

Experts Say Poaching Could Soon Lead to a Decline in the Rhino Population

By LOUIS LUCERO II

After two decades of gains, the world's population of rhinoceroses is being killed off by poachers at such a high rate that conservationists fear the deaths could soon surpass the number of rhinos that are born each year.

The International Rhino Foundation, a global nonprofit group, said Friday that two rhinos a day are being poached in South Africa alone, and that 688 were believed to have been killed there in 2012 — a record that was surpassed this year by September.

Susie Ellis, the executive director of the foundation, warned that worse days for the rhinos might still lie ahead.

"What we're seeing is that, while in any given year this kind of off-take might be sustainable, this trend is what's not sustainable, this skyrocketing increase," Ms. Ellis said in a telephone interview while at a meeting of rhino experts in Tampa, Fla. "There are reasons to think that it might get worse before it gets better." She said conservationists foresee a point where there will be so much poaching that "soon we will start to see populations go down," though she said she could not reliably predict when that might happen.

"It's going to be a struggle for populations to keep up with these poaching rates," Ms. Ellis said.

Rhinoceroses, among the largest living land mammals, are widely seen as symbols of humans' impact on the natural world. They have been hunted for centuries. Their horns, which ounce for ounce are worth more than gold on black markets, are prized in traditional Chinese medicine as a fever-reducing agent or, more recently, as a hangover preventive. Hunting rhinos is highly restricted, yet laws are often poorly enforced.

The International Rhino Foundation, which contributes information to the "Red List" of en-

dangered species of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, estimates that there are fewer than 30,000 rhinos left of the surviving five species — black, white, Indian, Sumatran and Javan.

Illegal poaching is only the most obvious of the threats facing the world's remaining rhino populations, a report by the group said. The animals are also threatened by deforestation, displacement by human settlements and the fragmentation of their habitats. The species that is most at risk is the Sumatran rhino, whose population has been estimated at fewer than 100.

The Javan rhino was once thought to live in 10 countries in Southeast Asia, but now can be found only in Ujung Kulon National Park, in Indonesia, where the surviving population has been estimated at 44.

White rhinos face the least risk of extinction, the report said. Still, even they are listed as "near threatened," their population now estimated at 20,400 still in the wild.

Ms. Ellis said economics is driving the destruction of rhinos in Africa and Asia. Chinese and Vietnamese consumers, many with disposable income for the first time in their lives, are looking for commodities that previously had been too expensive for them. Rhino horns are seen as luxury items and are considered extravagant gifts.

"Rather than buying a Rolex or something else, they're giving away rhino horns," she said.

Raoul du Toit, the African Rhino Program coordinator for the International Rhino Foundation, who was at the conference in Tampa, said there are numerous threats to rhinos in Africa, where the vast majority of the animals can be found.

In his country, Zimbabwe, thousands of acres of the rhinos' natural habitat has been convert-

ed to farmland for subsistence farmers, many of whom work plots in areas that are too arid to sustain agriculture in the long run, he said.

A bigger threat, however, are the illegal poachers slipping across the porous border that the country shares with Mozambique. Ms. Ellis said South Africa, which also borders Mozambique, shares the problem.

"There's a need for the international community to put pressure on Mozambique to help South Africa strengthen its borders," she said. "The South African government has implemented so many promising measures, but until that influx of poachers sneaking back and forth from Mozambique can be stemmed, the problem promises to just keep getting worse."

Mr. du Toit said poaching would never be fully stopped. "What we have to do is achieve appropriate management to give the rhinos room to expand, let them do what they're good at, which is breed," he said. "Rhinos will save themselves."