

BLACK GHOSTS

Text and photographs by Michael D. Kock

In the previous issue of Africa Geographic, wildlife veterinarian Michael Kock set out, under contract to WWF Cameroon, to explore the remote reaches of the country.*

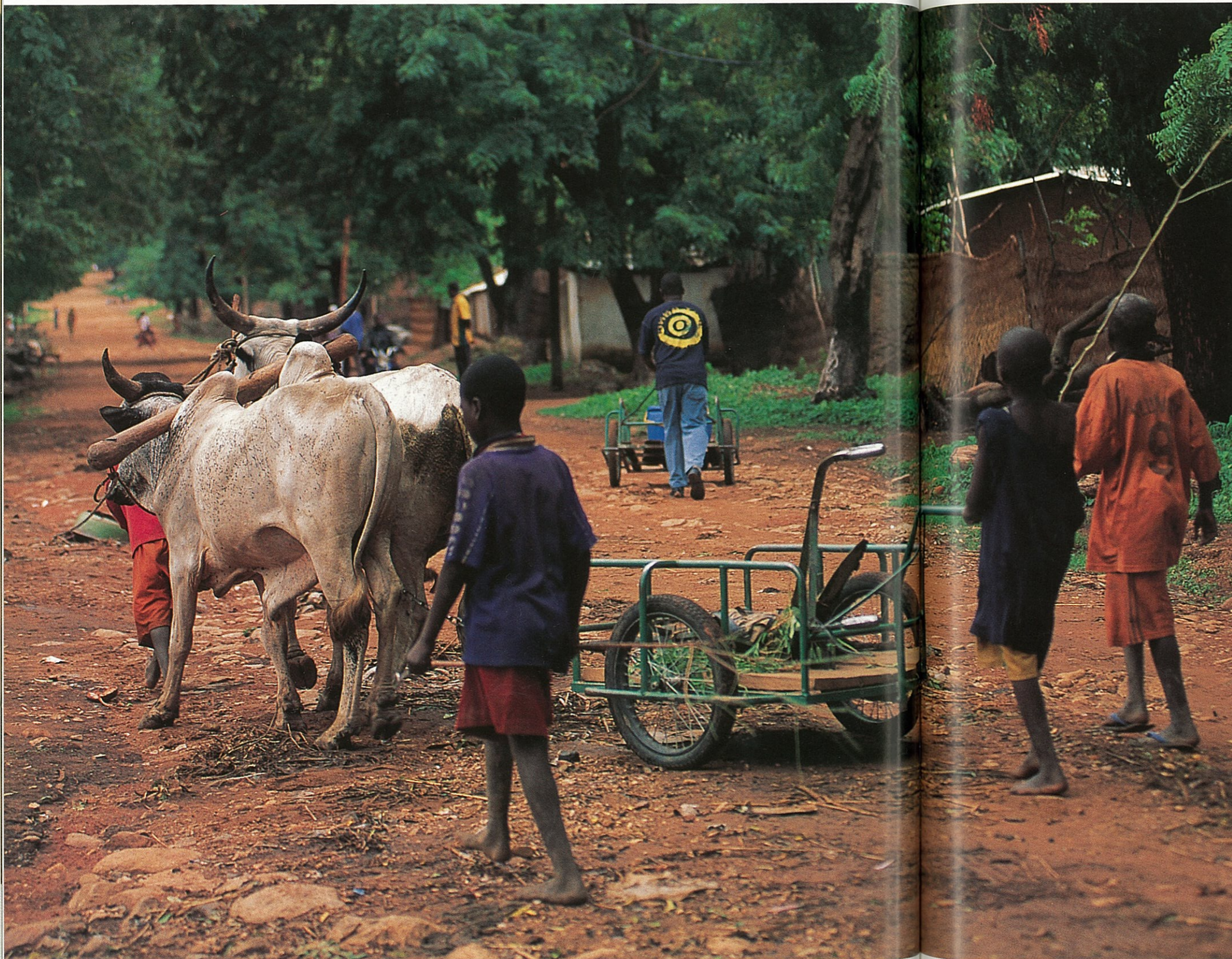
*His objective: to establish the status of the highly endangered western subspecies of the black rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis longipes*. As the expedition progressed spoor was found, but nothing fresh enough to follow. Now, in his continuing quest for the proverbial needle in a haystack, Kock turns his attention to a more easterly search area and in the face of punishing terrain, torrential rains and encounters with poachers, he finds more - and less - than he bargained for...*

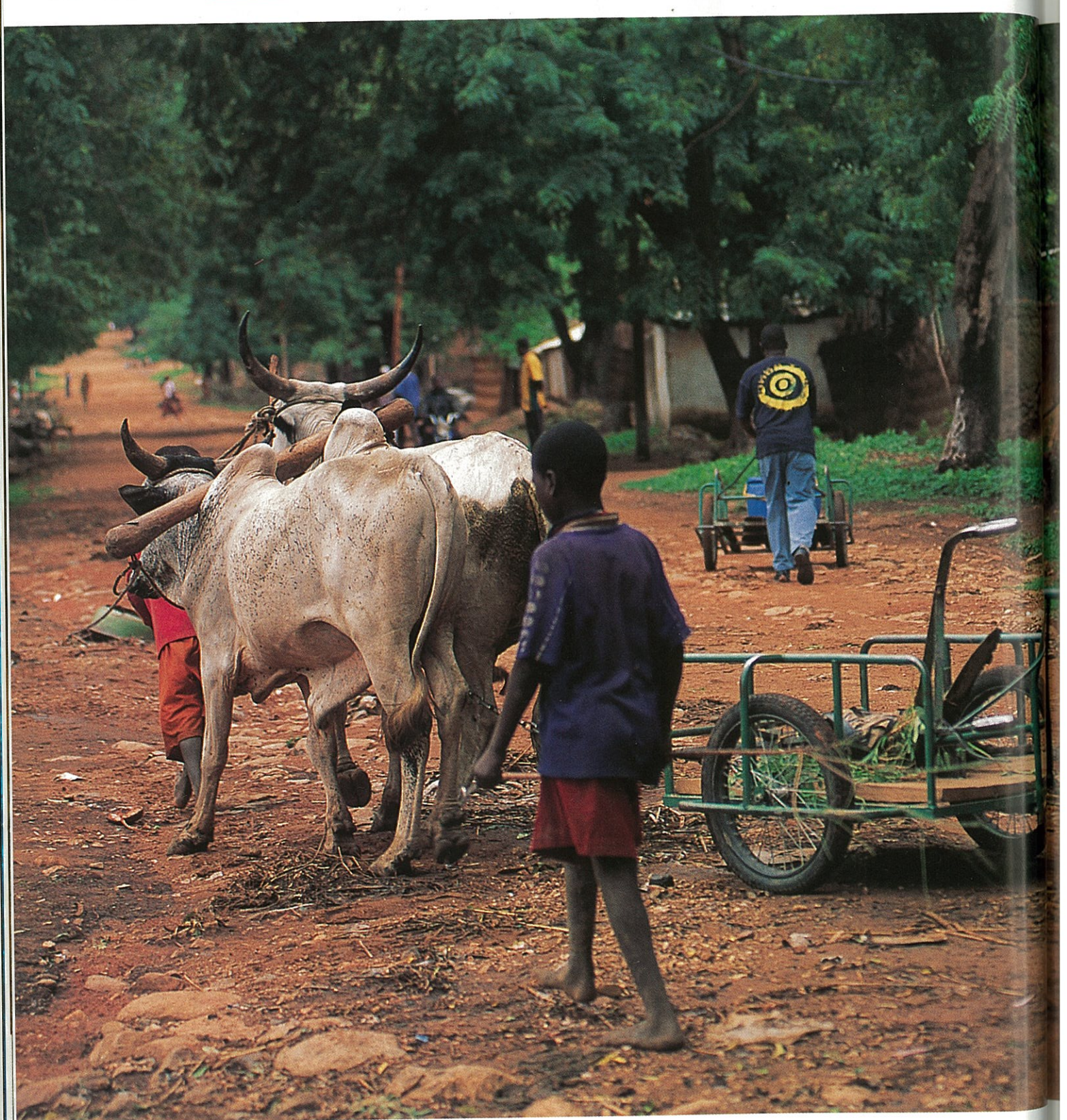
**See 'In the Lap of the Gods', Africa Geographic, February 2002*



ABOVE May Day in the northern Cameroonian town of Garoua, a time for colourful traditional garb and celebration.

LEFT Street scene in Tchollire, the administration centre for the central north-eastern area of Cameroon. Its recent acquisition of electricity notwithstanding, the town reflects the region's remoteness, and cattle-drawn carts and bicycles are the main means of transport along the potholed and rutted roads.





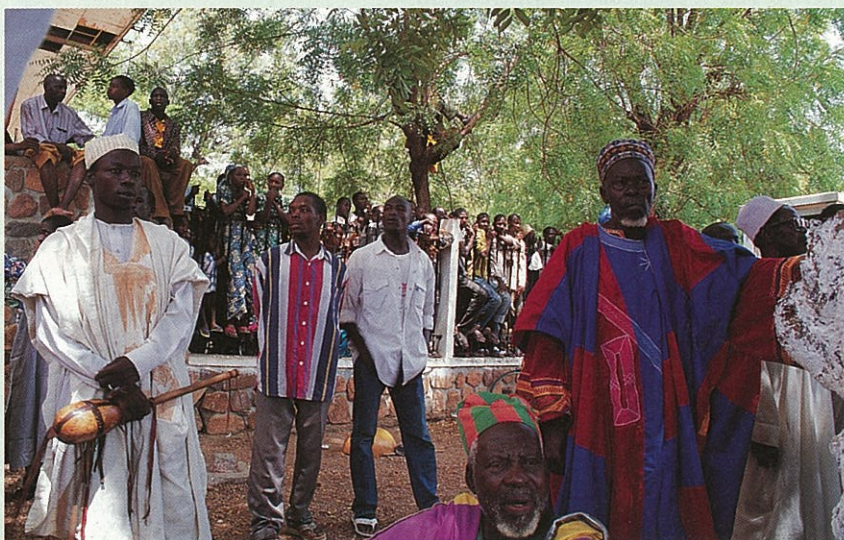
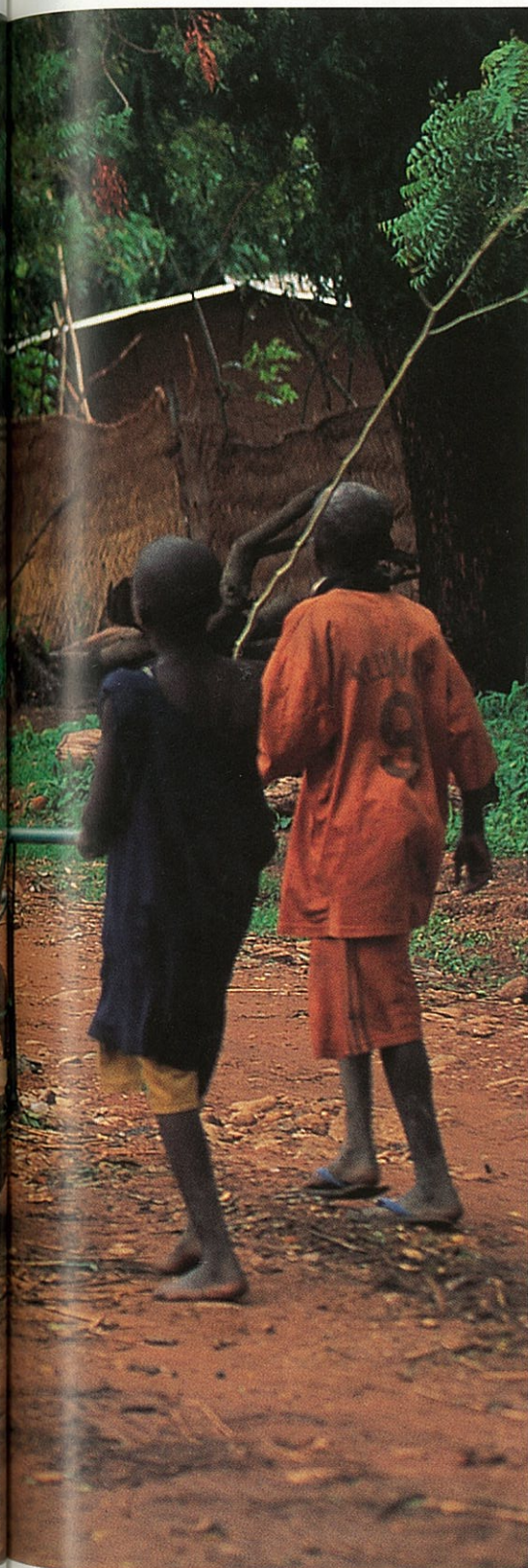
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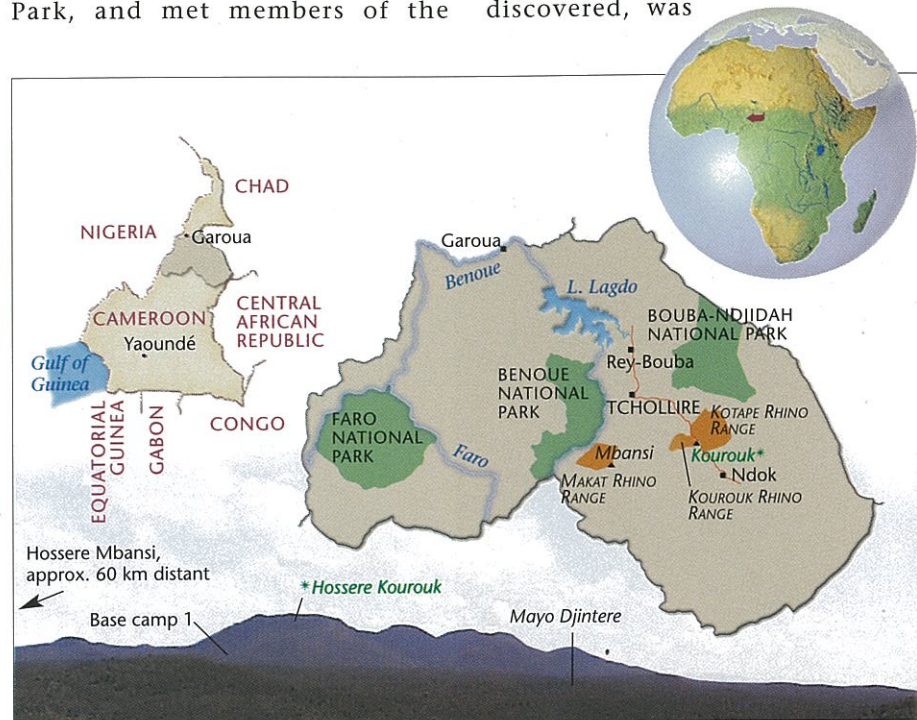
Hossere (Mount) Mbansi and its angry gods were a distant memory as, in mid-May 2001, we arrived in Tchollire, a provincial 'hub' in north-eastern Cameroon. This part of the country has a distinct African feel, its cultures having remained untouched by Western influence. It is also a remote region, far from the seat of government in Yaoundé. Only 25 kilometres further north lies Rey-Bouba, the home of the Lamido of Rey-Bouba, a powerful chief who, although in his nineties, commands a significant following and has caused the Cameroonian authorities many a headache.

Its recent acquisition of electricity notwithstanding, Tchollire reflects the region's remoteness – you still need a 4x4 to drive around its potholed and rutted roads, and as you're driving you still need to dodge goats, sheep, donkeys and dogs. Nevertheless, it's a lively town, with a vibrant market where you can buy traditional medicines, dried fish, smoked meat, aromatic spices, colourful cloth, mangoes of all shapes and sizes, unpasteurised milk, yoghurt made by the nomadic Fulani people – and much more. It's also a friendly place, where a quart of 'Trente Trois' beer can be sipped to the beat of Cameroonian or Congolese music blaring from overworked loudspeakers. Music from this part of the world must be some of the most vibrant and pulsating around, adding to the local colour and convivial atmosphere.

Despite the distractions of Tchollire, we had work to do – we still had to track down the western black rhino.

The border with Chad lies a mere 100 kilometres from the town and, although that country was at peace, the threat of armed banditry was real – especially in the isolated areas where we would be working. I didn't relish being ambushed on a remote dirt road so we visited Bakaou Hamayero, the warden of Bouba-Ndjidah National Park, and met members of the

I was in northern Cameroon at the behest of WWF Cameroon to establish how many of the western subspecies of black rhino *Diceros bicornis longipes* were left – if any. Assisted by local trackers and an entourage of game guards and porters, I was to find the rhinos and photograph them – all of which, as I had already discovered, was



provincial government, including the police chief and head of the *Gendarmerie*, a French-style paramilitary police force. We were told that an increased military presence had calmed things down, but this did little to reassure me.

far easier said than done. We had spent April and much of May in the Makat rhino range, south-east of Benoue National Park, had walked 264 kilometres and had found no fresh signs of their presence. Although this was both frustrating and disappointing, there were mitigating factors: very low black rhino numbers in a wilderness area larger than 3 000 square kilometres; very difficult terrain with poor definition of rhino spoor on uneven ground; and progressively heavier rainfall, in both intensity and duration, that washed away spoor and promoted vegetation growth. It was becoming increasingly apparent that our search was the proverbial 'looking for a needle in a haystack'.

Now we had shifted our search area further eastward, to the Kotape and adjoining Hossere Kourouk rhino range areas. Based on reports from the 1990s, Kotape seemed to hold the greater promise of success. In 1996, three rhinos (an adult male, adult female and a calf of about three years)



Fellow traveller on the dirt road eastwards from Tchollire.

had been sighted together, and the following year a tracker had seen four rhinos together on two occasions. So it was with some optimism that we established a base camp in the shadow of Hossere Kourouk.

The Kotape/Kourouk area is dominated by savanna/woodland vegetation that, as we moved eastwards, seemed to change subtly to a more open wooded and bush savanna with many acacia species and large groves of *Gardenia aqualla*, a species favoured by the black rhino. Several rivers bisect the landscape and they are fringed with thick riverine vegetation, including species such as *Acacia ataxacantha*, *A. polyantha* and *Mimosa pigra*. At the base of large mountains, gallery forest, springs and mud wallows would offer black rhinos an ideal habitat – if they were around.

Through the second half of May and into the last week of June we walked, covering 218 kilometres in 100 hours. The rains had arrived, and both their frequency and their intensity were increasing daily. Rivers began to rise and the bunch grasses were growing rapidly; they would not stop until they attained a height of two metres or more.

On 26 May we located fresh rhino spoor along the Mayo (River) Dinot, close to Hossere Kourouk. It was that of a young adult, probably a female, and was only three days old. The trackers tried to follow it but, frustratingly, elephants and buffaloes had done their worst, trampling both the spoor and our hopes. It was at times like this that I began to question my sanity: having walked for 147 hours and covered 319 kilometres, when we find reasonable spoor, Murphy's law will come along and let buffalo and elephant stuff it up!

But there were other times when we were encouraged. For example, we had a credible report from a truck driver of a group of three rhinos crossing a road south of Bouba-Njidah in early May. Further intelligence work revealed evidence of three rhinos having walked a trail through gallery forest in the area; spoor had been found by an experienced tracker in November 2000. Were these the same animals? When the team visited the forest we confirmed a well-used game trail through good rhino habitat. It seemed that there were rhinos in the area but we were unable to find them.



A small truck loaded to the gunnels. Negotiating the roads of northern Cameroon is a slow and uncomfortable process, as much for the driver as his hapless cargo.

It was on 9 June that we became aware that all was not well within the Kotape rhino range. Early in the morning we were following the meandering course of the Mayo Kotape northwards when we located some interesting spoor close to the riverbank. Our initial excitement was soon tempered when we realised that they were hippo tracks. But there was also a set of large lion spoor and evidence of a chase, with the skid marks of a large antelope, probably a

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hartebeest. As we examined the tracks a group of Buffon's kob watched us from a distance, the male snorting as we passed. But the real find was further downstream, where we came upon evidence of poaching – wooden racks on which fish and meat were smoked and thus preserved. They had clearly been used recently for the ashes were still fresh.

Half the team was on the other side of the river, so that both banks could be searched for tracks at the same time.

As we moved quietly along (maintaining silence was essential), Justin Koulagna, one of the game guards, motioned us to stop. Five hundred metres ahead of us a trail of smoke was curling skywards. We could see a crude shelter and movement behind it. The group on the opposite bank joined us immediately and then Justin took off through the bush, his old .303 rifle at the ready, while we waited.

Peering through binoculars, I watched Justin burst into the camp and the ensuing commotion. Quickly we followed and, when we caught up with him, I was amazed to see a well-established poaching camp with a large rack on which several different fish species lay. A fire smoked below the rack, and next to it was a large pile of traditional poison to be used in the numerous pools along the Mayo Kotape. The Cameroonians whom Justin had caught red-handed were two young lads, a young woman and an older woman. They were from a village to the north and acknowledged that what they were doing was illegal. Justin and Dairou Hargue, a representative of the Lamido of Rey-Bouba, made the two young men lie on their stomachs and proceeded to beat them with a whip-like sapling, their faces grimacing through the smoke-laden air. Meanwhile, two of us searched the camp and found several bones and hooves from small antelope, turtle shells and a crude bullet head. The poachers were told to pack up and return to their village.

This was a disturbing experience for me, compounded by the discovery ▶



Two poachers apprehended in prime rhino habitat in the Kotape Rhino Range area, which lies to the south of the Bouba-Ndjidah National Park.



Poachers used a traditional cable snare to capture this hartebeest.

of more poaching camps as we moved downriver. In one, hidden among a cluster of rocks, the fire was still smoking under a large and well-constructed rack on which hartebeest bones and skin lay.

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Our hopes that rhino may be in the area were fading rapidly. We pushed on, leaving the river to walk behind Hossere Kotape and return in a southerly direction to the Mayo Kotape further upstream. Although we passed through several areas of good rhino habitat, we saw no sign of the animals.

As we walked over a high ridge and descended towards a large salina, or salt spring, three of the

team – Sylvain the technician and two trackers, Beilima and Nang – became slightly separated from the rest of us. We were circling the salina looking for signs of rhino when the radio crackled into life. Jean-Paul Mahop, a biologist technician, told me that Sylvain had bumped into some poachers, one of whom was armed, and they were becoming aggressive. We ran in Sylvain's direction and almost into one of the poachers, who presumably had decided that the situation with Sylvain was not to his liking. His eyes widened when he saw us, liking us less than Sylvain. The armed poacher was close behind.

Mayhem broke out. For 10 minutes we chased the two poachers this way and that. The armed poacher was threatening to shoot but was completely outnumbered. The two eventually succumbed to flailing sticks and war-like cries. They lay prostrate, looking terrified and gulping for air. I examined their weapons, a bow and a shotgun with two shells. One of the shells was filled with birdshot and the other had a large lead ball embedded

in the front of the cartridge. This would certainly be capable of killing a buffalo or a rhino.

The poachers were tied together and marched back to base camp. From there they were taken to Tchollire and eventually Garoua. We felt some satisfaction when we learned that one was a notorious poacher who had eluded capture for many years – but we were still no nearer any rhinos.

Towards the end of June we were running out of time. Although we had found some spoor in gallery forest close to the Amadou plateau, we could not follow the animals as rain the night before had washed away most of the tracks. We decided to walk a corridor between the two rhino range areas of Kotape and Makat, beginning from the Ntam-Ndok road south of Hossere Kotape. Early in the morning of 23 June we met on the road, the team now including extra porters to carry supplies for at least five days. I was not feeling well, and subsequently discovered that I had been hit hard by bilharzia, having probably caught the parasite in early April. When the temperatures were 44 °C in Makat, the only way to cool down after a 13-kilometre walk was to take a dip in a pool along one of the rivers; the heat was so oppressive that no amount of medical advice would have stopped me.

We completed our corridor walk in five days as planned, having covered more than 86 kilometres, crossed several large rivers and endured some severe thunderstorms with sheet lightning. It was when we had to cross the Mayo Oldiri, a major tributary of the Benoue River, that I discovered that several of our team could not swim; in fact, one or two were terrified of water. This was a problem, as the river was flowing rapidly and over a boulder-strewn riverbed. Three of us were confident enough to help the others and gradually we shepherded them across. The porters had to carry their burdens on their heads as we guided them through deep water. Sylvain, our technician, refused to open his eyes while he was in the water. However,

any mention of crocodiles, of which there were a few, produced an instant response and proved useful if someone froze in midstream.

There was some excellent rhino habitat in the corridor between Kotape and Makat, and we received credible information of a road gang having seen a single rhino. The sighting, confirmed by the local tracker, had occurred in January 2001.

Yet we still found no evidence of rhinos, frequent rainstorms again making our task impossible. By the end of the five days we were all exhausted, frustrated and looking forward to a break. My consultancy was due to finish on 6 July and there seemed little

The fate of the western subspecies of black rhino now lies in the hands of the Cameroon Government and several NGOs and funding agencies following my final report. We tried our hardest to fulfil the terms of reference but, in spite of walking more than 600 kilometres for 266 hours, we never saw a rhino. We saw everything else – some big pythons, a few puff adders snoozing on paths, roan antelope in extraordinary numbers and Lord Derby's eland in herds of 200 or more. We encountered elephants, leopards, armed poachers and the occasional lion. But in the end we could only dream about finding black rhinos – they were the ghosts of northern Cameroon. ■



A group of fish and small-mammal poachers caught red-handed. Poison is used to contaminate river pools and the fish caught are then smoked on open racks.

point in continuing our quest in the rain and head-high grass. As Murphy would have it, on 23 June, the first day of our walk along the corridor, a tracker close to Doudja village in the Makat rhino range had actually caught sight of a rhino. We reached the village early in July and were able to confirm the presence of a rhino in the area with evidence in the form of freshly browsed branches, a tree rubbing post, a bedding area and fresh spoor. It rained heavily soon afterwards – and by then our time was up.

Dr Michael Kock is a veterinarian who has worked in the fields of wildlife health and conservation for the past 25 years. In the USA, the Middle East and his home continent of Africa, he has been involved in many aspects of conservation, including wildlife and ecosystem health, sustainable use, the interface between people, their livestock and wildlife, and training African colleagues in wildlife health and game capture. In the course of his many projects he has worked with and immobilised species as diverse as bighorn sheep, wolves, elephants and wild dogs.