

THE PLIGHT OF THE RHINO

By PETER JACKSON

IN the mid 17th century one William Somner reported that the bones of a "sea monster" had been found at Chartham, Kent. They were later discovered to be the remains of a prehistoric rhinoceros which had roamed the forested hills and swamps of Britain. Strange bones also came to light in other parts of the northern hemisphere and gave rise to legends of dragons. Remains found in Baluchistan, Turkestan and the Gobi Desert indicated that an ancestor of the rhinoceros may have been the biggest land mammal ever to have lived. *Baluchitheres* must have been about 30ft long and nearly 20ft high, with a head over 5ft long.

At one stage over 170 species of rhinoceros-type creatures had been described. Today there are five. Tomorrow . . . ? Most of the early forms of rhinoceros passed into natural extinction, but the present-day rhinos may not be permitted to do so. Only a handful of small protected areas with well-equipped and armed guards stand between them and the end of the line.

The distinctive horn is the cause of the trouble. There is a widespread belief, especially among Chinese, that the horn is an aphrodisiac. Scientists declare that there are no grounds for the belief, but myths live long. The blame cannot be put solely on the Chinese. In 1976 the Swiss Customs seized about 50 rhino horns being imported by a Geneva "health club".

The "horn" is in reality agglutinated hair held in place by the skin. From early times it has fascinated man, and travellers' tales seem to have jumbled up the rhinoceros and the slender-horned Arabian oryx into the basis for the legend of the unicorn. Long spiral "unicorn horns" appeared in Europe, which were in fact the strange elongated tooth of the narwhal. Real rhinoceroses were brought to Europe in early times. Pompey paraded one in the Roman Games of 55 bc, and there are accounts of others killed in the arenas.

The Portuguese shipped an Indian rhino to Lisbon in 1513, and it became the basis for Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut. Dürer portrayed extra horns on the animal's neck, and this has been attributed to artistic licence. But rhinos have been known to have horns elsewhere than on the nose, even on the flank.

By the beginning of this century the rhinos had been greatly reduced in numbers,



1—TRANSPORTING AFRICAN BLACK RHINOCEROS TO A RESERVE IN RHODESIA. "A remarkable life-form is at stake"



2—INDIAN RHINOCEROS IN KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK. "The guards of Kaziranga have fought a constant battle with poachers"

but were still holding out in remote or virtually impenetrable areas of Africa and Asia. The human population explosion and the technological advances of our times have changed all that. Now the rhinos have their backs to the wall. Their ultimate fate is in our hands.

Kaziranga National Park in north-eastern India is representative of both the success and the problems of rhinoceros conservation. Within its 107 square miles on the south bank of the Brahmaputra live about two-thirds of the surviving 1,000-1,100 Great Indian one-horned rhinoceros. A visitor can safely reckon on seeing 10 to 20 of them in a couple of hours.

The sanctuary was established in 1908 when the species, which once ranged right across northern India, had been brought to a very low level by over-hunting and loss of habitat, through the spread of agriculture and through climatic changes. At that time only about 20 or so rhinos lived in Kaziranga, but the species was not in danger since it still had relatively secure habitat in the malarial swamps of the Nepal Terai.

The guards of Kaziranga have fought a constant battle with poachers, aided in recent years by a radio network, vehicles and other equipment financed by the World Wildlife Fund. Their success was obvious and

the last census, which counted 658 rhinos in the park, and there were signs of over-population of the available habitat. But the poaching threat is by no means ended. Any relaxation means that the rhinos will be attacked again by greedy men. The Jaldapara reserve in northern Bengal lost half its 60 rhinos in a few months in 1972, when protection was lax.

Not only poachers threaten the rhinos. Round Kaziranga there is cultivation, and domestic buffaloes sometimes graze with the rhinos. There is the danger of the introduction of disease, which could decimate the rhino population, as well as that of the rare wild buffalo and swamp deer, which also live there.

Then there are the annual floods which inundate Kaziranga. High ground on which animals can take refuge is limited. Rhinos, especially young ones, may be washed away. Some cross the main Assam trunk highway to the Mikir hills. Fortunately the Indian authorities have recently been able to add part of the hill



4—SUMATRAN WOOLLY RHINO: SMALLEST OF THE RHINOCEROS FAMILY.
“Its plight is almost as acute as that of the Javan”

3—THE WORLD'S RAREST RHINO, THE JAVAN, IN THE UJUNG KULON RESERVE. “In 1976 Professor Schenkel counted about 50 Javan rhinos”

area to the Park. The other main stronghold of the Great Indian rhino is the Royal Chitawan National Park at the foot of the Himalayas in Nepal. There are some 300 there, well guarded by anti-poaching teams of ex-Gurkha soldiers operating under military control. But the poachers are still awaiting their chance.

The ease with which the Indian rhinoceros can be seen is in deep contrast to the difficulty of spotting a Javan or Sumatran rhinoceros. They once ranged as far west as India, but are now hovering on the brink of extinction in dense jungles in south-east Asia. A Swiss scientist studying the Sumatran rhinoceros with support from the World Wildlife Fund saw only one animal in three years. His knowledge of the rhinos came almost entirely from tracks, dung, traces of feeding and other signs.

Let us look first at the world's rarest rhinoceros—the Javan. It is smaller than the Indian, but it too has only one horn and its skin also has folds, which make it look as though it were armour-plated. The ranges of the two species overlapped in India, but the Javan was shot out by the beginning of the



5—WHITE RHINO IN THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA. “The present position of the white rhino is a success story for conservation policies”

century. Intensively hunted for its horn and for its blood, which was considered of medicinal value, the Javan rhino rapidly disappeared, and although a few isolated populations may also have existed, it was extinct everywhere except in Ujung Kulon in south-western Java by the Second World War.

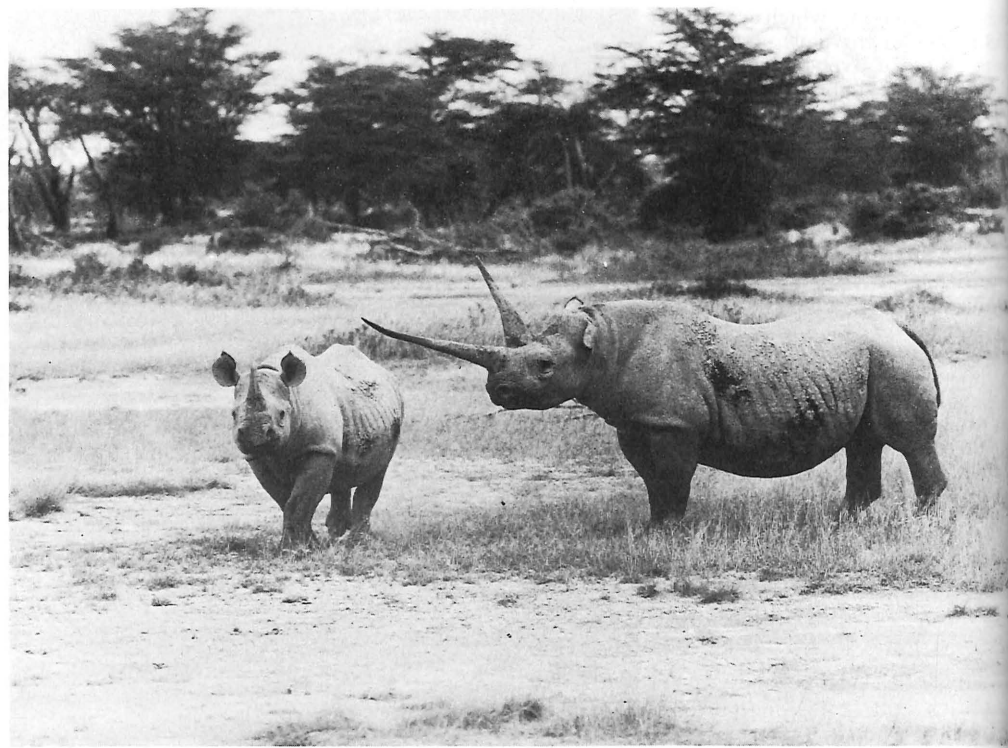
The Netherlands Indies Government had made Ujung Kulon a reserve in 1921, and the rhinos survived the war and a period of lax protection after independence. But their numbers declined, and when Professor Dr Rudolf Schenkel of Basle University was commissioned to undertake a scientific conservation programme by the World Wildlife Fund in 1967, he found traces of only about 24 rhinos. With his wife, Dr Lotte Schenkel-Hulliger, and Indonesian colleagues, Professor Schenkel re-organised and strengthened the guard system, and year after year returned to Ujung Kulon to continue studies of the rhinos and to improve habitat management.

By 1976 Professor Schenkel was able to count about 50 Javan rhinos, possibly as many as 54. They are now seen occasionally, and some have moved to an adjoining area which rhinos have not used for many years. But, just as with the Indian rhino, eternal vigilance and effort are necessary to ensure the Javan rhino's future. Ujung Kulon is their only known sanctuary, and no zoo has a Javan rhino.

The plight of the Sumatran rhinoceros is almost as acute. This is the smallest of the rhinoceros family, and is sometimes called the woolly rhinoceros because of its body hair. It has two horns, and fossil remains show that it once lived in north-west India. Around 1900 it was still found in eastern India and through Burma, Thailand, Indo-China and Malaysia to Indonesia. Like the Javan rhino it has always been avidly hunted for its horns, and now the world population is reckoned in the low hundreds. The last zoo specimen died in Copenhagen in 1972.

The largest group is in Sumatra, estimated at between 45 and 85, of which most are in the extensive Leuser reserve west of Medan. Here, despite every effort at protection, poaching still occurs. The few rhinos outside Leuser are difficult to protect, and Markus Borner, the leading expert, believes that Leuser offers the only long-term sanctuary. There are some small scattered groups of Sumatran rhinos in Burma, Thailand, Western Malaysia and Sabah, but, even though their endangered status is widely known, unnecessary threats continue. Ten to 20 rhinos at Endau-Rompin, on the borders of Johore and Pahang states in Malaysia, are considered the only potential survivors outside Sumatra. Although the Federal Government has designated the area as a future National Park, and it already has reserve status, logging has been permitted by the states' governments and there are grave fears about the effects of the disturbance and forest destruction on the rhinos.

While the Asian rhinoceroses teeter on the brink of extinction, the picture for the two African species is slightly better. In fact the southern race of the white, or square-lipped rhinoceros provides one of the great conservation success stories. When Europeans landed in southern Africa there were hundreds of thousands of these placid grazers, the biggest land animal after the elephant. Easy to approach and kill, they were hunted for meat, for skin to be made into whips, and, inevitably, for their horns, especially as the Asian rhinos declined. By the 1930s the southern white rhino was found only in the Umfolozi and Hluhluwe reserves in Natal, and even there only a few survived. Sound management by the Natal authorities allowed the population to build up again so that by 1972 Umfolozi Hluhluwe held over 2,000—more than the area could support, while over 800 had been transferred to parks and reserves and zoos in Southern Africa and other parts of the world. The white rhino is no longer listed as in danger, although in the wild it is still threatened



6—BLACK RHINO, MOST NUMEROUS OF THE RHINO FAMILY. "The heavy toll of poaching in Kenya has seriously affected the black rhino"

anywhere when law and order break down.

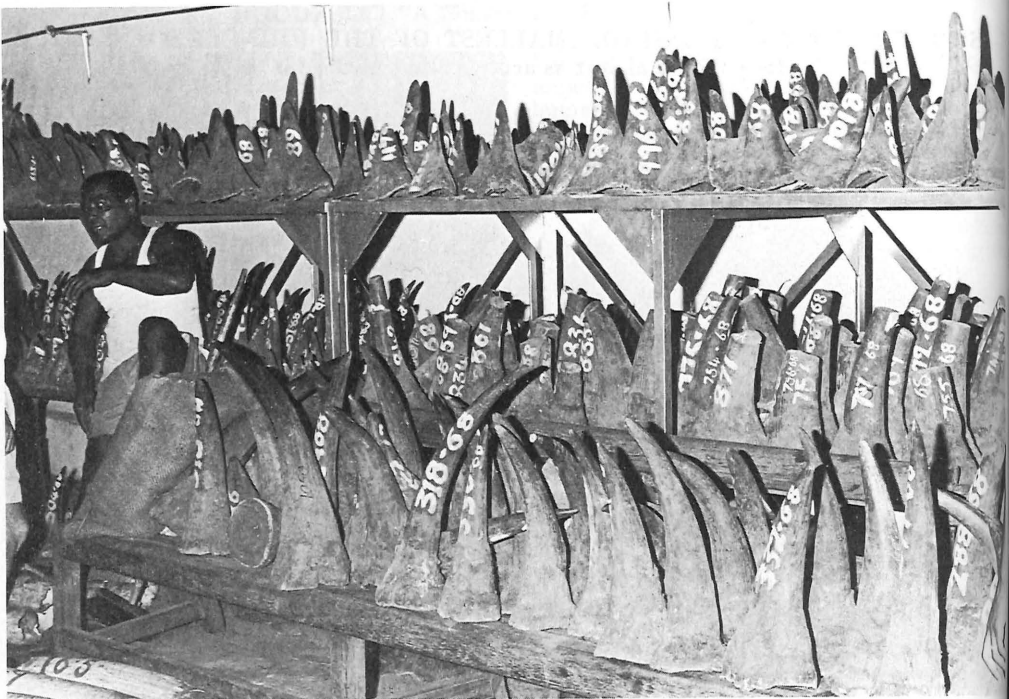
The fate of the northern white rhino is much more uncertain. It used to be found from the southern Sudan westwards to south-eastern Chad, the eastern Central African Empire and adjoining areas of Zaïre and Uganda. Much of this area has suffered from political instability and insurgency, conditions which have always led to destruction of wildlife. The overall number of survivors is unknown, but in 1976 an FAO survey estimated some 400 in the Garamba National Park in Zaïre, compared with 1,000 in 1960.

The African savannahs from the south to Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad and Nigeria were the home of the black rhino. It has disappeared from many of its former haunts because of intensive hunting, but it is still numbered in thousands and is the most numerous of the surviving rhino species. Population figures run as high as 12,000 in Zambia's Luangwa valley, and 3,000 in the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, which still numbered 3,500 a few years ago. Nevertheless the heavy toll of poaching in Kenya in recent years has seriously

affected the black rhino. In Amboseli, where rhinos were once a showpiece, poachers have almost wiped them out. All sport hunting is now banned in Kenya, but until the ban was imposed in mid-1977 rhinos could still be shot for a fee. Like the white rhino, the black has sometimes been translocated for safety. In Rhodesia over 70 were successfully tranquillised and moved by truck over 600 miles to the Gonare Zhou reserve.

While far from being under the pressure threatening the Asian rhinos, the African species also suffer from decreasing habitat and growing disturbance. But for all of them the myth of the beneficial qualities of horn is the worst danger. No amount of proof of its ineffectiveness convinces those worried about declining sexual powers. A remarkable life-form is at stake, one that is no threat to man. Is it not ironic that it could vanish from the face of the earth because of a spurious belief that it can help humans to procreate?

Illustrations: 1, *World Wildlife Fund*; 2, the author; 3 *A Hoogerwerf*; 4 and 5, *F. Vollmar*; 6, *Peter Feer*; 7, *Mark Boulton*.



7—WHITE RHINO HORNS TAKEN FROM ILLEGAL TRADERS IN MOMBASA