

Our Last Chance to Save the Rarest Large Mammal on Earth

Reintroducing Northern White Rhinos in the Wild

By
Elodie Sampéré, Ol Pejeta Conservancy
Kenya, Africa

The history of northern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) conservation has been a difficult one, characterised by missed opportunities. But in an unprecedented partnership, the Ol Pejeta Conservancy, the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic, non-profit organization Back to Africa, and Fauna and Flora International are joining forces in a last attempt to save the northern white rhino from extinction. This is a chance to break the cycle and hold out a lifeline for what is the most critically endangered large mammal on the planet.

Tomorrow Will Be Too Late

The northern white rhinoceros is the most critically endangered rhino subspecies and the most endangered of all the world's mammals. Northern white rhinos used to range freely over parts of Uganda, Chad, Sudan, Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. As recently as 1960, significant numbers still remained, but the situation has deteriorated rapidly since then. Wholesale slaughter for horn, hide and meat has driven the northern white rhino to the very brink of extinction. Until recently, the only known wild northern white rhino population was clinging to



Africa is where the northern white rhinoceros belongs. It's time to give these last surviving representatives of their subspecies a taste of the lush tropical grasslands and wide, open spaces in which their ancestors lived.

Photo: © Ol Pejeta Conservancy

survival in Garamba National Park, situated in northeast Democratic Republic of the Congo, but this area continues to be ravaged by civil war and armed conflict, with devastating consequences for the wildlife and the people assigned to protect it. There has been no sign of the four rhinos since 2007.

Inaction is Not an Option

In recent decades the Garamba National Park population did manage to crawl back to approximately 30 animals, but then crashed to the four animals which have not been seen for the last few years. There was a brief opportunity to translocate some of these animals to a secure conservation area before this crash, but the initiative failed. To all intents and purposes, the northern white rhino is now extinct in the wild.

The last eight northern white rhinoceros believed to be left in the world are currently all held in captivity. Despite the best efforts of captive breeding programs, the subspecies has not yet been given the lifeline it needs. Whilst the survival rates of captive white rhinos are good, rates of reproduction are low. It has been nine years now since a northern white rhino was born in captivity. Evidence points to the fact that the lack of natural diet and habitat and unusual social conditions experienced by captive rhinos may be critical factors in their failure to breed at a sufficiently rapid rate.

The only captive individuals still capable of breeding reside in Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic. The Zoo's two males and two females represent the last hope of survival for the entire

subspecies. The consensus among the world's leading rhino specialists is that reintroducing these four captive animals to their natural habitat may represent the best, if not the only hope for the future of the northern white rhino. However, the window of opportunity is closing rapidly. The breeding potential of the remaining rhinos is diminishing with each passing day.

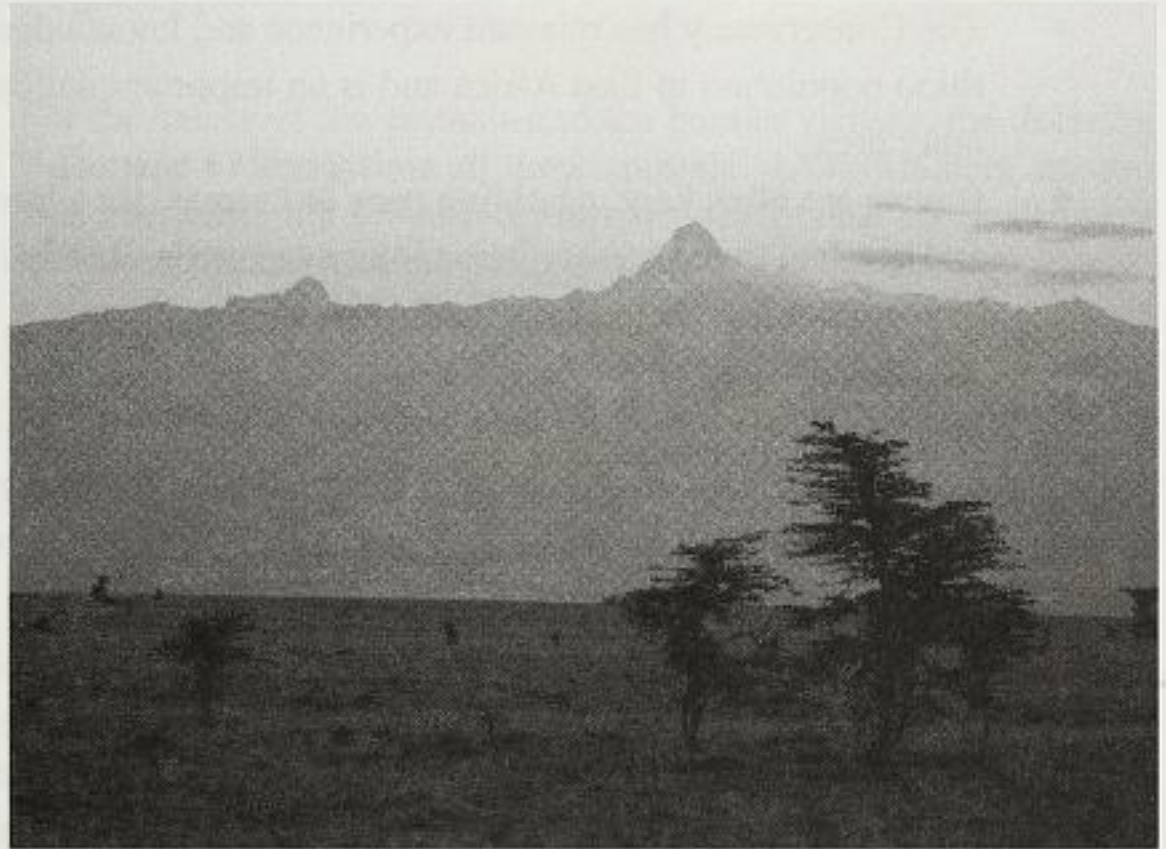
A Lifeline for One of Africa's Most Charismatic Animals

Dvur Kralove Zoo has now generously approved the translocation of its captive rhinos to a safe site in the wild in East Africa. As well as full protection, this will provide the best possible breeding conditions by giving the four rhinos access to tropical African grasses and a more natural setting within a larger conservation area. Back to Africa, which has developed a very productive working relationship with the zoo, has a proven track record in successfully translocating and reintroducing zoo-bred animals into the wild.

The Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya has been identified as the location with the most suitable habitat, climate, security and infrastructure to give the rhinos their best, and last, chance of breeding successfully

An Encouraging Historical Precedent

Once widespread in southern Africa, by the beginning of the 20th century the southern white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) was on the verge of extinction, reduced to a single population of less than 50 animals. By 1997, after years of careful protection and a series of translocations, numbers had increased to over 13,000 individuals spread across almost 250 discrete wild populations. The southern white rhino is now widely distributed across South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, with additional, smaller populations in countries outside its historic range. The recovery of the southern white rhino is one of the greatest conservation success stories of the last century.



The vast 90,000-acre Ol Pejeta Conservancy is located between the northern slopes of Mt. Kenya and the Aberdares. (Photo: © Ol Pejeta/Sandra Hill)

Significantly, the breeding success and rate of population growth of southern white rhinos in the wild has far exceeded that of their counterparts in captivity. Whilst captive breeding programs have failed to increase numbers, well-protected wild populations in South Africa's Kruger National Park, for example, have grown by an average of over 8% per year. It is hoped that we can replicate this success with the northern white rhino on the Ol Pejeta Conservancy.

Africa is where the northern white rhinoceros belongs. It's time to give these last surviving representatives of their subspecies a taste of the lush tropical grasslands and wide, open spaces in which their ancestors thrived. We fervently hope and believe that the secure, stress-free environment on the Ol Pejeta Conservancy will hold the key to their survival.

The Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya – A Perfect Location

The vast 90,000-acre Ol Pejeta Conservancy is located between the northern slopes of Mt. Kenya

and the Aberdares. It comprises a mosaic of grass plains, wooded grassland, acacia woodland and evergreen thicket. This productive mix of habitats supports elephants, giraffe, and plains game. Formerly a cattle ranch, Ol Pejeta was bought by Fauna & Flora International in late 2004 with the generous support of the Arcus Foundation. Ownership was subsequently transferred to the newly created Ol Pejeta Conservancy, which now benefits from the support of a network of partners, local political figures, community leaders and conservation groups.

The African Rhino Specialist Group at IUCN (The World Conservation Union) and other experts have endorsed the choice of the Ol Pejeta Conservancy. The location is the conservation equivalent of an ideal home for translocated rhinos and has a number of distinct advantages:

- Ol Pejeta is less prone to drought and less vulnerable to poaching than other proposed sites. Moreover, it is closer to the original range of the northern white rhino, and in particular to Uganda, a former stronghold of the subspecies. The location of Ol Pejeta will facilitate any future translocation of rhinos to other safe areas, in the rhino's former range
- The Conservancy has relevant experience and knowledge – it now holds the largest black rhino population in East Africa and is an important national resource for the restocking of other areas
- Rhinos are often kept in holding pens or 'bomas' for a minimum period after translocation, and much of the necessary boma infrastructure is already in place in the conservancy, ready to accommodate the translocated white rhinos.
- Technical support can be offered by the nearby Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, which is currently among the best protected and monitored of Africa's rhino reserves. The reserve will benefit from what has been described as 'Rolls Royce' security, including 24-hour

surveillance

- In view of the small size of the remaining breeding population of northern white rhinos, it is imperative to aim for rapid population growth, in order to avoid so-called 'genetic drift' and minimize the risks of inbreeding. Ol Pejeta has already proven to be successful at achieving this growth - many of the populations of southern white rhino currently held in Kenya have been growing at rates above 9% per year



Rhinos on the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy benefit from extremely high quality security, including 24-hour surveillance. Technical support will be given to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy to protect the northern white rhino. (Photo: © Daryl & Sharna Balfour)

An Unrepeatable Opportunity

First and foremost, the irreversible loss of this subspecies would

represent a failure of the imagination. We have an unrepeatable opportunity to bring the northern white rhinoceros back from the brink, provided that our translocation strategy can be implemented as a matter of utmost urgency. The crisis facing the northern white rhino could not be more serious. This is our last chance to save it.

Surely we have to use every means at our disposal to prevent one of our most charismatic creatures from sliding inexorably into extinction?