

## PERSPECTIVE: The Disappearing Rhino

*Amboseli National Park, in Kenya, was the home of a unique strain of black rhinos. Renowned for their spectacular horns, they were always featured in Park posters. Dr. David Western, an NYZS Research Zoologist, and other conservationists tried to save this small population from poachers. As shown by the mutilated bodies of the two young animals below—last of this Amboseli group—they lost the battle.*



H. Von Meiss, National Audubon Society/PR



David Western, NYZS

When great Indian rhinoceroses copulate, the act often continues for about an hour, with the male ejaculating by the minute during the entire event. This biological fact of life has caused the death of rhinos throughout Africa and Asia, or so many scholars believe. They surmise that it is why rhinoceros horn is considered a potent sexual stimulant throughout the Far East.

Ground into powder which is ingested, or prepared as an ointment applied to human male testicles, rhino horn commands huge sums of money in India and the Orient because of its supposed sexual significance—an attribute that never has been substantiated, at least not scientifically. The horn—actually compressed fibers of keratin, the material in human finger-

nails and hair—is also used in Chinese folk medicine to cure a host of ailments from toothache to insanity.

The demand for horn—together with habitat destruction—has so decimated the three species of Asian rhinos that they all are endangered. Fewer than fifty-five Javan rhinos remain in the western portion of that island and minus-

cule populations may hold out elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Sumatran rhinoceros, closely related to prehistoric woolly rhinos, numbers only a few hundred individuals. As for great Indian rhinos, fewer than 1200 inhabit the wild, restricted to reserves in north-eastern India and Nepal.

Two African species of rhino survive: the black, and the white or square-lipped. Hunting, legal and illegal, for sport and for horn, long ago reduced the northern race of white rhino to a handful in the Central African Republic, Zaire, Uganda, and Sudan. According to Dr. Kes Hillman, coordinator in Africa of international conservation efforts to preserve rhinos, their number has declined below 1,000. Populations have been further decimated in the past year or two. The southern race, once almost lost, has been carefully managed and maintained at about 3,000 animals in South Africa.

Until this past decade, the black rhino has bucked the trend. It appeared to be thriving in sub-Saharan Africa. No longer. Throughout most of its range—and suddenly it seems—the black rhinoceros has become extremely rare. Kenya and Tanzania, according to the U.S. Department of the Interior, lost 70 to 85 percent of their black rhinos in the 1970s.

Populations in Meru National Park in Kenya fell 90 percent during the last eight years. Amboseli National Park lost 85 percent. Ironically, the black rhino is the symbol of Kenya's national parks. In Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater National Park, 70 percent of the rhinos have disappeared, par for the course in many of that country's reserves. All in all, black rhinos are vanishing from Africa at an alarming rate.

Behind the drastic decline seems to be the increase in the value of rhino horn. Dr. Hillman and a Kenya-based geographer, Dr. Esmond Bradley Martin, have ex-

amined the market and say that rhino horn brings poachers a wholesale price of almost \$300 a kilogram. They have an unconfirmed report of poachers selling a kilogram for \$750. And once the product is out of Africa, it is worth many times that figure. Dr. Hillman claims a verified report of the powder retailing for \$5,000 per kilogram in Hong Kong.

Recently, another use for rhino horn has been added to its traditional function of aphrodisiac. In parts of the southern Arabian peninsula, across the Red Sea from East Africa, rhino horns are carved into handles for daggers. Called *jambias*, they are worn traditionally as symbols of manhood. The carving and marketing of these daggers is centered in North Yemen.

The prices brought by *jambias* with rhino-horn handles are incredible: as much as \$11,000 each. Yet many can afford them. A million Yemeni men—out of a population of 5.1 million people—work in the rich Saudi Arabian oil fields.

Economists have probed the trade in rhino horn and disagree about the quantity that circulates on the world market. Unquestionably, the figure is high, perhaps more than ten metric tons a year. The average weight of a rhino horn is between three and four kilograms, which would mean that about 3,000 animals are killed yearly to satisfy the demand. With an estimated total population of fewer than 15,000 black rhinos left in the world, the species could vanish very quickly indeed.

Fortunately, it is not too late to save the black rhinoceros. Even in Kenya, where the toll has been extreme, the species is not about to disappear tomorrow. Dr. Kes Hillman, who heads the African rhino group of the IUCN, told me she takes issue with reports that the rhino may vanish in Kenya within the year. At the same time, she agrees the animal is faced with very real peril.

Efforts to preserve these creatures are at least underway. President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya has issued a total ban on rhino hunting in his country, and has called for international action to halt the trade in rhino horn. Hong Kong recently banned the import of the horn, and China may do the same, thereby curbing an enormous market.

The U.S. Department of the Interior considers the rhino's plight so serious it may declare the species "endangered." And the World Wildlife Fund has mounted a global fund-raising campaign for rhino conservation work patterned after its highly successful Operation Tiger.

For a variety of reasons, some conservationists tend to combine the predicaments of the rhino and the African elephant. It is true that the poacher of one is likely to hunt the other as well. And smugglers often transport both ivory and rhino horn together. But there the similarity ends. The rhino is a zoological museum piece, a hold-over from times long past, a loner that is unadaptable and rather stupid. The elephant, on the other hand, is intelligent, functions splendidly in a surprisingly complex social structure, and is able to live in a greater variety of habitats than the rhino.

Africa can still count more than a million elephants, many of which inhabit remote jungles. Its relatively few remaining rhinos live primarily on open savannas, often accessible by motor vehicle and an easy target for big-time poachers.

To regard the perils of rhino and elephant as one and the same is a mistake. The elephant needs help, but help in the nature of long-range planning together with immediate steps to control abuses such as ivory poaching. The rhino situation requires much more urgent assistance.

—E.R.R.