

## The African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG)

– current rhino numbers and trends, recommended conservation strategies and the EAZA Rhino Campaign –

Richard Emslie

IUCN SSC African Rhino Specialist Group, 59 Silverdale Crescent, Chase Valley, Pietermaritzburg, 3201, Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa

---

### Rhino numbers and trends

Two rhino species occur in Africa - the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) and the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*). There are currently two recognized subspecies of white rhino and four black rhino subspecies.

### White rhino

The two sub-species of white rhino have very different histories.

#### **Southern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum simum*)**

- 20-50 in 1885 - Umfolozi area of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP)
- 1960 still only one population - started developing translocation techniques and moving rhinos.
- By the end of 2003 numbers up to ~11,320 in the wild in 379 populations in eight countries (all from Umfolozi stock) plus + 737 in captivity. Biggest population (Greater Kruger - numbers doubling every 8-9 years) now has 4,890 with HiP 1,900). Total numbers just over 12,000.
- In the wild .. South Africa 10,540; Zimbabwe 250; Kenya 218; Namibia 186.
- Numbers in the wild now exceed current recommended MVP of 5,000-7,000 animals.
- One of the world's great conservation success stories thanks primarily to political will, good protection in the field, good biological management, and commercialization of white rhino through live sales, limited sport hunting and eco-tourism.

#### **Northern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*)**

- 2,230 in 1960 in 5 countries - more than southern whites
- Massive poaching - by 1984 only 15 left in wild in one population - Garamba NP (DRC)
- Under protection - numbers grew rapidly to 30 by 1991
- Civil war in neighbouring country and then Zaïre/DRC. Influx of weapons - poaching
- Period 1991- April 2003 numbers remained relatively stable around 30
- From mid 2003 - Big upsurge in poaching (Arabic horsemen from Northern Sudan) - March 2004: 14 seen, maximum possible = 22
- Unsustainable - Development of emergency win/win plan.. High level mission to Kinshasa. Supported by two DRC vice-presidents but for internal political reasons not officially ratified. Rhinos left to their own fate.
- Most recent reconnaissance survey saw four but unlikely to be more than 10 left.
- Park may lose its World Heritage Status if northern white rhinos are wiped out.
- Local authority (ICCN) signs contract with Africa Parks for them to manage the park.

### Black rhino

As a species...

- 1960: 100,000
- 1970: 65,000
- 1980: 14,785
- 1991: 3,450
- 1992-1995: Stabilized at around 2,450
- Since 1995, numbers have steadily increased reaching 3,610 in the wild by the end of 2003 + 243 in captivity.

- In the wild... South Africa 1,285; Namibia 1,240; Zimbabwe 535; Kenya 440
- Encouraging.. but no room for complacency with 1) declining budgets and capacity 2) problems of poaching and snaring in some areas 3) sub-optimal biological management 4) very low numbers of western black rhino (*Diceros bicornis longipes*) scattered over large area - current status not properly known.

#### **Other challenges - need to..**

- maintain and increase incentives for local communities and private sector to conserve wildlife and rhinos.
- change view of conservation as low priority waste of land and luxury for foreign tourists to enjoy to valid form of land use of benefit to people and country
- maintain and improve the quality of monitoring
- Improve biological management and related decision-making
- ensure effective targeted donor support

#### **How is Rhino Conservation structured and coordinated in Africa ?**

##### ***Continental coordinaton - AfRSG***

IUCN SSC's African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) provides strategic direction and coordination at the continental level.

37 members. Over 80% of members live and work in Africa. AfRSG "small but active". Meetings very useful, and funding permitting these to happen every two years.

- Mix of official country representatives and rhino specialists.
- Part-time secretariat of chairman and scientific/programme officer (depends on continued funding)

##### ***AfRSG objectives***

- To compile and synthesize information on the status and conservation of Africa's rhinos across their range (done every two years). AfRSG now tasked with preparing a summary report on status and trend in African rhinos as well as levels of poaching and illegal trade and submitting this to the CITES Secretariat prior to the next CITES Conference of the Parties.
- To provide and improve technical information and advice on the conservation of Africa's rhino across their range to a variety of clients
- To promote and catalyse conservation activities on behalf of Africa's rhinos
- To build capacity through the exchange of ideas, information and technical expertise among members

##### ***The primary focus of AfRSG is field conservation***

- AfRSG members provide the support to facilitate decision-making and the development and implementation of appropriate rhino conservation policies, strategies and programmes; as well as assisting funding agencies with assessment and prioritisation of projects and spending money effectively.
- Members participate in many regional and national rhino management groups and committees (gearing).
- Ultimate yardstick - increasing rhino numbers

##### ***Modus operandii - A key to AfRSG successes***

- Face to face exchanges at AfRSG meetings help establish a sense of belonging to a serious and relevant professional peer group, which strengthens the confidence and influence of government rhino managers in particular.
- Plays an important role in building and maintaining effective networks where rhino conservationists not only know who to contact for advice, but also know they will get a friendly helpful response as they have met.
- Key AfRSG members involved at all levels from continental-regional-national

## **AfRSG recommended strategies**

### ***Field protection - critical ("Defence")***

- Concentrate law enforcement effort (fenced sanctuaries, IPZ's)
- Ensure adequate provision and deployment of anti-poaching resources (capacity)
- Consolidate isolated and vulnerable rhino
- Develop and operate intelligence networks
- Support efforts to reduce illegal demand and trade
- Use transponders
- Secure horn stockpiles and develop horn fingerprinting
- Effective investigation and prosecution
- Ensure penalties for convicted offenders are adequate

### ***Biological management of rhinos on a metapopulation basis to meet demographic and genetic conservation goals also essential ("Attack")***

- Monitoring and standardized annual status reporting
  - Assess progress towards goals
  - Allows managers to view their performance of their rhinos in context - encourages a metapopulation view
  - Get earlier warning of problems
  - Learn and share lessons learned
  - Provides info for improved decision-making
  - Helps with morale and security
  - Can catalyze improvements in monitoring and decision-making
- Translocations - the key for growth seeking to prevent density dependent reductions in population performance by reducing densities on donor populations whilst creating new populations which are likely to show rapid growth. This point was illustrated with the example of the southern central black rhino (*Diceros bicornis minor*) in South Africa.
- Genetic conservation (prevent inbreeding and seek rapid growth to minimise loss of genetic diversity)

### ***Strategic direction ("Game Plan - The coach")***

- Promote adoption and implementation of continental, regional, national and organisational plans, strategies and policies.
  - AfRSG members continue to actively participate in the development, review and revision of rhino plans, policies and strategies throughout the continent
  - AfRSG members assisted South Africa, Kenya, Namibia, Botswana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia with plan/strategy development. Advice also given to Cameroon, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda, Swaziland and Rwanda
- Base recommended strategies on lessons learned about what works
- Look to constantly improve and adaptively update best practices based on new knowledge and techniques as well as results of research and monitoring
- Requires coordination (AfRSG, SADC RMG, National rhino coordinators)

### **Capacity and support (need local support - fans and money/good players)**

- Need to build capacity where needed.
- Need support of local communities (both through education but especially through transfer of benefits/ empowerment driven by conservation).
- Successful rhino conservation is expensive - need to look for ways to ensure sustainability.
- Ensure that what external support is given is appropriate and well targeted (AfRSG project and population prioritisation). Should seek to build on what is already there.

### **AfRSG meetings continue to be held every two years**

- but lack of funding may mean no meeting in 2006.

- Country reports and continental statistics updated.
- In future will report to CITES secretariat.
- Technical presentations.

- Working groups - development of recommended conservation strategies.
- Learn about rhino programmes/conservation initiatives in host country.
- Opportunities for members to network.
- Updates on status of captive breeding and Asian rhinos.
- Detailed confidential proceedings produced.

### **AfRSG Technical assistance**

#### ***Major focus of work - some examples***

- SADC Regional Rhino Conservation Programme - AfRSG a consortium member - this has been very productive and complements work of other donors.
- Major Biological Management Workshop Rhino
- Horn Fingerprinting Project
- Assistance with population estimation
- AfRSG Rhino Monitoring Training of Trainers Course
- Improved carrying capacity estimation. Development of models and field methods
- Facilitating development of software and training courses (RHINO, Wildlife Investigator, WILDb, Horn Stockpile Management, Transponder management, Scene of the crime training, Training in status reporting, Training in population estimation and monitoring
- Expert witnesses in court cases
- Reviewing and priority rating proposals for donors
- Technical assistance missions

#### ***Current AfRSG funding problems***

- At the time of the EAZA Rhino Campaign 2005/06 launch the AfRSG had effectively not secured any new funds in since January 05. Fortunately since then the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) has committed some funds to partially cover requirements of the AfRSG secretariat. However, additional funding is still required.
- No funding yet secured for the 2006 AfRSG meeting and additional funding required to partial cover scientific officer costs.
- AfRSG partial support project on EAZA campaign substitute's bench.
- Hopefully enough funds will be raised by EAZA to also help the AfRSG and indeed some other great projects on subs bench!

### **Regional coordination**

A brief outline was given of regional rhino conservation bodies operating within the SADC (Southern African Development Community) region; namely the SADC Regional Programme for Rhino Conservation, the SADC Rhino Management Group (South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe), the SADC Rhino Recovery Group (Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, Angola and Mozambique) and the SADC Rhino and Elephant Security Group (South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Botswana and Zambia). Given the advantages of regional coordination in the SADC region it is hoped that a similar coordinating body is created to facilitate cooperation and coordination in East Africa.

### **National and organisational coordination**

The major range states have national rhino conservation strategies, plans and policies. Some range states also have national rhino coordinators. Every attempt is made to ensure continuity so that the same representatives (usually the rhino coordinators) attend the various regional and continental coordination meetings.

Some conservation agencies within countries also have their own rhino conservation strategies, plans and policies.

### **The EAZA Rhino Campaign**

The involvement of Save The Rhino International in the EAZA campaign is very positive given their track record in supporting field rhino conservation projects over the years. They also managed to get a large selection of project proposals in from the field.

Project prioritisation and review - The AfRSG & AsRSG (on request) assisted the EAZA Rhino Campaign Core Group by commenting and reviewing project proposals that had been submitted to the campaign. The main problem was that there were too many good projects and it was not possible to fund all good projects. The final decisions on project selection were made by the EAZA Campaign Core Group with input from member institutions.

As outlined above there are tried and tested approaches that can contribute to successfully increasing rhino numbers. In particular by building on existing work one can get “bang for buck”. In this way EAZA Rhino Campaign projects can provide value for money.

The EAZA Rhino Campaign is a credible campaign that can really contribute to increasing rhino numbers as well as indirectly benefiting a whole host of other species.

EAZA campaigns also provide an opportunity for *ex situ* organizations to make a significant contribution to *in situ* conservation. Hopefully some links will be created which will be maintained long after the campaign has finished.

Rhinos are flagship species that require large areas of suitable habitat to be successfully protected and managed. Invariably whenever rhinos are successfully conserved biodiversity conservation as a whole benefits. Thus even if your institution does not have rhinos you are encouraged to make a contribution.

The AfRSG therefore strongly endorses the EAZA Rhino Campaign and encourages delegates to sign up and make this “mother of all campaigns”