

Good News for Rhinos

After decades of decline, black rhino numbers are slowly recovering. *Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne report.*

SINCE 1993, DUE TO A SPECTACULAR reduction in poaching, the number of black rhinos in Africa has remained stable. In 1970, before serious poaching started, the total population was as much as sixty-five thousand spread through about eighteen countries, but by 1980 there were less than fifteen thousand left. The first black rhinos to be killed in large numbers in the 1970s were the thousands of rhinos which roamed the huge unfenced areas of Tsavo National Park in Kenya and the Luangwa Valley in Zambia; they were the easiest to poach as they could not be protected adequately in such huge areas.

Throughout the next decade, black rhinos were wiped out in the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Malawi, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. By 1992, numbers had plummeted to a mere 2,475—87 percent of them in only four countries: Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Today, these four countries harbour 98 percent of the continent's black rhinos. At the same time the northern white rhino was almost completely eliminated from the vast areas of the Central African Republic, Zaïre and Sudan by illegal hunters. From perhaps three thousand in 1970, numbers had fallen to about thirty by 1995. The verdict was thus clear: in very large areas impossible to protect adequately, rhinos had little hope of survival.

Hope did lie, however, in an example from South Africa. Back in the early 1900s, after hunting had annihilated nearly all its southern white rhinos, South Africa saved them from the brink of extinction by starting to put them in well protected, typically small, fenced reserves and parks. This allowed their numbers to build up to 2,500 by 1980, 5,297 by 1992, and 7,095—94 percent of the continent's total—by 1995, a great conservation success story.

By the late 1980s, wildlife officials and conservationists outside South Africa realised that the best chance of keeping their black rhinos alive was to put them, too, in smaller, better protected areas. In Kenya the government developed special black rhino sanctuaries—usually fenced—in Lake Nakuru National Park, Nairobi National Park and Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary in Tsavo Na-



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A black rhino at Ol Pejeta private game reserve in Laikipia, in Kenya's central highlands.

Private sanctuaries have proved an effective way of protecting Africa's remaining rhinos.

tional Park. Namibia also improved the protection of its rhinos from 1985 onwards, mostly keeping them inside fenced national parks with a smaller number free-ranging but regularly monitored. In South Africa, both black and white rhinos remained well protected within fenced national parks and game reserves. In Zimbabwe, the government created Intensive Protection Zones in the early 1990s. These are areas within larger pieces of government land, such as parks, which have natural barriers or are fenced. Rhinos have done well in all these government-protected zones in Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe for three reasons: the areas are small enough to have a high concentration of manpower along with adequate anti-poaching equipment; there are effective intelligence networks surrounding them; and the areas have natural barriers or fences, sometimes electrified, making it harder for rhinos to wander out and for poachers to get in.

A second major reason for the decline in black rhino poaching is that, beginning in the 1980s, government officials permitted and even encouraged individuals to keep government-owned black rhinos on their privately-owned land. With government budgets for wildlife declining, especially in Zimbabwe and Kenya, several wealthy and motivated people were allowed, first by the Kenyan government, to invest large sums of money in black rhino conservation on their ranches. By 1995, 28 percent of Kenya's 420 black rhinos were on 5 private sanctuaries. In the early 1990s a few of Namibia's six hundred black rhinos were also being managed on private land. In South Africa only white rhinos had been permitted to be kept on private ranches, but by the early 1990s black rhinos were allowed on private land as well. By 1995, of South Africa's 1,024 black rhinos, about 51 were in 6 private reserves. In Zimbabwe the government permitted private landowners to establish fenced areas called conservancies under the control of at least two landowners; by 1995, 60 percent of Zimbabwe's 315

black rhinos were on privately-owned conservancies and other private properties. This strategy worked in all four countries: extremely few rhinos have been poached on private land.

A third factor which helped reduce the illegal killing was better law enforcement in the 1990s in the four countries with sizeable rhino populations, and increased prison sentences and fines in South Africa and Namibia. For example, Namibia's maximum sentence for killing a rhino rose from a 6,000 rand fine and/or six years

law enforcement in Taiwan. Furthermore, Taiwan and China had large stockpiles of horn so the demand for new supplies from Africa declined. Additionally, the United Nations Environment Programme, the CITES Standing Committee and various non-governmental organisations put pressure on certain Asian countries to implement their laws on rhino products and reduce demand for rhino horn by encouraging the use of substitutes, and the United States threatened economic sanctions on countries trading in rhino horn, further encouraging the eastern Asian nations to enforce their laws. This threat was actually carried out against Taiwan with trade to the United States in wildlife products banned for a time. South Korea and Hong Kong also sharply reduced imports, exports and domestic trade.

So, black rhino conservation is finally working. Since 1992 poaching has drastically declined. This is partly because the easiest to kill, large populations in the vast unpatrolled areas of Africa had all gone by then, but also because those countries with large remaining populations—Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe—all created effective rhino management strategies in their despera-

tion to save the last rhinos from the onslaught of poaching. These governments developed smaller protected rhino areas, allowed black rhinos to be kept on private rhino sanctuaries, which are mostly fenced, and increased their law enforcement activities. Law enforcement was also tightened in Asia—due to threats from the West—and demand for horn has fallen with the help of substitutes. Now that black rhinos are being protected effectively, and if the above strategies are sustained, there is optimism that their numbers will continue to rise. ❧

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Four main factors have contributed to a continent-wide decline in rhino poaching:

- **Increased government protection of remnant populations, generally in fenced-off reserves.**
- **Government encouragement of private wildlife sanctuaries.**
- **Improved local law enforcement.**
- **A drop in international demand for rhinoceros horn.**

Now that black rhinos are being protected effectively, and if the above strategies are sustained, their numbers should continue to rise.

imprisonment to 200,000 rand (about US \$45,000) and a possible twenty years in prison. South Africa also set up a special police section called the Endangered Species Protection Unit in 1989 which has been effective in catching many rhino poachers and middlemen in southern Africa.

The final factor contributing to the drop in rhino poaching was reduced demand for the horn in Asia. In Yemen, prices for rhino horn have remained the same at about US \$1,000 a kilo since 1985 due to a deterioration in the economy and greater use of alternative materials (*see page 15*). In eastern Asia prices peaked in 1990 in China and Taiwan and then declined, mainly due to the unavailability of horn in the medicine shops because of a domestic rhino horn trade ban in China and improved