

# Thin White Line

Environmentalists and park authorities are fighting a desperate battle to protect the endangered northern white rhino in Zaire's Garamba National Park. But extreme poverty and armed poachers are making their job difficult and hazardous, *reports Will Cohu.*

**O**N THIS SUNDAY MORNING, the hot grassed plains of Garamba National Park seemed blissfully peaceful. By an encampment on the banks of a caramel-coloured river, Kes and Fraser Smith's children were fishing. From across the plains came the bronchial chuckles of hippos wallowing in a pool.

The first batch of automatic weapon fire came spluttering across the plain like pneumatic drilling to be followed by a clutch of sinister shorter bursts. The children stared at the horizon. It might be guards shooting at poachers, or poachers shooting at animals. Or it might be poachers shooting at the children's parents.

The latter possibility was all too real. Once a villager might spear a buffalo for the pot. Now poachers come in raiding parties of up to forty, armed with machine guns and hand grenades looking for elephant and rhino ivory. Fraser Smith used to think that if he flew low enough they could not aim straight, but recently a bullet passed through the passenger seat of his aircraft. Fortunately, it was vacant.

For twelve years Fraser, a chunky Zimbabwean game warden, and his wife Kes, an English zoologist working with their Zairian colleagues, have repulsed the poachers. When they were brought to Garamba by WWF-World Wide Fund For Nature and the Frankfurt Zoological Society, there were only fifteen northern white rhinos in the park - the last of their kind in the wild. The number rose to thirty-one but, since February, two have been killed. At that rate, the sub-species - whose family tree stretches back to the dinosaurs - will be extinct within a year.

Wider circumstances have conspired against Garamba. The average income in Zaire is US \$150 a year and empty plates are filled with buffalo or hippo meat. More than 50,000 hungry refugees fleeing civil war in neighbouring Sudan have passed over the border. The Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) makes ever deeper poaching incursions. And there is even evidence that the Zairian army is hunting ivory to order.

Garamba's guards are ill-equipped for battle. They have not been paid for nearly two years, their battered guns are like gnawed fish bones, their am-

munition faulty, their uniforms rags and they wear green wellingtons instead of leather boots. Courage is no substitute for training. Many have been wounded and, last year, one was shot through the head. International funding bodies have become increasingly loathe to prop up the Zairian regime. But at the eleventh hour, WWF has committed itself to an urgent fund-raising campaign that offers the Northern white rhino a glimmer of hope.

While waiting for the money, Fraser, Kes and a team of international vets have hit on a way to keep track of the most peripatetic and threatened rhinos: installing radio transmitters in their horns. The rhino is darted with a synthetic opiate, the doped animal falls down on its haunches and a wave of vets swarm over it like ants, measuring, syringing, cooling - and drilling holes for the transmitter.

There is a possibility that the animal might have an adverse reaction to the drugs, but the alternative is probable death from a bullet. The park tried radio collars, but rhinos rub them off. With this procedure, the rhino can be back on its hooves in forty minutes.

But should people die so that it can survive? Why not take the last few away to join the nine other Northern whites in zoos in the Czech Republic and the USA? Because, says Kes, that would be giving up on the whole ecosystem. When the rhino has vanished Garamba will no longer attract funds, and any future it offers for both animal and human populations will go up in the smoke of the poacher's fires.

Social development is being planned, but it will take years and the rhino can hardly wait for humans to understand that the value of a rhino is not limited to its horn. One day Garamba will attract tourists. It boasts 11,000 wild elephants, 25,000 buffalo and a small population of giraffes. But it lacks the animal abundance of other African parks. Moreover, travel to Garamba is only for the intrepid, entailing aerial hops across Lake Victoria and the Ituri Forest and having to face corrupt immigration authorities. It has to be a star animal to pull people through this turnstile. For the moment, Garamba is under siege. But at least, in Fraser and Kes, the rhinos have resourceful allies.

**Opposite: One of only twenty-nine northern white rhinos left in the wild.**

*Photograph:  
c. Kes & Fraser Smith*

*Will Cohu, a correspondent for Express Newspapers plc. in the U.K., visited Garamba as a guest of WWF-World Wide Fund for Nature*



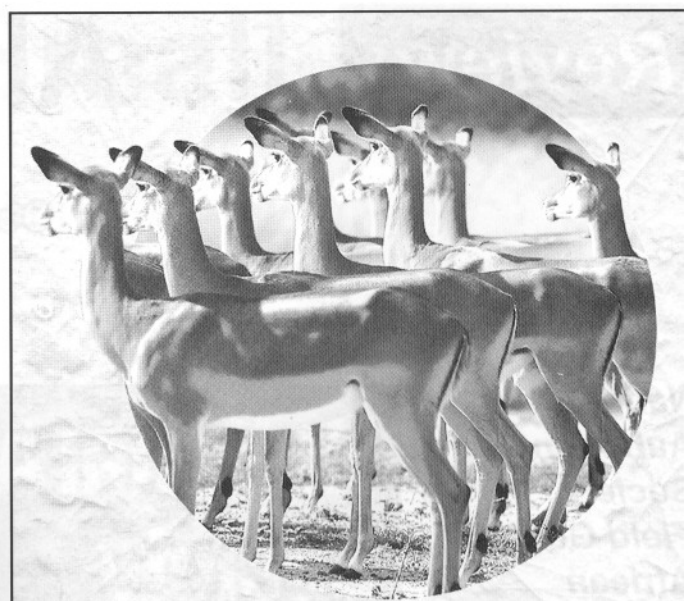
On this particular Sunday, details of the shoot-out which had scared Fraser's children were beginning to emerge. "The guards are allowed to shoot at the poachers after three warning shots," said Fraser. "In this case they gave them 260." He laughed.

Dr. Mbayma Atalia, park warden for Zaire's conservation body, who was told about the shooting, understands the situation. He knows the circumstances are desperate. This time the guards recovered an elephant tusk and some dried hippo meat. Next time, it could be another rhino horn.

## What's White About a White Rhino?

**N**OT A LOT. THEY ARE THE SAME COLOUR AS black rhinos. The difference lies in the shape and use of the mouth. The white rhino is really the 'weit' rhino - an Africaans word meaning 'wide'. Unlike the black rhino, which has a beak-shaped lip adapted for browsing, the white rhino's lip is wide and square like a lawnmower, which is basically what it is, since the white rhino's diet consists solely of grass.

White rhinos are the second biggest land mammals after elephants, and they weigh on average twice as much as black rhinos. There is still hope for the Northern white rhino, despite its scarcity. At the beginning of the century, the Southern white rhino was itself nearly extinct, but concerted conservation measures have seen rhino numbers rise to 6,300, all in South Africa.



ORDER YOUR CHRISTMAS CARDS  
AND 1997 CALENDARS  
and help conserve wildlife

### ORDER FORM

To: East African Wild Life Society Shop  
P.O. Box 20110, Nairobi, Kenya.  
Tel: 331888/221780 Nairobi,  
Fax: 254-2-746868

Please send me the number of cards/calendars indicated in the boxes.

By Air

packets of 24 cards & envelopes  
 copies of 1997 wall calendars  
 copies of 1997 desk calendars

Enclosed find my cheque for

or collect by Visa/Euro/Master Card (see page 34 for price details)

Card No.

Expiry date

MY NAME

ADDRESS

Signature   
PLEASE PRINT

