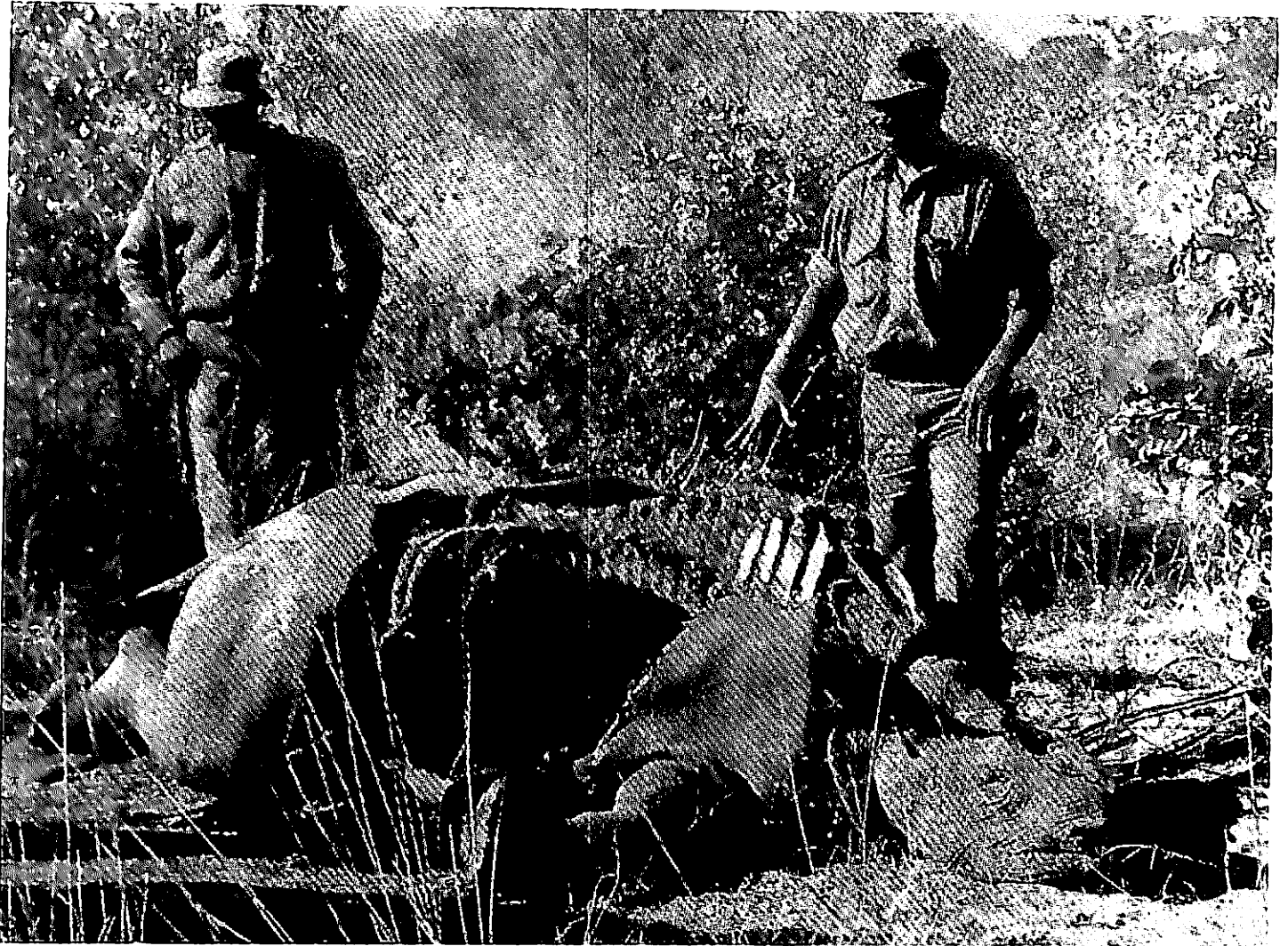


GOODBYE TO THE BLACK RHINO?



"People can just kiss the black rhino goodbye," Mr Jorgen Thomsen, the director of WWF-affiliate Traffic International, which monitors the international trade in fauna and flora, told a meeting of the 112-member countries of CITES.

The South African and Zimbabwean delegations to CITES had requested a limited, controlled trade in rhino horn to help fund conservation, without success. Zimbabwe claims it costs R56 million (US \$20 million) to run anti-poaching programmes to protect its black rhinos—Africa's largest remaining and most severely threatened population—but the allocated budget is only half that amount.

According to Mr Thomsen, it is not the elephant issue which needs more attention, but the rather severe situation facing the rhino. Since the late 1970s all five rhino species—the Indian, Sumatran and

Javan Rhino in Asia and the Black and White Rhino in Africa—have been listed under Appendix I of CITES, prohibiting all trade in rhino products. In spite of the ban, the demand for this wildly expensive commodity, used for its medicinal properties to treat everything from epilepsy to malaria, has kept the illegal trade alive and casts doubt on the ban's effectiveness.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) objects to legal trade, but says new ideas and a debate are urgently needed. Perhaps the application of market theory and private property rights to conservation of endangered species would be an enlightening and worthwhile exercise. Consider this: the street price of powdered rhino horn in Taiwan is R140 000 per kilogram. A mature rhino's horn can weigh up to 7 kg. If cut off, the horn regrows at a rate of 3 cm per year.

There is enough suitable land around the world and rhino breeding stock to begin a domestication programme. This could conceivably place sufficient rhino horn on the Eastern markets to bring down its price to levels which would make poaching uneconomic. Remaining stocks in game parks globally would be under less pressure and the species would be brought back from the brink of extinction.

Merely speculation at this stage? But there are increasing examples where ownership rights over wild animals are being extended to the communities over whose lands they roam, for it is in their self-interest to ensure that the animals are managed for preservation rather than be poached.

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