DON'T ARGUE – SA

All Zimbabwe's beleaguered black rhinos need now (and we reveal here, exclusively, just how shockingly beleaguered that happens to be) is to become the centre of an economic experiment. No, it's not a good idea to legalise trade in rhino horn, and time's too short for that kind of fooling around, anyway. *Ian Redmond* and *Esmond Bradley Martin* explain.

Rhino conservationists are used to bad news. For decades, numbers of black rhinos have been spiralling downwards, but recent revelations from Zimbabwe have surprised even the pessimists and triggered the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) into immediate action.

In 1991, the official population estimate for black rhinos in all of Africa was 3,500 (65,000 in 1971), with nearly 2,000 in Zimbabwe. But now Zimbabwean scientists have revised that to 500-1,000 (see BBC WILDLIFE, October 1992). These alarmingly low numbers arise from reports from dehorning teams, now in the field. A firm figure is expected at the end of November, when the dehorning operation – not seen as a long-term solution so much as a last-ditch attempt to thwart the poachers – is expected to be mostly completed for this year. If the worst is confirmed, it could mean that the continental total is little more than 2,000.

This news has led to an increase in calls for a fundamental change in rhino conservation. Past efforts have failed, the critics claim: banning the trade in rhino horn has not stopped the poaching. Rhino horn is still fetching a high price, and so why not reopen the legal trade, sell off the stockpiles of horn in Africa's wildlife departments and use the money to finance community wildlife schemes and more efficient anti-poaching units?

It all sounds so simple that it's almost believable. But is it? Or is it only simplistic? Let's take a closer look at some of the claims made by the increasingly vocal pro-traders.

'International trade bans don't work for rhino horn; they only create high black-market prices.'

First, this is not true for Japan, the Philippines, Brunei and peninsular Malaysia. The same argument was given by some economists opposed to the ban on ivory at the 1989 meeting of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). But a ban was agreed, and the world ivory trade has since collapsed. Why? Partly because the ban was supported by campaigns to change attitudes among buyers of ivory products. The failure of the rhino-horn ban in certain countries might be blamed on the absence of culture-specific public-relations campaigns to change the habits of the users of rhino-horn products, and this must be rectified. Evidence indicates that the international trade is now centred on Taiwan (where powdered rhino horn, which fetches an importer $2,000 a kilogram, is used as a medicine for reducing fevers, *not* as an aphrodisiac) and Yemen (where makers of rhino-horn dagger handles will pay just over $1,000 a kilogram). In both of those countries rhino horn imports are illegal on paper; all that is needed is for the law to be enforced.

'Attempts to curb traditional use of rhino horn have failed.'

True enough in the black spots, such as Yemen, Taiwan, China and South Korea, but we mustn't forget the domestic markets that *have* been closed: Japan, Hong Kong, peninsular Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Brunei and the Philippines. Japanese pharmacists, for example, were major users when Japan joined CITES in 1980, but thanks to government intervention, this trade has virtually ceased.

'All efforts to protect rhinos have failed.'

Not true. Of the three Asian species, the Sumatran rhino *is* declining, but the tiny Javan rhino population is stable, and Indian rhinos have seen their numbers creeping upwards in recent years. This is in spite of Asian rhino horn being worth 10 times as much as African and of a state of civil unrest in Assam, an Indian rhino stronghold. Assam lost only 28 animals in 1991, the lowest number for years. Even in Africa, white rhino numbers are rising, and

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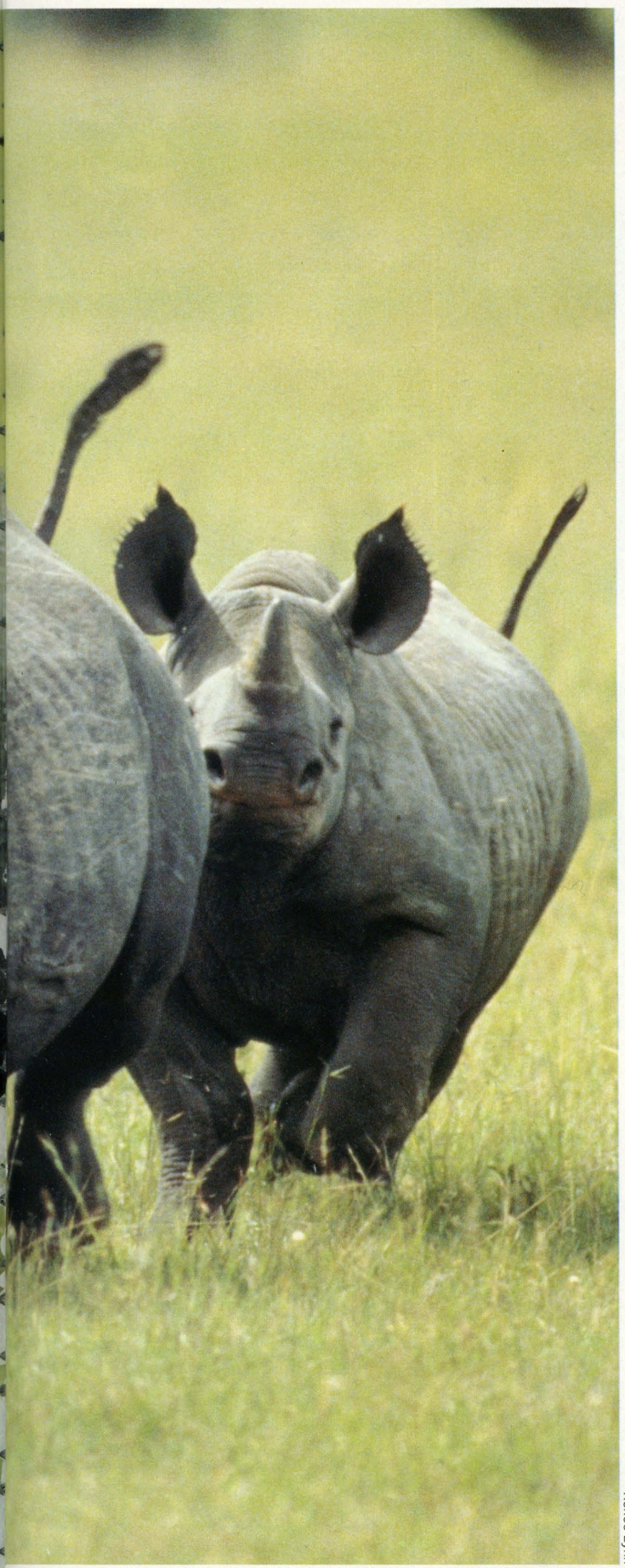

Renee Lynn

black rhinos in Kenya (now 410), Namibia (450) and South Africa (760) have been slowly recovering. The explanation for most of the successes is simple: sufficient manpower to enforce the laws, and strong government commitment.

'Zimbabwe's stock of rhino horn would fetch more than $5 million, which could be used for rhino protection.'

But that's at the black-market rate. If legalisation worked the way its proponents say it would, then Zimbabwe's present 2.675 tonnes would be worth a lot less. As for making a regular income through dehorning, the horn only grows about 6cm a year, and anyway, it costs $1,000 to take the horn off a live rhino. Also, in Zimbabwe, proceeds from sales would go to the central treasury, not the parks department. An alternative way of raising $5 million would be for the park entrance fee of $1-$2 to be raised for foreigners to at least $10, comparable to fees in Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and Zaire.

'Flooding the market with legal horn would lower the price and thereby reduce the incentive for poachers.'

Such is the level of poverty in Africa that prices would have to go *very* low to cut into the pittances poachers are paid by middlemen. If the price of rhino horn were to drop by 50 per cent tomorrow, Zambian poachers would still be crossing into Zimbabwe because, to them, it would still be worth it.

At the CITES meeting in Japan last March, when Zimbabwe and South Africa sought (unsuccessfully) to legalise the rhino-horn trade, their argument was based on the concept of 'sustainable utilisation' and their desire to apply it to every species. This was accompanied by the dark warning that if something new *wasn't* tried, by the time of the 1994 CITES meeting there might not be any rhinos left to protect.

It's tempting to wonder if the Zimbabwe delegates had some idea of the fall in numbers then. No nationwide rhino census has been carried out since 1989, but the well-organised parks department does keep computerised records, and they show that 238 rhino carcasses were counted in 1991 (plus 20-30 per cent for missed ones) and 96 in the first seven months of 1992. They also show that the number of poaching incursions from Zambia has increased sharply, from 57 in 1990 to 166 in 1991 to 130 in the first seven months of 1992.

Almost all rhino poaching in northern Zimbabwe is carried out by teams from Zambia, and the Zambian economy has been plummeting faster than ever recently, making it easier for middlemen in Lusaka to recruit hunters (many of them Angolan refugees) and harder for the government to pay for patrols, vehicles, boats and spies. Because of the drought, the economy is failing in Zimbabwe, too, and restructuring by the International Monetary Fund has meant that the parks department has had to lay off 264 game scouts – lowering the morale even further among the remainder, already war-weary from eight years of intense fighting against poachers.

The urgency of this situation has led the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to give Zimbabwe emergency funds to bolster anti-poaching activities. Success will depend on improving the intelligence-gathering network, hiring more trained and motivated men, offering rewards to boost morale and moving more rhinos into safe sanctuaries. Changes in legislation are also needed, so that revenue made by the parks department stays there, instead of going to the central government.

UNEP's executive director, Dr Mostafa Tolba, has appointed a special envoy for rhinos, to collect up-to-date information from 10 countries in Africa and Asia. He has also called for a meeting of all the countries that have rhinos – the so-called range states – to ask donors for money.

Pressure is mounting for resumption of legal trade, but it must be made clear to its proponents that the rhino's immediate problems simply couldn't be solved by legalisation: under CITES, trade couldn't even be restarted before 1995 at the earliest. The practicalities are such that sustainable utilisation of rhino horn could not legally take place for some time, and the urgent need is for action now. The advocates of legal trade must understand that their proposal is only distracting attention at this critical stage, when solutions are needed immediately.