

Once again, poachers have rhinos firmly in their sights, with losses escalating alarmingly in recent months. Will we ever save this icon of conservation? Wildlife photojournalists **Ann** and **Steve Toon** report

Back in the firing line



Death threat - more than 1500 rhino horns were destined for illegal trade between January 2006 and September 2009, a period that saw poaching escalate to its highest levels in 15 years. The critically endangered black rhino, pictured above, accounted for nearly half of the victims. Poaching has continued throughout 2010

You're unlikely to forget your first encounter with an African rhino – unless, that is, you're accustomed to meeting a living dinosaur face to face. Much bigger in the flesh than you'd imagine, the fearsome horns and bellicose body language, all wrapped up in an oversized battle-jacket, are thrilling to behold. When you stop to consider you're exchanging glances with some 60 million years of evolution and the largest land mammal after the elephant, you begin to realise just how remarkable rhinos really are.

A long, chequered past and an uncertain future, given the very real threat of extinction, has made this intimidating yet endearing creature, a global ambassador and emblem for wildlife conservation.

Rhinos once roamed the plains and forests of Africa in their hundreds and thousands, but persecution, habitat loss and, most significantly, poaching for their horns, culminated in their wholesale slaughter during the 1970s and 80s. By 1983, Kenya's black rhino numbers were down to just 283. Since then conservationists have worked tirelessly to help rebuild numbers across former rhino range states.

POACHING LEVELS SOAR

A recent upsurge in rhino poaching is currently of grave concern to conservationists, wildlife directors and rhino conservation charities alike. According to a recent report by the African Rhino Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), some 470 rhinos were poached in Africa between January 2006 and September 2009 – the highest levels in at least 15 years.

What's worse, nearly half of these incidents involved the critically endangered black rhino – the rarer of the two African species.

In Kenya, which has some 577 black rhinos and around 303 white rhinos, a total of 17 rhinos were killed as a result of poaching in the same period. In 2010 alone, at least 14 Kenyan rhinos have been taken – a worrying increase revealing rhino poaching is once again on the increase after a decline in the middle of the decade. Only Botswana, Namibia and Swaziland reported no losses to poaching during this time.

South Africa, along with Zimbabwe, has borne the brunt of this alarming escalation in poaching. Since 2006, up to 95 per cent of illegal rhino deaths have occurred in these two countries. Across South Africa a staggering 180 rhinos were poached from January to the end of August in 2010. That's about six rhinos every week. Kruger National Park lost 66 rhinos in the first seven months of the year (one black and 65 white), a situation that has put authorities on high alert. Despite the fact that South Africa still has healthy breeding populations of white rhinos, with a total population of just under 19,500, together with around 1678 black rhinos, the almost daily problem of rhino poaching poses a real threat to their future.

HIGH-TECH HUNTERS

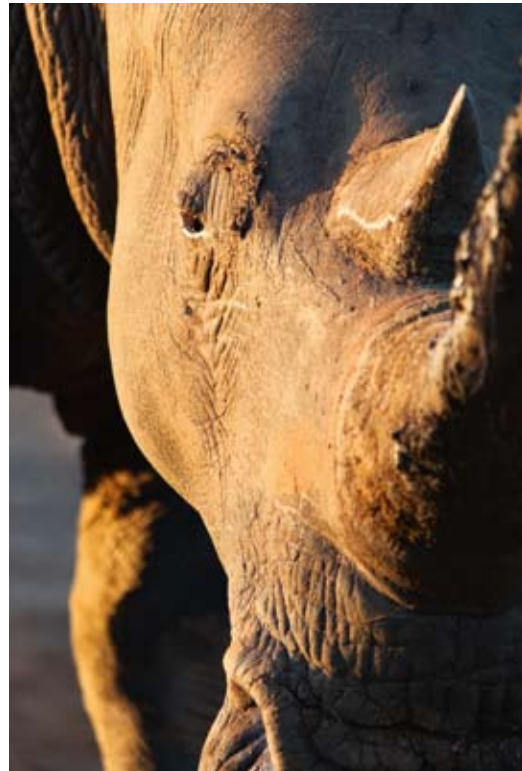
The big concern for conservationists following the spiralling numbers of rhino killings is the sheer scale and sophistication of the attacks. This is not the poaching we've come to know of old. In more than two thirds of the cases reported in the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group report the rhinos were shot. There was a marked drop in ►

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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS:
ANN & STEVE TOON



ABOVE: Poaching an adult female rhino usually means death for a dependent calf. RIGHT: Exchanging glances with some 60 million years of evolution. OPPOSITE: Piles of confiscated poachers' snares and skulls of poached rhinos on display in an African game reserve



the use of snares to obtain bush-meat and an increase in targeted poaching for horn using guns.

Quieter methods, such as tranquilliser darts, are being used to avoid detection, pointing to an unprecedented level of specialist knowledge and organisation. The crime syndicates involved are now hiring professional hunters, and even vets, to dart rhinos with deadly amounts of tranquillising drugs from helicopters, with ground crews moving in once the rhino is down, to hack off the horn.

"Perhaps it is no longer appropriate to refer to this spate of illegal killing of rhinos as poaching, given the levels of sophistication, violence, precision and the money behind it," says the chief executive of South Africa's National Parks, Dr David Mabunda.

"With the increasing use of helicopters, tranquillisers, AK47s and night-vision equipment, the nature of rhino poaching has shifted dramatically over the last couple of years. Rhinos are now being 'poached to order' by criminal gangs working for major players who are now dealing in illegal wildlife products as well as drugs and arms," says Cathy Dean, director of Save the Rhino International (SRI). "Conservation agencies are struggling to respond to such high-tech, well-financed operations. Park budgets and the fundraising efforts of NGOs can't keep up."

Benson Okita-Ouma, senior scientist for rhino conservation at the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), says: "The increasing poaching threat is an alarm bell that rhinos are in grave danger. Kenya lost 2.2% of its black rhinos and 1.8% of its white rhinos to poachers in 2009. Poaching levels over 1% are considered detrimental to population growth."

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TRADING RHINO HORN

More than 1521 rhino horns were destined for illegal trade between January 2006 and September 2009, compared to 664 horns between 2000 and 2005. Rhino horns can fetch more money than gold on a per weight basis, so it's not hard to see why big business has moved in big-time. It's not news that rhino horn has long been used in traditional medicine in Asia as an analgesic, but it is also now being promoted in places like Vietnam as a cure for 'non-traditional' medical conditions like life-threatening cancers.

"Asian countries, particularly China, have seen an economic boom over the last few years, with many Chinese businesses expanding into Africa. Alongside this, Asian-organized crime syndicates have also begun working in Africa and this has contributed immensely to the current poaching crisis," explains Dr Susie Ellis, director of the NGO International Rhino Foundation (IRF). "In some countries, government and consular officials are engaged in the black market sale of rhino horn, using sophisticated techniques and sometimes abusing diplomatic immunity, including diplomatic pouches, to ship horn from Africa to Asia."

Fred Njagi, Project Manager for the Maasailand Preservation Trust, which helps conserve an unfenced population of rare eastern black rhinos in Kenya's Chyulu Hills, points out the additional problems rhino conservationists face in a region where rhinos roam community lands unprotected by the KWS: "Prolonged dry seasons expose the rhinos to poaching when they move out in search of water. At the same time, the recently completed Emali-Loitokitok tarmac road provides an easy escape route

for poachers across the border to Tanzania, and also to the Nairobi-Mombasa highway."

FIGHT IS ON

If all this paints a particularly bleak picture for the future survival of African rhinos, Dr Joseph Okori, who heads up the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) African Rhino Programme sounds a welcome positive note. "At the turn of the nineteenth century, Africa had approximately 20 white rhino left, and now takes pride in around 20,000 across the continent – a result of a concerted conservation effort. We did it before and we can do it again," he says. "We need to maintain productivity of established populations and to create additional populations with good growth prospects."

Dr Susie Ellis of the IRF agrees: "We must, and can, save the rhinos, but it will not be easy. Saving these magnificent animals will require governments in Africa to really crack down on poachers and impose stiff sentences when poachers are caught. There is a need for co-ordinated efforts among private landholders, national parks, police, and NGOs for rapid responses to poaching incursions. The guards who protect the rhinos are usually under-armed compared to heavily armed poachers."

The KWS is undertaking a number of measures towards halting the threat to rhinos including a move to more punitive penalties in its draft wildlife bill, working more closely with the police and re-training and arming rhino monitoring scouts.

"The fight to save the rhino is more than a battle now, it's a war," says Dr Ellis. "We need to make rhinos economically

Success stories

Together, **South Africa, Namibia, Kenya and Zimbabwe** conserve more than 90 per cent of Africa's rhinos. Here are just some of their conservation success stories:

LEWA WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, (www.lewa.org) near Mount Kenya, has been involved in rhino protection since 1983. It started with just 13 black rhino and now has more than 60, around 10 per cent of Kenya's population, having been successful enough to move several to other reserves where rhinos had long been absent. The conservancy works closely with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and other Kenyan rhino sanctuaries. Lewa is also founder member and manager of the nearby OI Pejeta Conservancy which protects the largest single population of black rhinos in Kenya.

CHYULU HILLS GAME SCOUT AND RHINO PROGRAMME

Due to the effectiveness of this initiative, a small but significant population of critically endangered Eastern black rhinos, one of the last potentially viable unfenced populations in Kenya, continues to thrive in the lava forest of the Northern Chyulu range. The rhinos are protected by Mbirikani game scouts in collaboration with KWS rangers, the Friends of the Chyulus (a local community group) and the Maasailand Preservation Trust (www.maasailandpreservationtrust.com), an NGO established by Richard Bonham, safari guide and owner of OI Donyo Wuas luxury lodge.

OPERATION RHINO

Anyone visiting the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi games reserves in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province today can enjoy the successes of a landmark success story in the conservation of African rhinos. Rhinos here can be observed up close and in healthy numbers, but it wasn't always this way. When the park was first established more than 100 years ago the white rhino was staring extinction in the face with only around 20 animals left. Thanks to the world-renowned Operation Rhino, involving pioneering conservation work in the early 1960s, the situation was completely turned around. Increased protection, improved game capture and translocation techniques allowed rhino numbers to grow once again and rhinos were successfully re-introduced to their former African rangelands and new habitats for the first time.

THE BLACK RHINO RANGE EXPANSION SCHEME AND BLACK RHINO CUSTODIANSHIP SCHEME

These two schemes, developed in South Africa and Namibia respectively, take black rhino conservation to the next level. In effect this is a novel form of rhino 'babysitting' where state-owned rhinos are given over to the care of private landholders. With healthy, protected populations of the species achieved in state reserves and national parks, these schemes encourage the wider distribution of black rhinos on private and community-owned lands creating new rhino habitat and populations. In the case of the South African scheme, again pioneered in KwaZulu-Natal in a joint venture between WWF and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the state wildlife service, there are clear financial incentives for landowners as they are allowed 50% ownership of rhino calves born under the scheme.



Stuck in the mud - where do rhinos go from here? The future of these magnificent creatures still hangs in the balance

valuable to local communities, so that a live rhino is worth far more than a dead one, and ensure communities benefit financially by protecting the rhinos in their areas. Rhinos must be seen as part of the rich biological heritage that belongs to all Africans."

But Cathy Dean of SRI is concerned that while the major game parks and reserves may be able to protect their rhinos against this onslaught, smaller sanctuaries and community-owned reserves could well lack the resources to do so. She fears land now dedicated to wildlife conservation could end up reverting to livestock production and farming. "This would significantly reduce land available for rhino population management and growth, and anticipated annual population increases would suffer," she says.

At the end of the day it comes down to resources. The situation is now critical. Without adequate financing more radical and controversial solutions, already being talked about in some quarters, could end up coming into play. "The funding needed to secure the most important rhino populations is still not there," says Cathy Dean. "In the absence of sufficient funds, other, more extreme options are being discussed, such as poisoning rhino horns and leaking them into the illegal trade so that any end-user of traditional Chinese medicine might become seriously ill or even die, or that we explore establishing a legal trade in rhino horn, like the de Beers' model for diamonds."

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Dr Susie Ellis hopes it might finally prove possible to target the end-users of rhino horn in Asia. She is encouraged by the fact that the traditional Chinese medicine community has already condemned the use of rhino horn and she now has hopes for the younger generation. "They see the world differently to their their parents, so we need to target them and instil in them a deep appreciation for these animals and

If poaching isn't stopped, then the rhino conservation wins of the last decade will be in jeopardy and this will greatly affect biodiversity as well as the tourism industry

Factfile

Five things you should know about rhinos

01 According to the latest official figures from 2008 there are around 17,500 white rhinos and 4,240 black rhinos in Africa.

02 The white rhino is currently listed as 'near threatened' on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, while the rarer black rhino is listed as 'critically endangered'.

03 The white rhino is more sociable and generally more placid than the black rhino. Its broad, wide-lipped mouth is perfectly designed for grazing grasslands and savannah.

04 White rhinos are bigger than black rhinos - a male white rhino typically weighs in at about 2,250kg, while a male black rhino rarely reaches more than 1,300kg.


05 The black rhino is generally shyer and more secretive than the white rhino and can also be much more aggressive. Its mouth is shaped like a turtle's beak for browsing on trees and shrubs.

The wide-lipped or white rhino



the natural world."

"If poaching isn't stopped, then all of the rhino conservation wins of the last decade will be in jeopardy. Not only will this greatly affect biodiversity, but it will also have an impact on the tourism industry and the communities that benefit from it," concludes Dr Joseph Okori of the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Whatever happens next, Dr David Mabunda, head of South Africa's National Parks, is out there on the frontline ready for the long fight ahead. "We have worked hard to bring this species back from the brink of extinction and we will continue to defend it," he says, "until we are the last man standing." 

**i Do your bit to help save Africa's rhinos
Contact the following organisations:**

Save the Rhino International (www.savetherhino.org)
World Wide Fund for Nature (www.panda.org)
International Rhino Foundation (www.rhinos-irf.org)