

A RHINO MYSTERY

IN early December rumours reached Nairobi about the mysterious deaths of rhino in the Royal Tsavo National Park. One suggested cause of the deaths was "immense gangs of poachers." Another was not any ordinary scourge, or even anthrax, but "a new and untraceable disease."

The Warden of Tsavo (East), David Sheldrick, told our correspondent that, in fact, the carcasses of 88 rhino had been found along sections of the Tsavo and Galana rivers. In a few instances there was some evidence of poaching: healed wounds or the horns removed. In other cases, where blood-slides were sent to the veterinary laboratories, there was no trace of extraordinary disease.

This left one simple and distressing conclusion. The northern part of Tsavo is a vast tract of nearly waterless bush. In a dry year the animals are forced to concentrate, abnormally, within reach of the remaining lifelines of water. Now, after two years of drought, the position has become desperate. Not only are feed supplies near the residue water eaten away, but whole sweeps of surrounding country have become brown and bare. These rhinos, in short, died of starvation.

Two comments are relevant. The rhino population of Tsavo is said to have been reduced now to about 500. This figure is alarmingly small. Poachers take dreadful annual toll. Adding loss from starvation to loss from poaching, this year 40 per cent. of the few remaining rhino may be lost. Secondly, this anxious news from Tsavo gives fresh impetus to the appeal launched by the Royal National Parks of Kenya for their "Water for Animals Fund."