

MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner discusses the use of IVF to save endangered species, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

**W**hy is everyone so excited about the latest plan to bring the world's most endangered mammal – the northern white rhino – back from the brink of extinction? The northern white is the most Critically Endangered rhino, with just two survivors left. Both are female. They are living their last days in semi-captivity in Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya.

But it appears that we are not going to stand idly by as they slide into oblivion. Experts are using the most advanced reproductive technologies science has to offer in a last-ditch attempt to stop that happening. Semen collected from the last male northern white rhinos, before they died, has been used to fertilise eggs from the two remaining females (which are too frail to be able to maintain a pregnancy and deliver a calf).

On 27 May this year, the first embryo was successfully transferred into the uterus of a southern white rhino surrogate – and a 16-month wait began.

It would sadden me as much as anyone to see the northern white rhino disappear. I was lucky enough to see one in the wild. In fact, I saw eight, back in 1989, when the last 22 survivors were making their final stand in the middle of a lawless and relentless war zone in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Against all the odds, they survived a little longer – but no one has seen one alive in the wild since March 2006.

Twenty years later, in December 2009, I travelled with four captive

animals – for a BBC documentary – in a specially chartered Boeing 747 all the way from Dvur Králové Zoo in the Czech Republic to Nairobi in Kenya, and on to Ol Pejeta. Our journey took 26 hours. Conservationists were hoping against all hope that the wide expanse of African sky, and a last chance to stand on African soil, might encourage the rhinos to breed.

Sadly, it didn't work. There was no breeding. And, in the years since, two of 'our' four and the few other northern white rhinos in captivity have all died.

I understand the reluctance to let go. It's awful to have to stand by and watch yet another Critically Endangered mammal disappear. I appreciate the potential importance of such space-age technology, too, in pushing medical and technical boundaries. Most of all, I admire

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the tenacity and determination of all the people involved – conventional conservation approaches haven't worked and they are willing to try absolutely anything to turn back the clock.

But I think it's completely mad. First, the northern white rhino is 'only' a sub-species of white rhino (the other being the southern white rhino – which has made a remarkable comeback). Second, it is diverting a phenomenal amount of money (€4 million so far) away from saving rhinos that are hanging on by a thread in the wild (though, admittedly, the money probably wouldn't have been made available for any traditional conservation efforts).

Third, I am seriously worried that so-called 'de-extinction' lulls everyone into a false sense of security. No one is going to worry about conservation if they (wrongly) believe that extinction is just a temporary inconvenience and all it takes is a bit of technology to bring back a species.

Besides, we haven't solved any of the original problems. The forces that wiped out the northern white rhino – war, poverty and poaching – haven't magically gone away. Despite some spectacular successes, rhino poaching is still at crisis level. So why would we want to bring northern white rhinos back into such an unsafe and hostile world? 🐾

**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)



Can the northern white rhino be saved? And should we even try?