

African Rhino Specialist Group

Richard Emslie

The mission of the AfRSG is to promote the long-term conservation of Africa's rhinos and, where necessary, the recovery of their populations to viable levels. The AfRSG is charged with (a) providing and improving technical information and advice to both government and non-government conservation agencies, and (b) promoting and catalyzing conservation activities to be carried out by these agencies. AfRSG members come from 15 countries, and all but four members are based in Africa. The Group comprises official representatives of the major African rhino range states and rhino specialists in the scientific, veterinary, field conservation management, and trade study fields.

Status of African Rhinos

The status and trends of rhino populations in Africa were reviewed at the 1994 and 1996 AfRSG meetings. Numbers of southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) in the wild increased from 6,780 in 1993-1994 to 7,530 in 1995, with five countries recording increases and none declines. Provisional results of a 1996 survey indicate that numbers of southern white rhinos on private land in South Africa continue to increase, bringing the African total to just over 7,700.

The northern white rhino (*C.s. cottoni*) population now stands at 29 after two rhinos were poached in the first quarter of 1996.

Since 1992, numbers of black rhinos have remained stable at around 2,410, although this is largely due to a combined 23% increase in numbers of South African and Namibian black rhinos, which has offset declines in a number of other range states. The status of the last remaining *Diceros bicornis longipes* in Cameroon continues to be critical, and this ecotype may become extinct in the near future.

Performance of African rhinos in captivity remains poor, although it has improved in

some cases. By 1995, there were 664 white and 223 black rhinos in captivity worldwide.

Northern White Rhino

A number of meetings and a workshop were held on the conservation of the last wild population of northern white rhinos in Garamba National Park. The AfRSG then organized a workshop at White Oak, Florida, to explore and debate options for the future conservation of the remaining northern white rhinos in both the wild and captivity. Attempts to reach agreement on the need for a second free-ranging population using the nine remaining zoo animals and a couple of additional males from Garamba were unfortunately unsuccessful. The workshop identified the need for a technical assistance mission to Garamba. The joint AfRSG/WWF technical assistance team was all AfRSG members. The team examined current approaches and made recommendations on how to improve law enforcement and its monitoring, and rhino research and monitoring. The team's report gives prioritized recommendations and is being used by WWF staff to assist the development of a new project document for Garamba.

Tour of Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park

In a study tour after the February 1996 AfRSG meeting, AfRSG members visited the Natal Parks Board's Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park, which currently holds the world's second largest populations of both black and white rhinos making up 24% of Africa's rhinos. Members were exposed to aspects as diverse as law enforcement techniques and equipment; deployment of specialist anti-poaching units; operation and value of intelligence networks; rhino carrying capacity estimation; vegetation ecology as it affects rhinos; rhino capture techniques; equipment and veterinary issues; white and black rhino monitoring and population estimation.

6243

Species 26-27, June-Dec 1996

rhino metapopulation management; ecotourism; and community development and awareness programs.

AfRSG and CITES

At the request of the CITES Standing Committee, the group drafted the text of a resolution on the conservation of rhinoceroses in Africa and Asia at its 1994 meeting. This resolution was then introduced at the CITES COP9 by AfRSG representatives on the IUCN team and was passed with minor modifications. On behalf of the CITES Standing Committee, the AfRSG is currently developing indicators of success as required by resolution Conf 9.14.

Employment of Scientific Officer

In October 1994 Richard Emslie was employed as the first full-time Scientific Officer for the AfRSG. This has both assisted the Chairman, and increased the productivity of the AfRSG enormously. Not only can a greater variety of tasks now be tackled, but the drafting of detailed evaluations and strategies has become possible. The Scientific Officer also became a member of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group, which has increased liaison between the two groups.

AfRSG Publications

The AfRSG released its first key issue report, *White Rhinos in Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park, South Africa: Have 800 Been Lost?*. The Scientific Officer was subsequently asked to give a presentation on the problems and merits of different population estimation techniques to a Natal Parks Board monitoring workshop.

A comprehensive plan outlining the conservation status, goals, and strategies for Africa's black and white rhinos has been drafted, and should be published in late 1996.

Prioritization of Populations and Proposed Projects

More international donor funding needs to be mobilized to support rhino conservation, and there is a need to channel much of this money

into critically important projects with a reasonable chance of success. The AfRSG has facilitated the second goal by prioritizing and listing important populations, and by identifying and promoting the conservation strategies most likely to succeed. The AfRSG revised the criteria for identifying key and important populations and its system of rating rhino conservation project proposals. The AfRSG has provided critical comment on a number of project proposals, including those regularly submitted by funding agencies.

Technical Assistance

Apart from the Garamba mission, the Scientific Officer visited Aberdares National Park at the request of Kenya Wildlife Services to advise on population estimation techniques as well as to give a brief overview of "RHINO" population estimation software. In 1995, he also visited Zimbabwe at the request of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management and the Rhino Custodians Committee to assess and prepare a report on the suitability of the Zimbabwe Midlands Conservancy for black rhino compared to lowveld areas. The Scientific Officer and Dr. Mike Knight held a workshop with local management and research staff in Kruger National Park to discuss potential ways to improve black rhino monitoring.

Acknowledgments

The AfRSG acknowledges the generous and significant financial support of the WWF-U.K., Department of the Environment, European Union, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environmental Programme, and the Howard Gilman Foundation. The Natal Parks Board is thanked for being the host organization for the AfRSG office.

*Richard Emslie, Scientific Officer
African Rhino Specialist Group*