



OUR TURN NEXT

GUNS AND RHINOS
GO TOGETHER,
AND BOLD NEW
INITIATIVES ARE
URGENTLY NEEDED

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So much has been written about the fate of the black rhino that one is inclined to believe the problem is in danger of being overstated. Why, one may ask, can those people entrusted with ensuring the survival of these creatures whose ancestors go back 30 million years not do anything about stopping the slaughter? People are tired of hearing about the use of rhino horn for traditional oriental medicines (we hear aspirin is just as good), and to display the status of Yemenis who favour rhino horn for dagger handles.

We in southern Africa and concerned people in the industrialised countries are inclined to lay the blame on a multitude of faceless people for the loss of Africa's rhino. Symposia and workshops are held, management plans drawn up and massive, well publicised fundraising campaigns raise millions of dollars to try to help.

On the other hand, most people around the world are by and large indifferent to the fate of the rhino. Many regard the black rhino in partic-

ular as ugly, stupid and dangerous. They don't get a lot of good press, in the larger scheme of things. The elephant and lion are way ahead on any tourist's shopping list in Africa, and look at the number of books on the African elephant alone.

Could a legal trade act as a way of slowing or even halting demand for rhino horn? The international ban on trade in rhino horn has been in effect for eighteen years. It has probably failed to save one single rhino. Right under our noses, the black rhino, once distributed all the way from Cape Town to the Sudan, has been blasted off the African landscape – in the main by the most successful assault rifle ever made, the AK-47. You can buy one for a few hundred rand, if you have the right connections. Reasons for the slaughter are both socio-political and economic. For hungry people in the front lines and greedy people in the back rooms the fate of a strange, antediluvian creature counts, of course, for nothing.

But why even look at the possibility of legal trade in rhino horn? The very thought of dealing with people now regarded as common criminals and thieves is anathema to the international conservation community. It would be nigh impossible to undo the past decade's public relations exercise of portraying the illegal trade as the ultimate scourge.

However, there may be reasons to reconsider. A little over a decade ago, there were an estimated 15 000 black rhino in Africa. There was already concern at the time. At a meeting of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), held in Nairobi in 1980, the plethora of management plans, budgets and projects being drawn up by well-meaning people all concentrated on halting the illegal trade in an attempt to stop the decline in Africa's black rhino. Most available funding supported projects in countries that were to lose their rhino in any event.

We are still in the same predicament in 1994, only now we are down to less than 2 500 black rhino. At Victoria Falls in November 1992 at another IUCN meeting, Rowan Martin of Zimbabwe's Department of National Parks and

Wildlife Management remarked that back in 1982, Esmond Bradley Martin, a consultant for WWF – World Wide Fund for Nature, a world authority on the rhino horn trade, had advised that he was about to undertake an investigation into the illegal trade in North Yemen. Here was Esmond Bradley Martin a decade later, advising the self-same group that he was about to go back on another investigation.

If the Yemenis and South-east Asians had had a regular, legal supply of horn back in 1980, there may not have been any need to spend so much money on further investigations. Why not let the Yemenis have rhino horn dagger handles? We are certainly not past the point of having a non-supply situation, in spite of the low numbers of living black rhino. South Africa alone has at least 5300 white rhino and there are stocks of black and white rhino horn being held in vaults, gathering dust.

A legal, regular supply could have had the effect of bringing the price down. But the eighteen-year ban has brought about the opposite effect: the price has gone sky high, raising as rhino numbers have declined. Buying rhino horn has become a form of investment. The scarcer the commodity, the greater its value. The actual amount of horn needed for dagger handles and powdered rhino horn for medicinal purposes may be achievable and sustainable, but once the commodity is favoured as an investment, it poses a different problem.

We may have left it too late. Clearly rhinos are nowhere safe. Horn is so valuable today that the economic incentive makes it worthwhile to risk one's life. Some 165 poachers have indeed lost their lives in the costliest rhino horn war to date, mainly in Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley. No country in Africa has seen such a concentrated effort to eliminate poaching, with tremendous commitment on the ground and enormous public funding. Nevertheless, that country has seen its rhino population crash from an estimated 2 000 in 1991 to around 400 today.

Zimbabwe's rhino are located in vast tracts of land. The wildlife agency has limited manpower (more than 200 game scouts were retrenched in 1992) and inadequate government

funding, even though wildlife reserves and hunting bring in a substantial portion of the country's foreign revenue through tourism. Who would have thought, back in 1974 when the first of an eventual 100 white rhino were translocated from Natal Parks Board reserves to northern Botswana, that Botswana would have less than a dozen white rhino in 1993? The same scenario exists in Zimbabwe today.

If one considers the relatively intensive management and security in the Kruger National Park, where five white rhino were lost, and the ongoing poaching in the very heartland of rhino conservation, the Umfolozi Game Reserve, which also loses rhino – what hope exists for the

rest? Rhinos are obviously not safe in vast areas with limited patrols, and neither are they safe in heavily guarded sanctuaries such as Kruger. What options have we left? Kruger and the Natal reserves, with large concentrations of people pressing on their borders, will be very expensive to protect. Rings of steel and killing fields are options. Dehorning is another option that has certain merits, but offers no guarantee of stopping poachers and is costly in scattered populations.

Halting the illegal trade seems from all accounts to be wishful thinking, although great strides have been made in South Africa by the Endangered Species Protection Unit of the



South African Police. Legalising the trade may help, but this also poses problems, not least the investment angle, which has brought a new and sinister threat. Crash programmes to win the hearts and minds of neighbours pressing against the perimeters of game reserves may help, but poverty is a deadly enemy, and you won't win them all. Again, in many respects, we have left it far too late.

Another enemy is the growing sentiment triggered by political change, producing such slogans as "To hell with the rhino, plant a tree" and "Are rhinos more important than people?" Of course they aren't, but why should rhinos suffer one more time because we are stricken

with guilt over how we have treated our fellow human beings over the past forty apartheid years?

Most African governments paid scant attention to protecting rhino until it was too late, and then yelled for the international community, who ended up wielding the big stick when coming to the aid of Africa's rhino. The international ban is a prime example. Left alone, the rhino does very nicely. But having become a flagship in African conservation, it is now a highly charged and emotional focal point. Everyone's coming to the party with ideas on how to save the rhino, and those ideas may have little relationship to real, pragmatic options.

We all recognise that the numbers of black rhino are dangerously low. So what are the practical steps we have left? Present rhino populations in government reserves will continue to require enormous funding and serious commitment for security and monitoring. Establishment of rhino populations on small, privately owned sanctuaries, as in Kenya, Zimbabwe and more recently South Africa, has great merit. In small areas, round-the-clock surveillance and monitoring are possible and practical, if still expensive.

It is essential animals in such sanctuaries be well away from human settlement, and one must have staff whose jobs are primarily concerned with rhino. One weak link is the staff, who through intimidation or bribery can be persuaded to penetrate any sanctuary. Offers of large sums of money to park staff has led to the deaths of many rhino. Close co-operation at official security level is also essential.

One other option – one that a few years ago was subjected to wide criticism – is to translocate rhino to sanctuaries in far countries such as the United States or Australia. Many people felt that *in situ* rhino conservation should come first, but let's face it, we haven't done well in Africa by any stretch of the imagination. Having all our eggs in one basket is clearly undesirable.

As countries to the north of South Africa lose their last remaining rhino, it is our turn next. Many conservationists believe this to be true and are preparing for the worst. We face a siege



unparalleled in African conservation and we can't afford the time to criticise past failures, for fear that they catch up with us and overtake our own ineptitude.

We need a major public relations programme to highlight the situation and urgently promote new, bold and optimistic ideas for rhino conservation. We need to make rhinos relevant to people, and make people aware of the benefits of sustainable use. We need to make rhinos easily accessible and desirable to tourists. (Look at what's been done for gorillas.) We need to encourage private sector involvement

and try to ensure that private rhino owners don't suffer from the financial and bureaucratic restrictions of government. Look what people have been prepared to pay for the privilege of owning black rhino, and look what happened when private ownership of white rhino placed a value on them. White rhino are traded like race horses, and hunters can bag one at enormous cost. You and I may not like the idea, but it does make a lot of economic sense.

We no longer have the time to count out any option that promises better results than our efforts so far.

There are no easy solutions to stem the decline of rhinos in Africa and prevent rhino horn trade in consuming markets around the world. In the absence of proven long-term successes, all available options, whether traditional strategies which have been practiced over the last 15 years or alternative strategies currently being developed in a number of range states, have associated risks. Crisis management options for rhinos in the field, such as dehorning and the creation of rhino sanctuaries, while perhaps beneficial in the short-term, do not provide lasting solutions and will require high levels of recurrent expenditure. Political solutions which rely on stricter legislation and law enforcement practices may suppress poaching in range states and demand in consuming countries, but neither will be eliminated. Equally, large-scale public awareness and consumer education efforts in end-use markets have never been attempted and would have to be viewed as experimental exercises in the initial stages. Treating rhino horn usage as a social issue raises the challenge of affecting large-scale social and cultural change in the behaviour of potentially millions of traditional medicine practitioners and their patients, hopefully within a single generation if rhinos are to benefit. And finally, the merit of radical economic solutions, which hope to harness basic market forces for the benefit of rhino conservation, ultimately will only be known if there is a will to test them. Any such move, however, would require an unprecedented measure of multinational cooperation as well as fundamental changes in the way rhinos are currently treated under CITES and the national legislation of most range states and consuming countries.

Rhino face a grave crisis and those who purport to hold the survival of the five species above everything else must be prepared to examine all available options with open minds and a will to seek lasting solutions. Zimbabwe's black rhino population, and probably those of most other countries, is likely to see the next century only through a massive regimen of dehorning, concentration into sanctuaries, conservancies or Intensive Protected Zones, and increased anti-poaching and law enforcement efforts in the field, supported by a concerted strategy to understand and impact rhino horn supply and price factors in consuming countries, including acceptance of the possibility that restricted avenues of trade may be part of the solution. As the rhinos enter perhaps their final hour, to let the dictates of dogma foreclose on any option before it has been thoroughly examined would be irresponsible and will certainly abet the rhinos' further slide into oblivion.

Credits: The decline of the black rhino in Zimbabwe. Tom Milliken, Kristin Nowell, Jorgen B. Thomsen. © 1993 Traffic International

