

# Central African Republic Hit by Poachers

The Central African Republic has a history greatly shaped by its isolation in the centre of the continent. Although few long-term scientific studies have been conducted on the nation's wildlife, it has a reputation as an important reservoir of several threatened or endangered species. Well-watered and having one of the sparsest human population densities in sub-Saharan Africa, the C.A.R. was until recently home to many big-tusked elephants and one of the largest populations of black rhinos. It has been speculated that it has a few of the extremely rare northern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) in a couple of isolated areas. Portions of the south of the country are covered by dense equatorial forest still rich in forest elephants (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*) and the south-western corner between the Cameroonian and Congolese borders is said to contain significant populations of lowland gorillas, chimpanzees and bongos (*Boocercus euryceros*).

Most of the Central African Republic is covered by wooded savanna which extends north to the sub-Saharan regions near the Sudanese border near latitude 100 north. The almost roadless eastern region is virtually devoid of human population and is excellent habitat for elephants and rhinos. Land-use pressure by man is practically non-existent and large areas of land were inviolate until recently. The years following independence saw massive inroads into many areas. Large caravans of camels and horses bearing Sudanese poachers began to enter the C.A.R. to hunt elephants and rhinos with spears and later with firearms. With the security that the remote savanna affords, bands of poachers could remain in game-rich areas for years at a time, hunting and living completely undisturbed.

The last years of the infamous reign of Jean-Bedel Bokassa saw the formation of a near-monopoly of the trade in ivory. The Emperor had a controlling interest in a society called "La Couronne" which sought to dominate the commerce by imposing harsh penalties on competitors. La Couronne's efforts resulted in more than 260 tons of ivory exports between 1977 and 1978 according to customs officials. The CITES figures indicate that 200 tons were exported in 1978 alone. La Couronne's statistics claimed that less than 1% of C.A.R.'s ivory exports was from Central African elephants and that 79% was Zairean in origin and 20.4% was Sudanese. During this period, observers reported that elephants were being shot by soldiers and large quantities of ivory were regularly transported in military vehicles and aircraft. Professional hunting guides and missionaries noted elephant poaching of near-massacre proportions in some areas. At the time of Bokassa's fall from the throne, the Central African Republic had become the world's largest ivory exporting nation.

Following the collapse of La Couronne, successors to the ivory trade were numerous. The tradition of ivory traffic by wealthy merchants was augmented by certain unscrupulous civil, military and cabinet officials who allegedly supplied poachers with arms and assured them immunity from prosecution.

In 1982 the Central African Republic again emerged as a major ivory exporter when 150 tons representing the tusks from almost 20,000 elephants were "legally" shipped out of Bangui. Again it was asserted that much of the ivory came from Zaire, but evidence recently uncovered makes this claim dubious. A scheme to forge certificates of origin was uncovered in a

village in the centre of the country some 300km along the usual Zaire to Bangui route. This system permitted illegal Central African ivory to become Zairean and thus be shipped from Bangui exempt from Central African laws.

It is recognized that large-scale ivory collecting goes on continuously in the C.A.R. but the amount that filters across or down the Ubangi River is unknown. The difficulty in controlling the trade is compounded by the ease with which ivory or rhino horn can be smuggled across the porous borders and the active co-operation of many authorities.

While reports of the widespread decimation of elephants and rhinos abound, hard numbers are difficult to come by. The overwhelming majority of the country has never been methodically inventoried including important areas with known high populations. The Zemongo Reserve in the east near the Sudanese frontier was thought to hold possibly a few northern white rhinos, but in light of the level of poaching in the area, such optimism seems groundless. A member of a governmental mission sent to investigate the area stated that the reserve is completely poached out and that no elephants or rhinos survive.

The eastern C.A.R. once offered excellent big-game hunting along the Chinko River near the "Three Rivers Camp". A group of hunting guides recently made exploratory flights over the once rich sector and report having seen over 400 elephant skeletons and no live elephants. Another guide recalled an area that held many big-tuskers when he opened an access road five years ago. He returned with some clients to find dozens of elephant skeletons and the spent shell cases from Russian AK-47 rounds.



*Bull elephant speared by horsemen, June 1984, Parc National Gounda-St. Floris [R.G. Ruggiero]*

The northern C.A.R. has fared only slightly better. Sudanese and Chadian horsemen have been hunting in the north in ever-increasing numbers since 1976 and the civil war in Chad has assured the availability of sophisticated automatic weapons at bargain prices. The Barningui-Bangoran National Park was an important rhino refuge where up to several hundred black rhinos were thought to live in 1981. By 1983 estimates placed the surviving rhino population within a 50km radius of the village of Bamingui at 10% of the 1981 level. Much of the

organized poaching in the park appears to come from within the country. One group that was apprehended had over 100 members and its leader was borne around the bush in a sedan chair. Another group was found which was described as consisting of ten teenaged boys each of which carried two Kalashnikov rifles.

The best hope for C.A.R.'s elephants and rhinos lies in the nation's largest national park, Gounda-St. Floris. It covers a sprawling 18,000km<sup>2</sup> and is composed of wooded savanna, open grass savanna and gallery forests. Much of the present area of the park was a hunting and photo-safari domain until 1978 when Bokassa declared the area a national park. Since that time, the newly gazetted park has come under increasing poaching pressure and in 1981 a WWF/IUCN research team was sent to investigate the rhino and elephant situation. Findings show that elephant and rhino poaching has risen to dangerous levels and that the most important refuge for rhinos in the park has been thoroughly poached due to a lack of surveillance. Chadian and Sudanese horsemen are thought to have killed hundreds of elephants mostly by spearing but the use of automatic weapons has also been confirmed.

Viewed in its entirety, the status of the rhino and elephant

populations in the C.A.R. is bleak. Corruption, non-compliance with CITES legislation and years of neglect by the international conservation community have all contributed. Although besieged by poachers, a recent change in the administration of the Gounda-St. Floris Park offers some cause for optimism. Wildlife populations are reduced but still healthy and should benefit from plans to augment the meagre staff of ten park guards and tourist facilities. A private corporation has won a long-term contract with significant governmental support to develop and protect the park. It is an experimental plan where by the complete control of a major African national park has been granted to a private concern. Since the viability of the corporation depends to some degree on profitability, the future of the park's wildlife depends on tenuous economic conditions. If the plans to attract foreign tourists are reasonably successful, the park has a very good chance for survival. But the fate of the rest of C.A.R.'s elephants and rhinos is precarious at best and is at the mercy of the economics dictated by the world trade in ivory and rhino horn. Compliance with the Convention of Washington would be of great help to stem the tide of destruction of Central Africa's troubled elephants.

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## Protecting The Black Rhino in Damaraland, Namibia

### Introduction

A viable but endangered population of black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis* L.) survives in the very arid country of western Damaraland, bordering the Skeleton Coast Park. The park is unfenced, allowing free movement of game in and out.

The eastern boundary of the Skeleton Coast Park was designed by ruler and pen without consideration for the ecology nor for the effective conservation or protection of game species. Important permanent waterholes were left outside the protection of the park, some of them as little as three kilometers from the boundary.

Elephant and rhino feeding routes are found deep into the true desert in sand-dune country, and elephants have been seen on the beaches of the cold Atlantic coast.



Black rhinos in Damaraland with food plant in foreground, *Euphorbia damarana* [B.D. Loutit]

### Poaching

When poaching of rhinos and elephants in Damaraland reached a peak in 1981-2, the Namibia Wildlife Trust was formed and field staff were employed in a successful operation to patrol and report to the officials of the Division of Nature Conservation. The NWT was sponsored by the People's Trust for Endangered Species, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the Foundation to Save Africa's Endangered Wildlife, the Wildlife Society of SWA/Namibia, and local business houses. In April 1984 the control of the project was taken over by the Endangered Wildlife Trust. Present field staff comprise a senior field officer, his assistant and six auxiliary game scouts appointed by Herero headmen, under the supervision of Garth Owen-Smith who is based at the Damaraland headquarters. The camp and radio equipment was donated by Consolidated Diamond Mines (Pty) Ltd.

Rhino numbers are carefully monitored by means of an identikit system compiled by Garth Owen-Smith, Karl Peter Erb, and the staff of the Skeleton Coast Park, assisted by Elias Hambo and Bernard Roman. To date 40 rhinos have been identified, most of which have been photographed. A possible 50-60 still survive in the area. Hind foot spoor size, ear notches, horn shapes, sex and age classes are recorded. The records of track (spoor) sizes have proved valuable in checking if a spoor is missing from a habitual drinking place or home range. The area is immediately searched on foot in case poaching may have taken place.

### Geographical Distribution

The larger portion of the rhino population is resident north of the veterinary control fence which bisects western Damaraland from east to west.