

UPDATE ON NAMIBIAN RHINOS

[David A. Buitron, *SWARA*, 14(2):20-30,

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"The Namib Desert has given rise to a number of unique plant and animal adaptations including the wonderplant which seems to have moved underground as a way of coping with the harsh desert climate. The seeds of this 'tree' happen to be one of the favorite brows-foods of Namibia's desert adapted black rhinos.

"There are still an estimated 90 of the so-called 'desert-rhinos' thinly scattered over the vast semi-arid region known as the kaokoveld in the northwest of the country. And together with another 350 rhinos living in and around Etosha, they comprise the total remaining population of *Diceros bicornis bicornis*, one of four currently recognized sub-species of black rhino in Africa. One of the long term management goals of rhino conservationists in Africa is to breed up minimum populations of 2,000 of each sub-species, and in Namibia there is already more than sufficient habitat for this under protection.

"Since 1982 in Damaraland, the Auxiliary Game Guard Programme, largely a creation of Namibian conservationist Garth Owen-Smith, was begun to help counteract the

poaching of rhinos whose numbers had dropped from about 300 to since 1970. Funded mainly by private businesses and nongovernmental organizations, this program provided for the appointment of game guards by chiefs and other community leaders from among the Himba and Herero tribes resident in the region. The guards were then supplied with uniforms, rations of food, and small cash salaries in return for helping Nature Conservation rangers monitor the wildlife population. The guards worked closely with the rangers to report any illegal activities. Owen-Smith is one of the originators of this concept - conservation extension, involving rural communities in conservation efforts in ways that produce tangible benefits for these communities while at the same time encouraging them to take an interest in the protection of their wildlife heritage.

"Unfortunately, just as the Kaokeveld rhino population was beginning to make real gains in numbers, severe poaching pressure on the rhinos began anew. Being thinly scattered over a huge area they were very difficult to protect in any direct way. Urgent action was called for which resulted in the decision to launch Operation Bicornis, a program involving both the de-horning and translocation of a certain number of rhinos. It was a last ditch measure

undertaken only after it was agreed there was nothing to lose. It was done by darting the rhinos from helicopters, sawing the horns off with hand saws, trimming the stumps carefully with hoof-clippers and files, and then sealing them with Stockholm Tar to prevent infection.

"At the time of this writing, no ill effects have been observed, three calves that have since been born to de-horned rhinos are doing well and the poaching of rhinos in Damaraland has stopped. The notion of de-horning rhinos in order to protect them from poachers had only been a topic of debate prior to Operation Bicornis, but Namibia's decisive action has now given conservationists a case study to look at. From this, decisions might be made as to the applicability of de-horning to small and threatened rhino population elsewhere in Africa."

"EXPERTS RACE TO SAVE DWINDLING RHINOS"

[By William K. Stevens, *New York Times*, Tuesday, May 7, 1991, p. B5, B9]. Great facts, even better photos and illustrations. If you can't find the issue, let me know.

