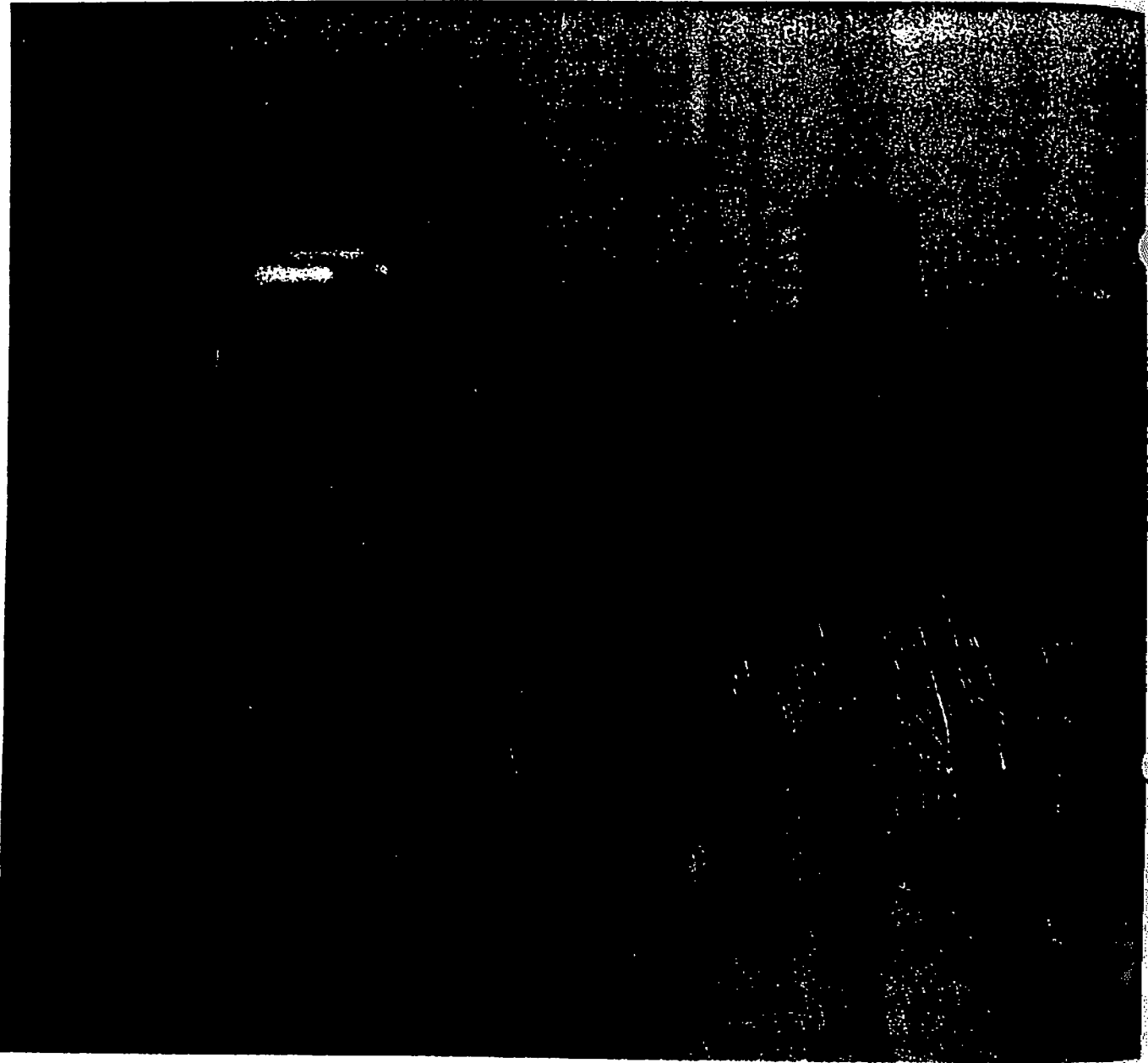


New Plan to Save Kenya's Black Rhinoceros



Under threat from one of the most massive poaching campaigns ever organised, Kenya's rhinos have been cut down from 20,000 to fewer than 500 in the space of 20 years. And the wholesale slaughter continent-wide has seen Africa's population fall from a 1970 high of 65,000 creatures to only 4,000. By Chryssee and Esmond Bradley Martin.

Above: Black rhinoceros in Nairobi National Park.

The black rhinoceros of Africa is facing a severe crisis. In 1970 there were perhaps 65,000 of these animals on the continent, but today only 4,000 remain — a 94 per cent decline. In less than 20 years the black rhino has become virtually extinct in Chad, the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

What happened?

Most have been illegally killed for their horns which are in great demand in Asia. About half of all the horns have gone to the Yemen Arab Republic

for making dagger handles; the rest have gone to eastern Asia for use in various medicines to treat mainly fever, but also colds, 'flu, laryngitis, and even headaches, earaches, and toothaches.

The Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Thais, and Burmese are the main consumers of rhino horn medicines, but they have never used it as an aphrodisiac.

East Africa has not escaped the slaughter of the rhinoceros. During

the mid-1960s Uganda had several hundred rhinos, both the black and white species. During Amin's regime and immediately afterwards, poachers decimated their populations, and today authorities are debating whether there is one rhino left or none.

During the past few years the black rhinos in southern Tanzania have come under attack from illegal hunters using shotguns and rifles. The Selous Game Reserve, the largest in Africa, had about 3,000 rhinos as recently as 1980, but probably only a few hundred now remain, poachers having moved into the area after eliminating most of the rhinos in northern Tanzania, including the Serengeti and Tarangire in the 1970s.

But, Kenya's rhinos have been hardest hit. In the late 1960s this country had one of the largest rhino populations in Africa: about 18,000. However, in the mid-1970s, when the price for rhinoceros horn started to soar, they began disappearing by the thousands.

Tsavo National Park, which had as many as 7,500 rhinos, now has less than 200. Due to Maasai hunting with both spears and rifles, Amboseli rhinos have declined from 150 to about eight. In northern Kenya also, almost all the rhinos have been killed; Meru and Samburu have hardly any left either. In fact, over the past twenty years, the rhino population in Kenya has dropped by 97 per cent to under 500.

Practically the only bright spot in Kenya's parks and reserves is Nairobi where numbers have remained stable at around 30. Because Nairobi Park is surrounded on three sides by the capital city, there is very little poaching going on. Would-be poachers are deterred by the presence of so many surrounding inhabitants who would detect their activities and by the large staff and visitors in the park.

There are three private ranches in Kenya where rhinos are kept behind well-patrolled fences in special sanctuaries. The oldest and most successful of these is Solio which has seen its black rhino population increase threefold since the mid-1960s.

It also contains the largest group of white rhinos in the country, over 30. The management now feels it has too many black rhinos; the present number of 85 is thought to be above the carrying capacity of the lands where there has been some damage to the vegetation and now there is a worry that the large population has

possibly inhibited breeding — a factor detrimental to the whole purpose of keeping rhinos at Solio.

Only one rhino has ever been poached at Solio, and none at the other two rhino sanctuaries on private land.

The Kenya government wants to emulate their success by setting up its own sanctuaries and has produced a rhino conservation strategy plan which envisages the creation of sanctuaries within several national parks.

The first one was completed recently at Nakuru where the entire park has been surrounded by a 12-strand security fence electrified by six wires. If anybody touches it, they will get a 5,000 volt shock. It has an alarm over every eight kilometres, and its siren is heard by radio.

Seventeen black rhino were moved from Solio Ranch to Nakuru in late 1987. In keeping initial numbers low, it's believed that the animals will be encouraged to breed more frequently.

Records are kept on each individual; its physical characteristics are charted, and it is watched with particular attention to its behaviour. It's also important to monitor the social interaction among rhinos in order to prevent a situation in which stress arises that leads to fighting. Black

Below: Threatened rhinoceros — one of the world's largest land animals is now on the brink of extinction.

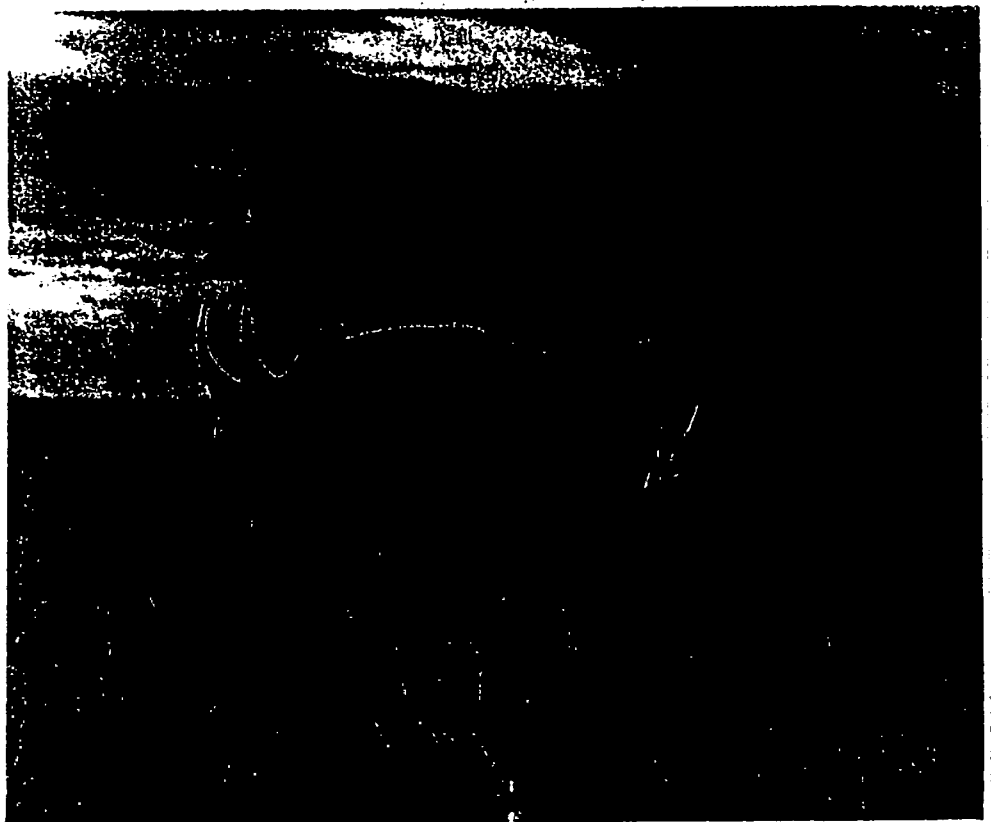
rhinos do not socialise with one another, and problems arise when they take a dislike to a particular individual.

Once a compatible group is established, the removal or introduction of another leads to a new assessment of hierarchy and difficulties sometimes arise. Kept under close surveillance from the beginning of the translocation, the rhinos become used to being watched and behave naturally, paying no attention to the presence of humans.

At present, it's thought that Nakuru's optimum rhino population may be about 40. But given favourable conditions it could become higher: when some 20-odd creatures were placed inside Solio's 15,000 fenced acres no one expected them to reach a population as high as 85. When it's necessary to thin the Nakuru rhinos, some will be moved to other sanctuaries.

Fencing of Nakuru National Park's 187 square kilometres, of which 40 are taken up by the lake, was completed in 1987. In addition to the security fence, there are holding pens for new rhinos, several watering points, increased staff housing and ranger outposts.

A vegetation and soil survey is now in process, and if it's found that the



animals need mineral supplements feeding points will be established.

Many international conservation agencies are most optimistic about this first national rhino sanctuary in Kenya. Several are helping with its development: Rhino Rescue (UK) has already invested over £300,000; other substantial contributions have come from the World Wildlife Fund and the David Sheldrick Wildlife Appeal.

Following the opening of Nakuru, attention will be directed towards expanding the small rhino sanctuary which already exists in Tsavo West National Park. It has only 20 square kilometres now, and just eight rhinos live in it.

The first were females captured near Kibwezi and Taveta. Delighting the officers in charge of the rhinos was the fact that a male rhino broke into the sanctuary shortly after it was set up and insisted on staying and making it his home.

Later, government rhino sanctuaries will be established in Meru, where poaching has been acute, and in the Aberdares Salient where presently rhino calves are threatened by a large population. It is thought that it will cost at least £234,000 to

develop the Meru sanctuary and about £330,000 for the Aberdares.

However, capital funding is really just the beginning of a rhino sanctuary. Maintenance costs are high, and continual monitoring and research must be financed.

Some people have suggested that there should also be a special fund to supplement the wages of the rhino ranger force, members of which should be chosen from the best wildlife rangers in the parks system, and provided with the best amenities in their important task.

When so few rhinos remain in the wild, you might well ask how great are the risks in capturing and translocating them. The answer is 'minimal'. When a rhino is anaesthetised, placed into a good holding pen, and allowed to settle comfortably in its surroundings it usually becomes used to people feeding it and caring for it within three days.

Within a week, unless there is something seriously wrong with its physical condition when caught, it can be transported by lorry to its new home.

Kenya's policy of establishing

fenced and fully patrolled government rhino sanctuaries within its national parks should be applauded. The day when literally thousands of rhinos could roam freely have gone. The high price of rhino horn and poachers have stopped that.

If the new rhino sanctuaries prove to be as successful as those on private land — and they will if they are properly managed and run by skilled, hardworking, honest and dedicated staff — then the rhino crisis will be halted.

Governments in other African countries should follow closely what happens. Kenya could become the model for the future.

It would certainly be advisable for African governments to give serious consideration to encouraging private ranchers to establish rhino sanctuaries — particularly in Zambia and Tanzania where the threat to rhino survival, especially in the Luangwa Valley and the Selous Game Reserve, is extreme.

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