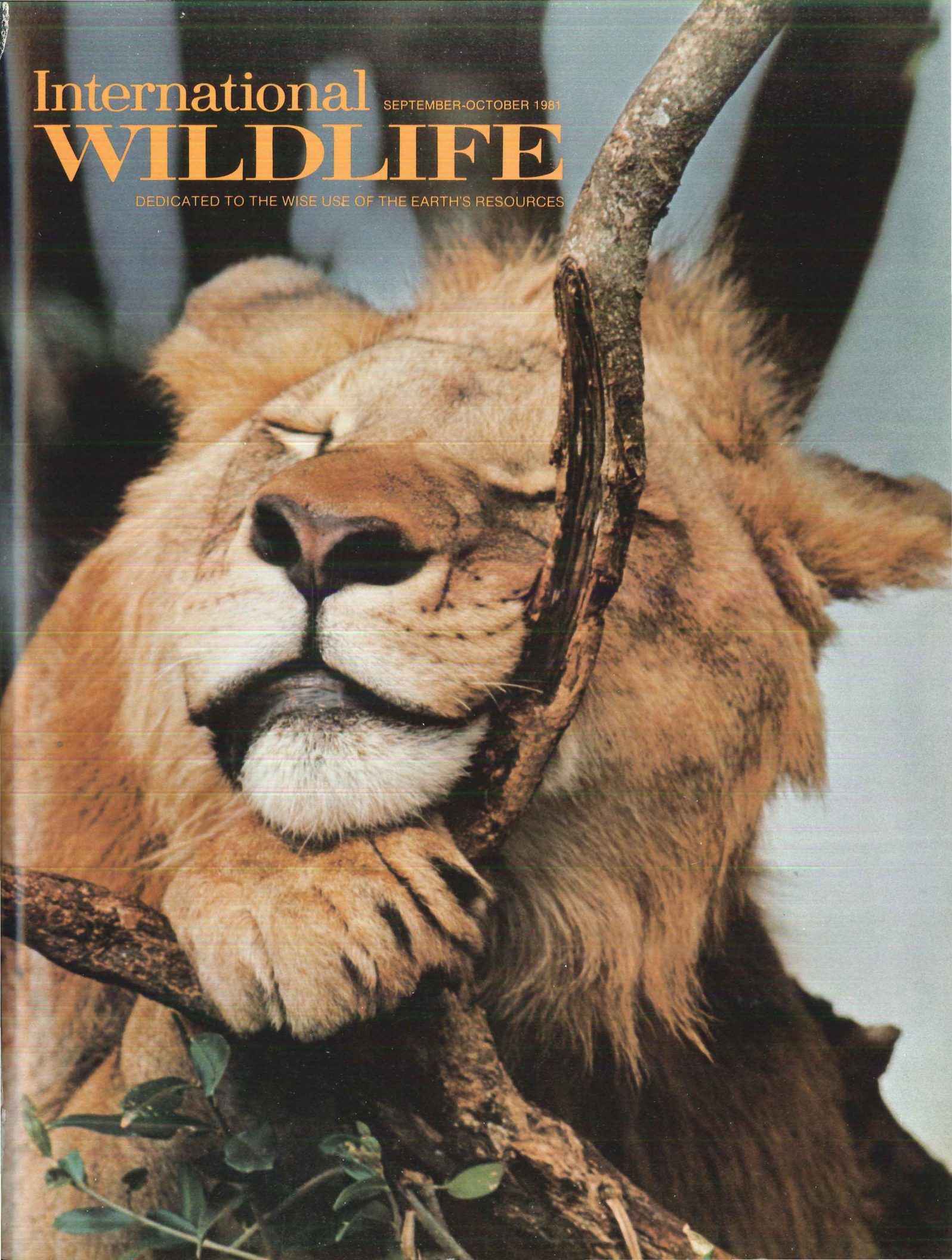


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Waging war on Kenya's poachers

Sometimes the grim fight to save the black rhino ends in death — for man and beast

BY CHARLES P. WALLACE

FROM a vantage point atop the cab of a two-ton Bedford truck, Turei Lesekteti, his ears looped in the traditional symbol of a Samburu warrior, scans the horizon for scavengers. They are black, ugly birds, whose presence speaks unmistakably of death. "When I see them, I know there is a dead animal," Turei says. "Then I know the Shifta is not far away."

"Shifta" is a Kiswahili word meaning "bandit," but among the scrub and grassy plains of Kenya's Meru National Park, it invariably means poacher. The chances are equally strong that the Shifta's prey, already dead by the time the birds begin their sleepy death dance, was one of Kenya's few remaining black rhinoceroses.

Clad in green military fatigues and a close-fitting beret, Turei is a veteran tracker for a ten-man squad of rangers from the Kenya government's antipoaching unit. Formed three years ago, the unit is in the vanguard of efforts now underway across Black Africa to save the rhino from extinction. It fights the poachers with a combination of vigilance, firepower and undercover work, and it may be the best tool available to control the wanton slaughter of the shy prehistoric beasts.

Here in Meru, the rangers deploy in trucks and Land Rovers at first light and in the late afternoon, churning up a biting cloud of alkaline dust in a slow-moving search for the intruders and their victims. It is a daunting and often dangerous task. The park is spread over 1,600 square miles in northeastern Kenya, and

it is possible to drive for days without covering the same territory twice. The poachers, mindful that they risk being shot, come powerfully armed, favoring the Russian AK-47 submachine gun to the rangers' standard World War I vintage Enfield .303.

While face-to-face encounters are relatively rare, the stepped-up vigilance by the rangers has resulted in a number of deadly shoot-outs. A firefight in 1980 left 22 poachers dead in the Masai Mara Reserve near the border with Tanzania. "It's a cat-and-mouse game waiting for them to appear," says Corporal Gideon Ngameni, who commanded a recent patrol through Meru's hilly northern triangle. "Last month, we followed the tracks of a gang for three days. All of a sudden, the footprints just disappeared," he says.

Meru is one of East Africa's most arresting wildlife areas, where thousands of animals roam free beneath the loom of Mt. Kenya's fog-shrouded peaks. It was once considered the last stronghold of the black rhinoceros in northern Kenya, its rolling savanna offering plenty of space and forage. "When I first came here in 1968, you used to see a rhino every half-hour," says Peter

Jenkins, the park's chief warden. "It was a common animal that lived in a wide range of habitats in the bush."

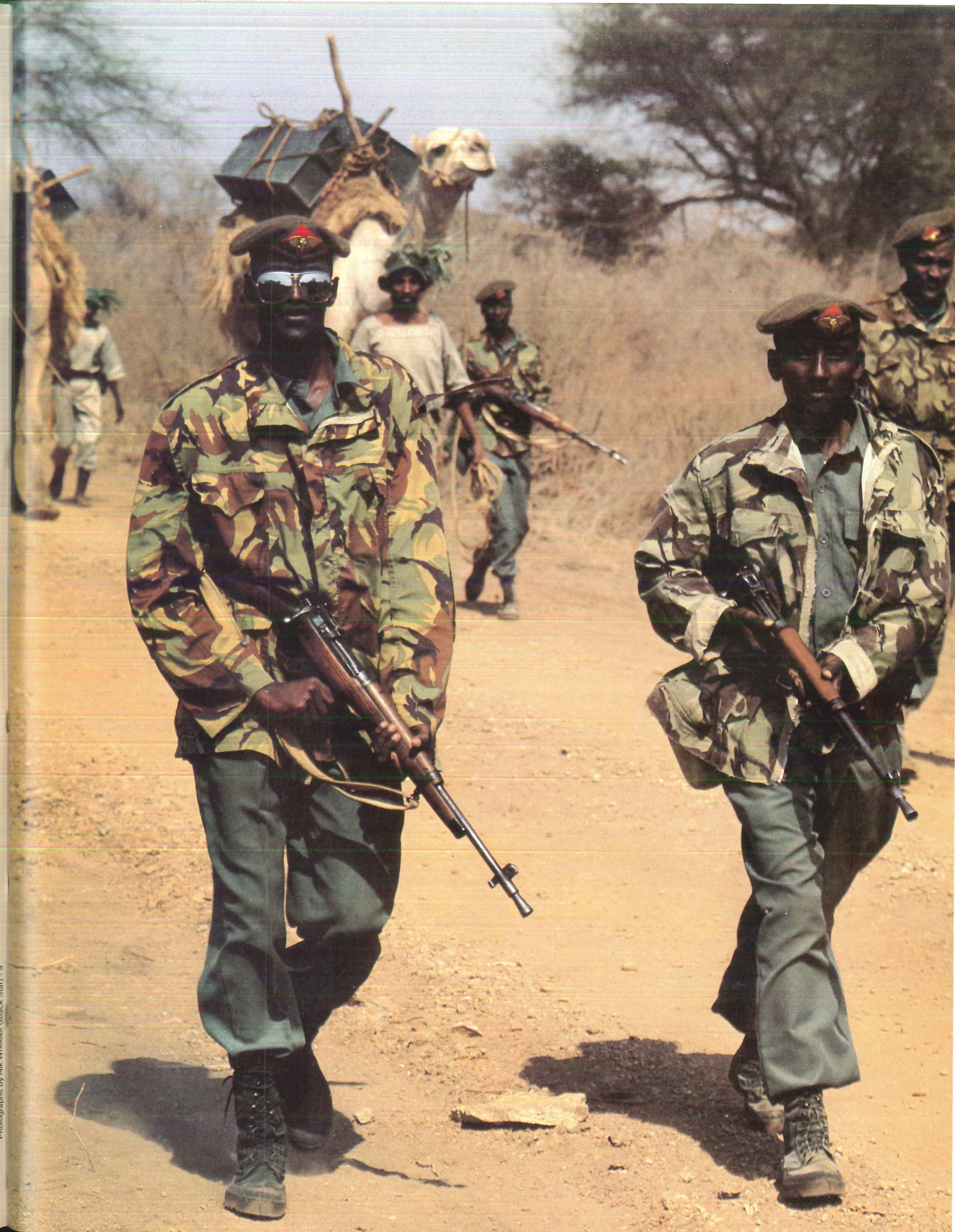
Indeed, the black rhino was so plentiful in Kenya that a game warden, appropriately named J. A. Hunter, was ordered to "cull" the animals from land in Makawane in the late 1940s to make room for an agricultural project. Hunter reported that he had killed more than 1,000 rhinos, but there were still many left. After the slaughter, plans for the project were, oddly, dropped.

Piloting his single-engine Piper 180 aircraft at treetop level on an inspection tour of Meru park, Warden Jenkins reveals a prodigious knowledge of the rhino that seems tinged with both affection and respect. "He's very selective, that's his problem, you know," Jenkins says in a clipped British accent. "He's mainly solitary. If you see two together, invariably it's a mother and calf. They live together until the calf is quite old. The bull won't make an appearance unless the female is in season."

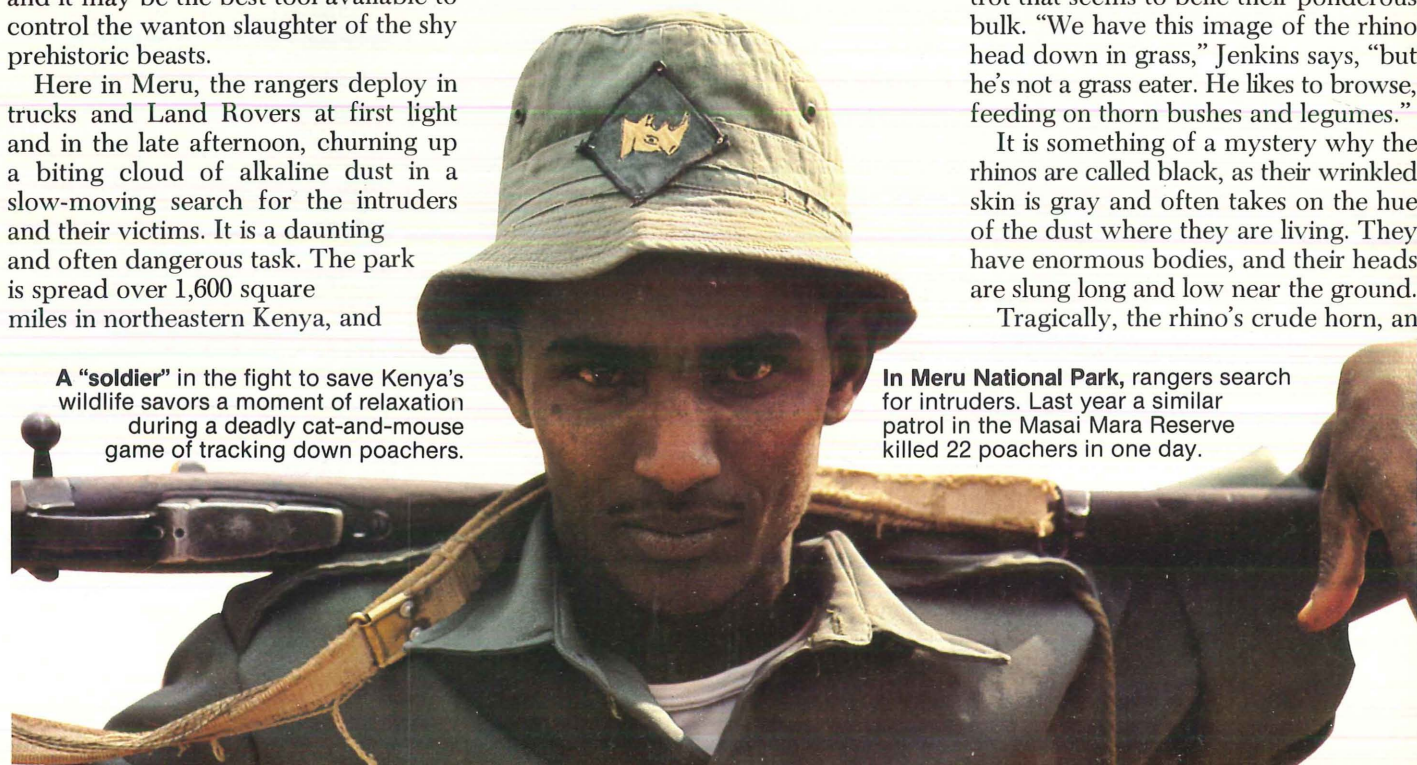
As if on cue, a mother and calf dart from their shady retreat under a thorn tree at the din of the approaching airplane. Although weighing up to two tons, the rhinos race ahead in a nimble trot that seems to belie their ponderous bulk. "We have this image of the rhino head down in grass," Jenkins says, "but he's not a grass eater. He likes to browse, feeding on thorn bushes and legumes."

It is something of a mystery why the rhinos are called black, as their wrinkled skin is gray and often takes on the hue of the dust where they are living. They have enormous bodies, and their heads are slung long and low near the ground.

Tragically, the rhino's crude horn, an



Photographs by Nik Wheeler (Black Star) - 9



A "soldier" in the fight to save Kenya's wildlife savors a moment of relaxation during a deadly cat-and-mouse game of tracking down poachers.

In Meru National Park, rangers search for intruders. Last year a similar patrol in the Masai Mara Reserve killed 22 poachers in one day.

average of ten pounds of keratin and gelatin hardened into a spiny weapon, has historically found wide use in traditional medicines, mostly in the Far East, where it was once thought to offer protection against poison. According to Esmond Bradley Martin, an American scientist who has traveled widely to study the uses of the horn, it is now employed in potions to cure fever, headaches and heart trouble, but it is sel-

To protect rhinos, a camouflaged ranger patrols with a camel. Despite efforts of men like him, the black rhino is in serious trouble. Only about 1,000 of these bulky but fast-moving beasts remain in Kenya — down from 18,000 in 1969.

dom used as an aphrodisiac, as was once popularly believed. In North Yemen, the horns are ornately carved and used as the handles of traditional daggers called jambias. The jambias are owned by virtually every man in society as a sign of his masculinity.

The combination of high demand and dwindling numbers has sent the price of rhino horn soaring — it went up 2,000 percent between 1975 and 1979. According to Martin, the minimum wholesale price is around \$300 a pound. In Hong Kong, which has stopped legal imports of horn, it is sold for prices ranging from \$1,000 to \$8,000 a pound. Thus, the rewards for the poacher in Africa

— where the average monthly salary is about \$50 — are astronomical.

In Kenya, where scientists reckoned there were 18,000 black rhinos in 1969, current estimates place the population as low as 1,000. The same story is being repeated elsewhere on the continent, with Tanzania reported to have lost 80 percent of the rhinos in one area, and Uganda's population said to be approaching zero.

The animal's troubles in Meru have been compounded by the park's closeness to the border with Somalia, a desolate frontier area well known as the refuge of brigands who seem to have no political allegiances. According to

Warden Jenkins, as recently as four years ago, aerial surveys showed there were at least 250 black rhinos spread out over the park. "In our last sample, no rhino showed up. We know of 29 rhinos in the park. We might have 40 left," he says, "but certainly no more."

Perhaps nothing so poignantly illustrates the sad fate of the rhino in Meru as the sight of a wooden pen near the park's headquarters, where five white rhinos — the other African rhino species — are kept under 24-hour guard. Each morning, an aged ranger named Mkururu herds the rhinos together and literally takes them for a walk as if they were poodles. The irony is that the

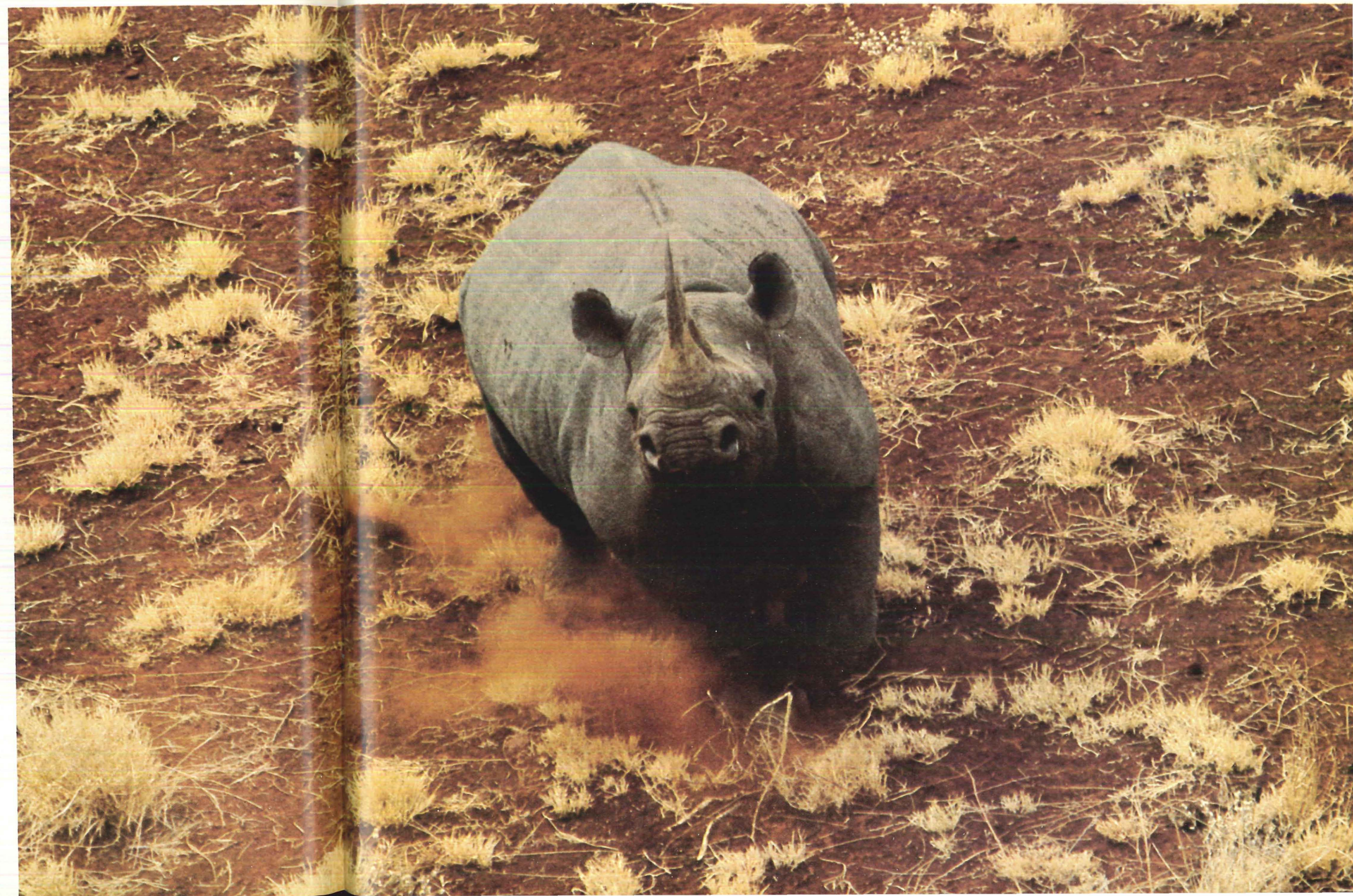
animals were a gift from South Africa, where the white rhino was once near extinction. A strict conservation program there has reversed the trend to such an extent that the government has excess animals to give away. Despite the close watch kept in Meru, two of the white rhinos have been killed by poachers.

Three years ago, in response to the poaching threat, the government established its first specialized antipoaching unit to work side by side with park rangers in controlling the illegal killing of elephants and rhinos. The force now has 420 officers and men in the field, backed by two helicopters and four airplanes. Here at Meru, there are 30 an-

tipoaching rangers on permanent assignment, down from what Warden Jenkins calls the "normal complement" of 42 men. Each earns about \$80 a month, and free housing is provided.

Since manpower is temporarily short, the rangers rarely make lengthy forays into the bush, where they would normally camp for days at a time in pursuit of poaching gangs. Instead, they use motorized patrols, looking for the inevitable birds that follow a fresh kill or for human footprints in the dust of the park's roads. Anyone who enters the park on foot is presumed to be a poacher.

Warden Jenkins credits the antipoach-



ing rangers with breaking up four gangs that preyed on the park in recent years. One poacher, a former police constable, surrendered rather than face what he called being "continually hounded by the men of the antipoaching unit."

Compared with the grim record of 1978, when 70 rhinos were killed, the vigilance of the rangers has produced excellent results. From September 1979, until June of the following year, the park experienced what Jenkins calls "a blank period" when not a single animal was killed. Then, in June, a new gang struck suddenly and killed 5 rhinos in a single, savage blow.

The raid was led by a man known as Makinye, literally Big Foot. In the dust around the poached animals, their horns lopped off with powerful strokes, rangers found a human footprint 13 inches long, without shoes. Big Foot managed to elude a manhunt for half a year, until his giant footprints were spotted in some dust. A search party followed the tracks until it was suddenly hit by automatic weapons fire. The rangers later laid an ambush, and Big Foot was killed.

In the Masai Mara incident last year, rangers also spotted the poachers' tracks long before they saw the men. In that case, it turned out that the poachers were after cattle instead of rhinos, but the antipoaching unit swung into action nonetheless. The rangers backtracked along the footprints to a main road. They then deployed on each side of a large, open field. When the poachers appeared, they were cut down in a crossfire. All 22 were killed and none of the rangers were hurt.

They are not always so lucky. One ranger was shot in the stomach in Tsavo West Park when poachers realized they were being followed. He was shot with a .458 elephant gun, but survived after being evacuated by helicopter. In another field operation, a ranger was shot when he turned to speak to a comrade. Moving in darkness, they had not realized that they'd stumbled into a poacher's camp.

For the most part, though, it is the poachers who suffer. In addition to those who have been killed in the parks, the rangers average 250 arrests a year. If a poacher is found guilty, which is common, he can receive five years or more in prison.

Harder to net are the middlemen, entrepreneurs who finance the poaching ex-

peditions and arrange to have the horns transported out of the country. International trade in rhino products is illegal in Kenya and most other countries. Often, though, traders have obtained export permits from other African countries through bribery, so blatant at times that they choose countries which have never had rhino populations. The middlemen usually cache their loot in the bush, paying entire villages to look after it. In one case, rangers uncovered a two-story underground vault filled with trophies.

From the bush, the horns are transported to the port of Mombasa, which serves much of East and Central Afri-

Poaching tailed off, then a new gang struck and killed five rhinos in a single, savage blow

ca. Using phony export papers, the middlemen ship the horns to the Middle East and Asia. Enforcement activities have been stepped-up against these traders recently, and at least one has been sentenced to a lengthy prison term.

The antipoaching unit unashamedly admits that much of its work is based on information supplied by a network of informers. It routinely interviews residents of areas surrounding the parks, offering cash rewards of \$150 for information about poachers, buyers, caches of weapons and the hiding places of horns.

In an effort to increase its effectiveness in Meru and carry the fight against poaching over to the offensive, the unit has recently reached back into the past for a novel weapon: camels. Under Jenkins' direction, the government has acquired 22 one-humped dromedaries and is setting up a patrol base at Korbessa, about 20 miles from the park proper, in the adjoining Biswadi National Reserve. The area is completely undeveloped, which makes it an ideal escape route for poachers in Meru.

Fifteen rangers have been specially selected for what has become known as The Camel Unit. They were drawn exclusively from frontier tribes which predominate in the area; all are lifelong students of the camel's peculiarities.

"There is absolutely no doubt that a mounted camel will give us the advantage over the Shifta in the field," says Mohammed Aden, who commands the new unit. Aden is a 45-year-old Somali with a wizened face and 18 years experience fighting poachers. During a recent march through Biswadi's prickly undergrowth, he ticked off the camel's virtues like a man who has the pride of ownership: they travel silently, walk 25 miles a day, feed off the land and rarely need water.

"While all of the poachers travel on foot," he says, "from a camel we have tremendous visibility. Up there, it's like sitting on a truck. We also don't have the maintenance problems we used to have with vehicles in this rough terrain."

Aden himself is something of a legendary figure among the rangers, having been personally involved in some of the antipoaching unit's most violent encounters with poachers. He is, in fact, the man credited with shooting Big Foot. "It always comes down to a shoot-out these days," Aden says. "These people are gangsters — they'll shoot anybody. The difficult part is controlling the fire. We don't have automatic weapons, but many of the Shifta do."

Warden Jenkins hopes that the balance of firepower will be restored, in part, by a recent government decision to turn over weapons captured from the Shifta to the rangers in the field. The Meru antipoaching unit recently seized three German-made semiautomatic rifles. They will be given to Aden and his men.

Constantly seeking ways to save the few remaining rhinos, the government has also experimented with a controversial measure known as translocation. In essence, wildlife experts find rhinos in an area where they are likely to be vulnerable to poaching and move them to a safer place.

It's not an easy task. First, a rhino has to be found, usually by aerial spotting from a small plane. A helicopter moves in, and Dr. Ishtiaq Chadry, the government's wildlife veterinarian, fires tranquilizing darts to put the animal to sleep. Ground teams chase the drugged rhino through the bush until it finally collapses into unconsciousness. Then it is lumbered aboard a sled or truck and moved to a receiving pen before being sent to its new home.

In Meru, officials feared that eight rhinos spread over the so-called Kinna



One rhino's journey to safety



IN a procedure called translocation, about 40 rhinos have been captured then moved to safety from areas where they are especially vulnerable to poachers. Here, veterinarian Ishtiaq Chadry (top left in helicopter) immobilizes a rhino with a dart gun. Workers on the ground follow it until it finally falls (top right) before placing it on a large "stretcher" (above) for transport to a holding pen (right) and ultimately to a secure game park. Some rhinos have accidentally died in the process, so the technique has become controversial.

Triangle in the north of the park were endangered because they roamed close to settled areas. A translocation program began in late August.

During the capture process, two of the rhinos died. One dart hit a rhino with an old wound in its throat and it choked to death. Another pierced a vein, send-

Under 24-hour guard, white rhinos at Meru park are taken for a walk each day from a wooden pen near the park's headquarters. The animals were a gift from South Africa. Despite the close watch, two have been killed by poachers.

ing the tranquilizer too quickly to the animal's heart. They were the first fatalities of the translocation program — 40 rhinos have been moved so far — but the setback has caused wildlife officials to reconsider the program.

The antipoaching patrols, though, are generally considered a success. "Our activities are a big deterrent," says Ted Goss, the senior warden of the antipoaching unit, who supervises the nationwide antipoaching effort from a military-style camp outside of Nairobi.

Despite praise for the rangers' efforts,

experts continue to disagree on where the conservation emphasis should be placed. Some, like zoologist Martin, contend that poaching will be a problem until the markets for rhino horn are closed. "The conservationists are pouring their money into the wrong things," he says. "We need to go after the trader because conservation has failed. You could buy another 500 Land Rovers, and there would still be poaching."

Martin has concluded from his studies of the horn markets that the business lies in the hands of relatively few

men, scattered in Yemen and the Far East. He believes they can be convinced to drop out of the rhino market but feels the approach will have to be made by someone sympathetic to business who can convince the traders that it is in their own long-term interest to stop. There are substitutes already accepted by these people, Martin says. "The traders don't care what they sell as long as they keep selling."

Warden Goss agrees with Martin's premise, but argues that there is little practical chance of stopping the trade

entirely. "If you were organized enough to kill the market, then you wouldn't need an antipoaching unit," he says. "But the smuggling business is really big business, and I doubt that the market could be killed."

Despite such disagreements, the antipoaching effort has gathered a sense of urgency as the number of rhinos continues to dwindle. Scientists are looking into the genetic effects that result from a sharp cut in breeding stock. With the black rhino able to produce a calf only once every three or four years,

experts worry that the damage is already too great to overcome.

"Even if you could eliminate all poaching from this moment, I think the chances of black rhino becoming viable again in their natural habitat are very slim," Peter Jenkins says. "I fear we may have reached the point of no return." ■

Charles P. Wallace was African correspondent for UPI when he wrote this article. Nik Wheeler, a veteran news photographer from Los Angeles, joined him in Kenya to cover this story.

