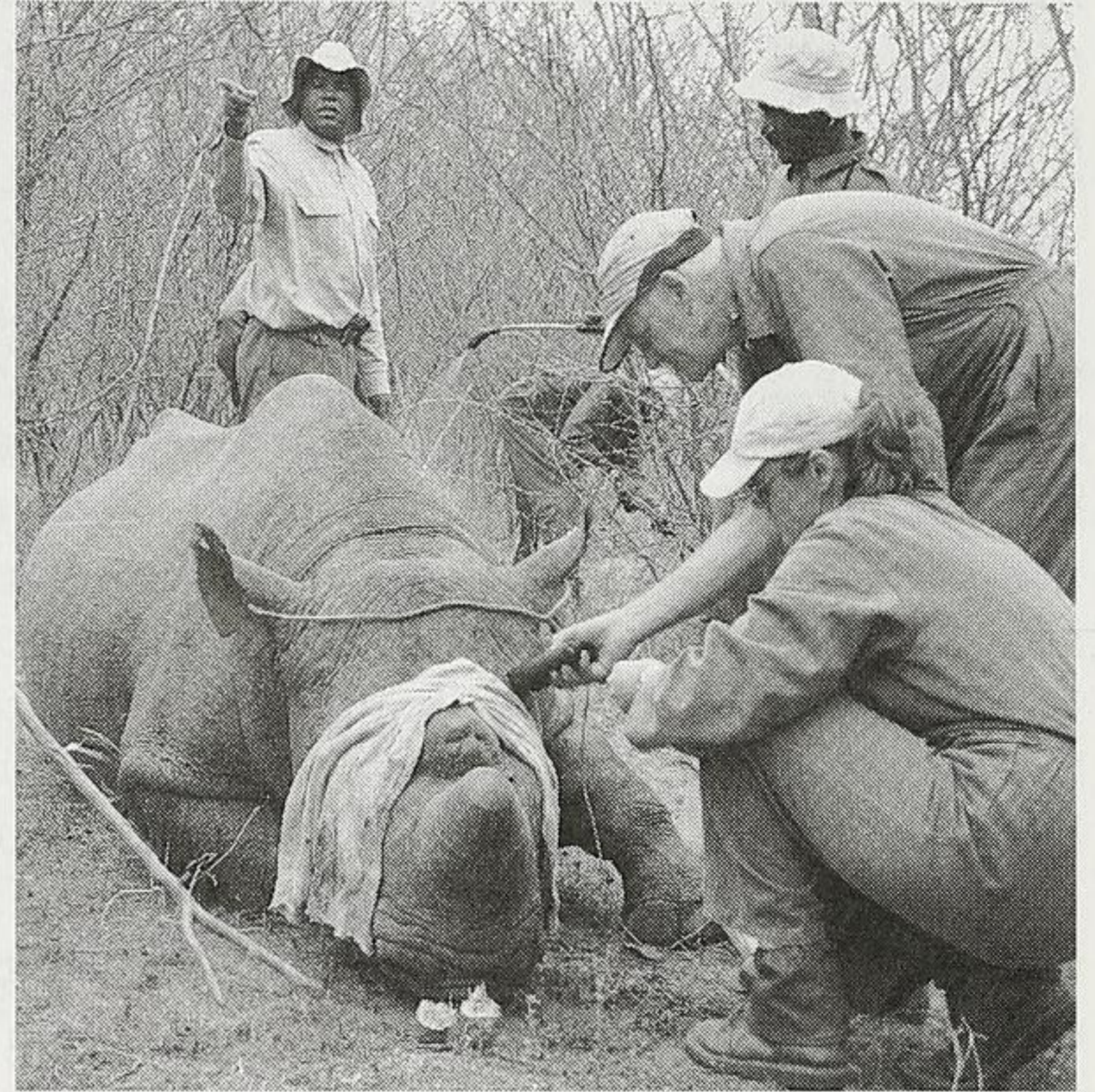


Hope for Rhinos in a World of Trouble

by Bill Konstant, Program Officer
Raoul du Toit, Africa Program Coordinator
Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, PhD, Asia Program Coordinator
International Rhino Foundation



(Left) Rhinos in southern Africa are now being poached at the rate of more than one per day. *Photo by Mark Brightman* (Right) Lowveld rhino team and anesthetized rhino ready for translocation. *Photo by Lowveld Rhino Trust.*

Paleontologists will tell you that the ancient ancestors of living rhinos had no horns. How ironic! Had the evolving lineage of species retained that important characteristic, perhaps modern-day rhinos might not be so endangered. Whether its consumers have fashioned it into exquisite carvings or believed it could detect poisons, treat snake bite, lower fevers, relieve hemorrhoids, combat hallucinations, cure cancer or even expel demons, rhino horn has been coveted by human civilizations for millennia. And, in the process, the illegal trade in this precious commodity has literally brought several rhino species to the brink of extinction.

The truth about rhino horn is known. It's not magic. It's not mystical. It's just compressed hair. But it's very difficult to refute long-held traditions and superstitions, so we can expect demand for horn to remain high as long as people practice traditional Asian medicine and have the disposable income necessary to purchase a substance that apparently now exceeds gold, heroine or cocaine in cost per unit weight. The demand is there, largely in the markets of China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, while the supply is on the hoof many hundreds or thousands of miles distant in the foothills of the Himalayas or on the plains of Africa. The assault on wild rhino populations has just entered a new period of slaughter, not unlike those of past decades and centuries, but at levels that could spell doom for populations that have been so seriously decimated for so long. Wildlife conservationists have come to the rescue in the past, and rhinos need their help now more than ever.

Unfortunately, the increasing demand for horn – driven by its escalating price - has raised the stakes considerably for those whose job it is to protect rhinos, especially in Africa. Snares, traps, spears and shotguns comprised the rather crude arsenal of most 19th and 20th century poachers. These days, however, rhino poachers are far more sophisticated, mobile and mechanized, incredibly well-armed, and willing to take high risks for what can amount to a huge payoff. The results of their perseverance and skill, needless to say, can be devastating. In South Africa, for example, after being kept to a

level of less than 25 rhino poaching deaths per year for nearly two decades, deaths due to poaching surpassed 50 in 2008, soared past 100 in 2009, reached the level of almost one per day in 2010, reached an incredible 448 in 2011, and began this year on that same dismal trajectory. As of 17 February 2012, the toll had reached 55 animals. There is little safe quarter for rhinos, not even in the country's most prominent protected area, Kruger National Park, which harbors several hundred black and several thousand white rhinos. Evidence of continued carnage appeared in the first week of January 2012 when eight rhino carcasses were discovered in the park. Government authorities responded by adding another 150 rangers to Kruger's existing staff of 500.

Concerned citizens around the world are also taking up the fight. The Stop Poaching Now campaign launched by the International Rhino Foundation in partnership with Save the Rhino, for example, has already raised significant support to better equip wildlife rangers, provide professional training for law enforcement officials, and thereby bolster anti-poaching activities in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Namibia. The strategy is straightforward; the tools in the conservationist's tool chest must outmatch the poachers' repertoire, and that will require both a heightened commitment and continued investment if we are to succeed in protecting rhinos.

It's also important to maintain perspective throughout these ordeals, recognize successes where they occur and build upon them. In a recent presentation to colleagues at the International Rhino Foundation, Raoul du Toit, African Rhino Program Advisor, summarized the status of Africa's remaining rhinos. Populations of both black and white rhinos have increased by approximately 15% over the course of the last four years, despite the recent upswing in poaching activity. According to the IUCN/SSC African Rhino Specialist Group, the most recent population estimates are 4,840 for black rhinos and 20,150 for white rhinos. These statistics tend to support the continued intensive management of wild African rhino populations, which includes not only protection against poaching, but veterinary care for injured animals and the strategic translocation of rhinos to maintain viable populations. Translocation is a useful tool for relocating surplus animals from protected areas



Natasha Anderson and Boy, his horns purposely removed to make him less desirable to poachers.

Photo by Lowveld Rhino Trust

where the carrying capacity has been reached, as well as for rescuing small, isolated populations that are highly susceptible to poaching.

The value of translocation as a population management tool is also being tested for the greater one-horned rhino in India and Nepal, where poaching has also been a very serious issue historically. As were Africa's white rhinos, Asia's greater one-horned rhinos were reduced to critically low levels at the turn of the 20th century due to habitat loss and poaching – no more than a couple hundred animals remained. Thanks in part to the creation of protected parks and wildlife sanctuaries in the late 1900s, the number of wild rhinos has increased more than ten-fold from its lowest point. Today the two countries harbor an estimated 2,800-2,900 individuals. Recent growth can be attributed in large part to translocations from burgeoning rhino populations in India's Pabitora National Park and Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park to other protected areas in both countries. India's goal, the core of its Indian Rhino Vision 2020, is to reach a population of 3,000 spread out among seven protected areas by the end of this decade. This is certainly achievable if successful translocations continue and poaching is kept under control, which it has been in recent years. Neighboring Nepal serves as a fine example in that regard. Its anti-poaching patrols posted a perfect record in 2011 – not a single rhino killed by poachers last year.

As good as that record is, Indonesia's Rhino Poaching Units (RPUs) have posted even more impressive statistics over the years in their efforts to safeguard wild populations of Sumatran and Javan rhinos. These two rainforest species, unfortunately, are the most critically endangered of all living rhinos and in serious danger of becoming extinct before the end of this century. Once the most widespread of Asia's rhinos, the Sumatran rhino is now restricted to fragmented populations in Indonesia and Malaysia that probably don't exceed two hundred animals, and the Javan rhino now occurs only as a single population of perhaps 40-50 animals in a final stronghold, Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park on the western tip of Java. Neither species could withstand the mortality currently being inflicted on Africa's rhinos. To put it in perspective, if they were being slaughtered at the same rate as rhinos in South Africa this past year, the last Sumatran rhino would be gone by Labor Day and the last Javan rhino wouldn't see the first day of spring. Fortunately, RPUs patrolling Sumatra's Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park and Way Kambas National Park recently posted their seventh year in a row of zero rhino poaching in those protected areas, and patrols at Ujung Kulon chalked up their 17th straight year of a perfect anti-poaching record. These successes were offset, unfortunately, by news that the last known Javan rhino inhabiting Vietnam was killed by poachers, causing biologists to declare the species extinct on the Asian mainland.

There is hope for the world's rhino species despite the recent and alarming rise in poaching activities. In southern and eastern Africa, both black and white rhinos will survive if protection efforts are increased overall and strategies tailored to counter changing threats. In India and Nepal, the greater one-horned rhino appears to have come through the bottleneck and has the capacity to replenish its numbers through the systematic re-population of protected areas within its range, providing poaching remains under control. The Sumatran and Javan rhinos, however, are another story entirely. Even if anti-poaching efforts are flawless, these creatures are already caught in a downward spiral driven largely by habitat loss. Hope for their survival rests on unrelenting protection, successful captive breeding efforts, and the search for additional protected areas into which the species might someday be reintroduced. We are grateful for the long-time support of the AAZK's Bowling for Rhinos program towards IRF's efforts with Asian rhinos.