

REPORT ON THE 1988 RHINO CONSERVATION WORKSHOP

by Sharon Montgomery

Black rhino are fast disappearing from the continent of Africa. This is the background to the Rhino Conservation Workshop held late last year. The objective of this meeting was to focus the attention of southern Africa's rhino managers on the issues of rhino conservation in the region.

The workshop, jointly convened at Skukuza in the Kruger National Park, by the Rhino & Elephant Foundation and the Game Rangers Association of Africa, was attended by more than 150 delegates – most of them wardens, rangers or wildlife managers – from central, southern and east African countries.

The formal opening of the workshop was preceded by the reading of a message of concern and goodwill from the President of the Rhino & Elephant Foundation, Inkosi M G Buthelezi.

"As your president it gives me great pleasure to wish you well in your important deliberations at the Rhino & Elephant Foundation Workshop. It is so gratifying to know that there are men and women from throughout Africa prepared to travel long distances to sit down and discuss such important matters as the survival of our wildlife.

"The survival of Africa's rhino and elephant population is so vital that it transcends political and geographical boundaries. Mankind's survival depends on his respect for the environment and its denizens. Without these splendid creatures, which are so closely interwoven into our historical and cultural backgrounds, Africa and the world would be the losers. It is horrifying and a very sad indictment on man that even in

this enlightened age, with all its technological advances, his wisdom cannot be used to conserve the last remnants of once vast herds.

"I dearly hope that I can be of service to you in helping to conserve Africa's wildlife, specifically the threatened rhino species, the survival of which is, I believe, your primary concern at this workshop."

The workshop was then opened by Dr U de V Pienaar, chief director of National Parks of South Africa. Mr John Geddes Page, retiring director of the Natal Parks Board then delivered a thought-provoking address. The workshop proceedings were arranged in six sessions with 22 speakers. Each session was under a different chairman drawn from the ranks of conservation agencies in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The main features of the presentations are summarised in this report.

Trade

The introduction to the workshop dealt with the disturbing reality that trade in rhino horn and ivory has grown exponentially, like the drug trade: there is even some evidence that the same syndicates are at work. Penalties are totally inadequate: rhino horns fetch thousands more dollars than the maximum fines imposed for illegal trade.

Restrictions on trade imposed by the international bodies such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) have not been successful in stemming the tide. Each country which still has rhino must look to its own affairs before appealing for help from international sources. Effective investigation and law enforcement and more liaison with police and customs authorities must be established to provide expert aid in the attempt to curb the illegal trade and this view was reflected in the workshop resolutions.

Poaching

The declines are horrifying: in 1970 there were an estimated 65 000 black rhino in Africa: *the figure for 1987 is 3 717 and falling*. Hardest hit at present is the Zimbabwean population which is under constant threat from Zambian poachers who cross the Zambezi with automatic weapons.

The South African and Namibian contingents were warned against complacency. Historically poaching has been moving southwards as the northern rhino populations have been all but wiped out, and when the Zimbabwean populations are no longer economically viable for poachers, their attention will turn to the relatively healthy situation further south. The warning signs are clear.

Strategies


The only effective conservation strategy seems to be to concentrate forces around small areas which can be patrolled and controlled more easily - smaller populations of rhino scattered in more areas. It was estimated that the optimum funding needed for effective protection was an annual amount of US \$400 per square kilometre. (This would mean an amount of \$7 million a year to protect the Zambezi Valley, which is obviously impractical.)

A draft national strategy for South Africa and Namibia received considerable discussion. Its aims were to determine how one could rapidly develop and conserve genetically viable populations of black rhino. It was considered essential that the numbers of the two major populations, those in South Africa and Namibia, be increased to 2 000 by the turn of the century, which would require an annual increase of six to eight per cent in the existing population.

Capture and translocation

In the light of this movement towards establishing and conserving more rhino populations in smaller areas, southern African developments in rhino capture and translocation and in anti-poaching work are encouraging. The Natal Parks Board, for example, was lauded for its impressive record of 300 recent translocations without a single mortality.

Increasingly sophisticated equipment and drugging techniques have ensured that the mortality rate during capture and translocation, which was a matter of concern less than a decade ago, has dropped to zero. This is obviously essential for the creation of new populations in safe areas, and moving endangered populations from regions threatened by poaching.



The excellent results obtained by the Namibian conservationists in their struggle against poaching in Damaraland and Kookoland were another ray of light in the gloom facing rhinos. Since patrolling and monitoring of the rhino populations began there in the early 1980's, poaching of black rhino has almost ceased. The auxiliary game guard system was recognised as an important step in involving local people in the long-term fight for conservation in general and in the protection of rhino and elephant in particular in specific tribal areas.

Monitoring

Continuous monitoring is of major importance if there is to be any hope of increasing rhino populations in the face of poaching threats. The only way effective and accurate information can be obtained is by finding reliable ways of identifying each individual rhino in an area. There was a great deal of discussion on this aspect and on radio-marking rhino, which has not proved too successful in the past. (See, however, Danie Pienaar's article on page 15). Rhino monitoring programmes in Damaraland and Etosha based on horn shape and size, notches in ears and other small details, has resulted in the identification of most individual rhinos in those populations. Records of births and deaths are carefully noted and each rhino is photographed from all sides at every encounter. Identification files have been created containing all relevant details and photographs and are used as reference for regular monitoring. The tenacity of field staff has been rewarded in that the rhino population in Damaraland is on the increase.

White rhino

Although most of the workshop was devoted to black rhino, one paper explored the distribution and status of white rhino in South Africa and its place in the safari industry. The white rhino is considered one of the success stories of the century: from a population of about 22 in the 1920's, it has grown in numbers to such an extent that surplus animals have been sold to farmers for hunting (see page 26 for a report on this important piece of monitoring). However, with a few notable exceptions, the placing of

white rhino on private land has not been a conservation success and the management of white rhino on private land leaves much to be desired. The record of the conservation agencies, on the other hand, is a glowing success especially where white rhino are hunted in a responsible way such as in Pilanesberg. But delegates were warned that it was dangerous to become too complacent about the status of the white rhino, as when poaching hits southern regions, poachers will not discriminate between species. White and black rhino will be equally vulnerable.

Summing up and closing

Dr David Cumming, southern African vice-chairman of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) gave an excellent summing up of the workshop in which he reviewed the major points made. In particular, he stressed how rhino conservation had to be seen within the context of the total conservation effort in the country. That in turn was affected by politics, finances and human population growth pressures as well as the organisation and motivation of the conservation agencies. Dr Cumming advocated a diversity of approaches to solving conservation problems and one of the key ones was the intra- and international contact and exchange of expertise which was generated at a workshop meeting such as this.

Paul Phelan, chairman of the Game Rangers' Association of Africa, echoed the delegates' sentiments when he said the outlook was depressing beyond expression. He emphasised that "conservation by consensus" – whereby people would benefit in a material way from the reserves in their areas – was vital for reserves surrounded by tribal areas where most of southern Africa's rhino are found.

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RESOLUTIONS PASSED AT THE RHINO CONSERVATION WORKSHOP HELD AT SKUKUZA

31 August – 3 September 1988

1. Resolution on trade in rhino horn and ivory

Recognising that Southern Africa now holds a large proportion of the remaining black rhinoceros populations in Africa and has a national and international responsibility for their conservation;

Recognising that the volume of illegal traffic in wildlife products in South Africa has now reached alarming proportions and there is now an urgent need for its control;

Stressing in particular the urgency for detecting and eliminating the illegal trade in rhino horn and ivory;

Noting that the prime need is for efficient control at a national level;

Understanding that:

Firstly it is the responsibility of the staff of conservation agencies to prevent illegal hunting in protected areas under their control; and

Secondly, that it is the responsibility of the police to investigate and apprehend illegal traffickers in rhino horn and ivory;

Aware that formal links are now required between these agencies (police and conservation departments) to ensure the survival of black rhino in South Africa.

Therefore:

The South African and international delegates attending the Rhino & Elephant Foundation/ Game Rangers Association of Africa Rhino Conservation Workshop at Skukuza recommend jointly to the commissioner of the South African

Police and the heads of conservation authorities:

- (a) that a central bureau be established within the South African Police to deal specifically with the illicit traffic in rhino horn and ivory;
- (b) that this unit should if possible include investigating officers experienced in wildlife law enforcement;
- (c) that these officers may be advised by selected officials seconded from government conservation departments within South Africa and South West Africa/Namibia;
- (d) that appropriate training courses for government conservation agency staff be approved and provided by the commissioner of the South African Police.

2. Resolution on illegal hunting of rhinoceros

Recognising that southern Africa now holds a large proportion of the remaining black rhinoceros populations in Africa, and has a national and international responsibility for their conservation;

Recognising that efforts to protect the black rhino elsewhere in Africa have failed dismally because:

- an inadequate number of conservation staff were employed to protect very large areas;
- an inadequate budget was provided to support these staff;
- staff were inadequately trained in anti-poaching techniques;
- no attempts were made to enlist the participation and support of adjacent rural populations.



Noting that, until now, there has been little co-ordination of these conservation efforts, the South African and international delegates attending the Rhino & Elephant Foundation/ Game Rangers Association of Africa Rhino Conservation Workshop at Skukuza

Recommend jointly to directors of government conservation agencies:

- (a) that sufficient staff establishments be deployed in protected areas to undertake law enforcement. (Recent work in Africa indicates that there should be a minimum of one man to twenty square kilometres in the field);
- (b) that adequate budgets be provided to support this staff establishment. (Recent work suggests that recurrent expenditure required to support men in the field at a density of 1/20 square km is approximately US \$400/square km);
- (c) if these budgets cannot be provided, that smaller areas should be protected to the required specifications of paragraph (a) and (b);
- (d) that staff are adequately trained for the task in hand;
- (e) that programmes be established wherever rural communities abut onto national parks and to encourage the participation and co-operation of local people in protected area management;
- (f) that conservation agencies throughout southern Africa co-ordinate their efforts in achieving these goals through a series of future meetings such as this one.

3. Resolution on laws relating to the illegal hunting of rhinoceros and trade in rhinoceros products

Recognising that penalties for poaching and trafficking in rhino horn and ivory vary from province to province within South Africa, from state to state, and from one authority to another;

Recognising that differences in sentences result in differential threats to rhino and elephant in the different provinces, states and areas;

Recognising further that there has been a great increase in the value of rhino horn and ivory but no commensurate increases in sentences and penalties;

The South African and international delegates attending the Rhino & Elephant Foundation/ Game Rangers Association of Africa Rhino Conservation Workshop at Skukuza recommend jointly that:

the heads of conservation agencies should seek a review of sentences and that such sentences should be standardised throughout South Africa (including the national states), the TCBV states and SWA/Namibia.

4. Resolution on a strategy on conserving and managing the black rhinoceros

Recognising that southern Africa now holds a large proportion of the remaining black rhinoceros populations in Africa and has a national and international responsibility for their conservation;

Recognising also that a number of agencies within the region are responsible for the conservation of black rhinoceros;

Recognising further that a well co-ordinated effort in rhinoceros conservation is likely to succeed within the region;

Therefore the South African and international delegates to the Rhino & Elephant Foundation/ Game Rangers Association of Africa Rhino Conservation Workshop held at Skukuza

Recommend jointly to the directors of nature conservation agencies that they formally adopt a regional strategy for the conservation and management of the black rhinoceros.

It is noted that a preliminary draft of such a strategy has been prepared and if acceptable to the agencies could form the basis of such a regional strategy.

