the horn's medicinal properties as a fever reducer, far from being mere superstition, has a factual basis. Luckily, researchers found that water buffalo and saiga antelope horn are effective as well, and there is a good chance that pharmacies in the four countries can be induced to promote these cheaper substitutes instead, as has already occurred in Hong Kong, Japan, Macao and Malaysia. Thanks to the efforts of Esmond Bradley Martin, a

similar approach, that of tackling the problem of demand as opposed to supply, has already almost ended imports of horn for dagger-handles to Yemen. Dr Martin also sees some grounds for cautious optimism at the supply end; in Kenya and Zimbabwe the black rhino reached its lowest ebb in 1987; since then anti-poaching measures have increased their effectiveness and rhino populations have begun to grow again. The well-protected southern population of white rhinos now stands at about 4,800, and the tiny remnant of the northern subspecies has nearly doubled in the past seven years (see *I.Z.N.* 225, p. 35). Numbers of the Indian rhino are continuing to increase, despite a recent upsurge of poaching in India and Nepal. The situation of the Javan and Sumatran species remains most critical, and only active conservation measures combined with the final elimination of the trade can ensure their survival.

The Secret of Successful Elephant Breeding

Amid the immense publicity given to the plight of the African elephant, whose numbers are down to about 600,000, surprisingly little has been heard about the far more endangered Asian species, estimates of whose population range from 56,000 to as low as 34,000. In a book published two years ago (*The Asian Elephant: Ecology and Management*, Cambridge University Press, 1989) Dr R. Sukumar presents the results of almost a decade's research on the species in southern India. The book's observations on captive breeding

may have relevance to zoos: in Tamil Nadu alone, between 1950 and 1983, about 74 calves were born to 37 captive cow elephants. Dr Sukumar attributes this success mainly to the fact that the cows were kept in fairly large groups (more than ten animals), and let out at night to feed in the forests, where the wild bulls could mate with them. Obviously such a management technique could not be exactly duplicated in a Western zoo; but it may give a pointer to the sort of method which should be tried if zoos are to improve their miserably low breeding success rates with both elephant species.