
CONSERVATION LESSONS

from the past

by John Mackie

PART 6

**AT THE UNSCRUPULOUS HAND OF MAN: THE NORTHERN
WHITE RHINOCEROS (*CERATOTHERIUM SIMUM COTTONI*)**

Northern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) 'Sudan'.
Photo © Steve Tum

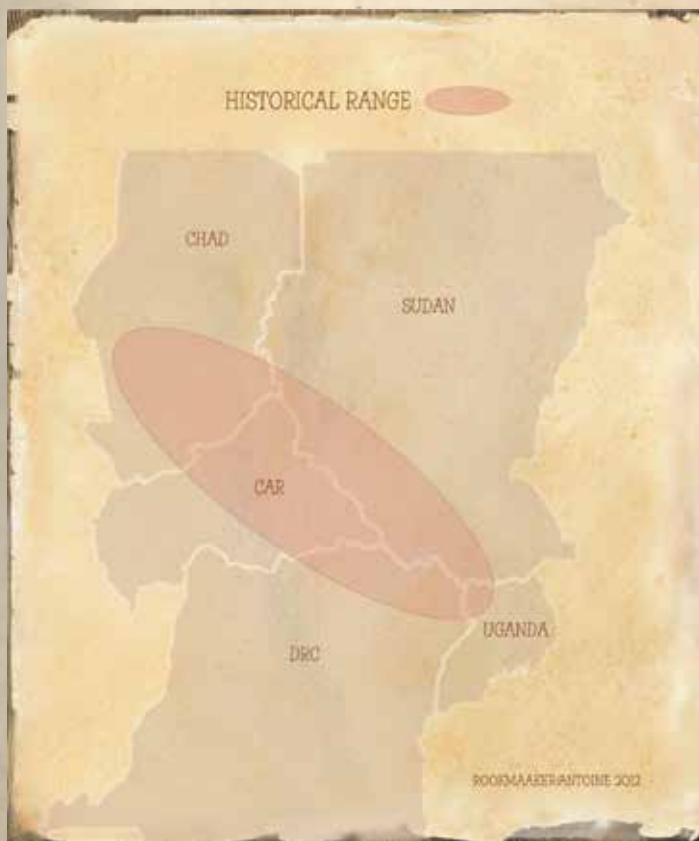


John Mackie

Having retired from corporate life last year, John is fully focused on the continuous development and improvement of Nondo Private Game Reserve, a 638ha safe haven for a full spectrum of smaller mammals, birds, predators and a thriving free-ranging tsessebe population situated in the western bushveld of the Limpopo Province.

The tragic demise of the northern white rhino (Ceratotherium simum cottoni) has been covered ad nauseam of late but what perhaps is not as widely known are the many valiant attempts over the years to try and save this iconic species from extinction.

This rhino historically ranged from north-western Uganda northwards along the west bank of the Albert Nile, through the infamous Lado Enclave and up to the Shambe district in Sudan. From there it had a patchy distribution northwest to the shores of Lake Chad and also occurred in the eastern parts of the Central African Republic and of course the north-eastern corner of the DRC, where it made one last stand in the only place it was ever formally protected, the Garamba National Park. >>



Around **1960** the total population was estimated to be **2 250** animals spread throughout the **DRC** (>1 000), **Sudan** (<1 000) and **Uganda** (>300), having for all intents and purposes been eliminated from both Chad and the CAR by the mid 1930s.



Northern white rhino.
Photo © INTERTOURIST

Under reasonable protection the Murchison Falls population peaked in 1974 in excess of 30 animals.

UGANDA

White rhino in Uganda started to come under severe poaching pressure in the **early 1960s** and numerous appeals made to local chiefs and their people to look after their rhino unfortunately were met with a lot of apathy and disinterest. As a result, it was decided to try and capture 20 animals and relocate them to the Murchison Falls National Park east of the Albert Nile. Conditions there were deemed generally similar although ‘out of range’, so to speak. The Lomunga Game Reserve area in the West Madi district up towards the Sudanese border was targeted as the few remaining rhinos there were regarded as doomed anyway.

In March 1961 big game catchers Ken Randall and Pat O’Connell succeeded in capturing 10 rhinos using lassos and ropes before the onset of the rains put an end to the operation. Four adult females, three half-grown males, a male calf and two female calves made the long and difficult journey by truck to Murchison Falls, where they were all released. Sadly, two adult females injured during the capture process died shortly thereafter and a young female calf whose mother was one of those that succumbed, had to be reared at Paraa, the park headquarters (1).

THE OPERATION COMMANDERS: Capt. Nick Carter (left) and John Savidge, with the Wildlife Society's aircraft during the 1964 operation.



As this founder population kicked off with only two adult cows and not a single mature bull, it unsurprisingly failed to breed and a second and final attempt was made by **Nick Carter** during **June 1964**, again in the Lomunga area. The known remaining eight rhinos were successfully captured, a large bull and five cows (one with a small calf and another with a half-grown one). Tragically a large, heavily pregnant cow did not survive the after-effects of tranquilisation and succumbed in the boma. A second pregnant cow also died and one of the calves that was shipped off to a newly established zoo in Entebbe contracted pneumonia and didn't survive either.

The remaining five animals (the bull and four cows) together with the female calf captured in 1961 and successfully reared at Paraa, were then released, bringing the Murchison Falls population up to a viable 12 animals (five bulls and seven cows) (2).



Under reasonable protection this population peaked some 10 years later in 1974 in excess of 30 animals but the calamitous reign of Idi Amin culminating in the 1979 liberation war saw the final demise of the species and a three-hour aerial search of the park towards the end of February 1980 did not reveal a single animal (3).



Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda.
Photo © Albert Backer



Northern white rhino, Dvůr Králové Zoo (72-hectare), Czech Republic.
Photo © Místvan



Josef Vágner (26 May 1928 – 6 May 2000).
Photo © Erby

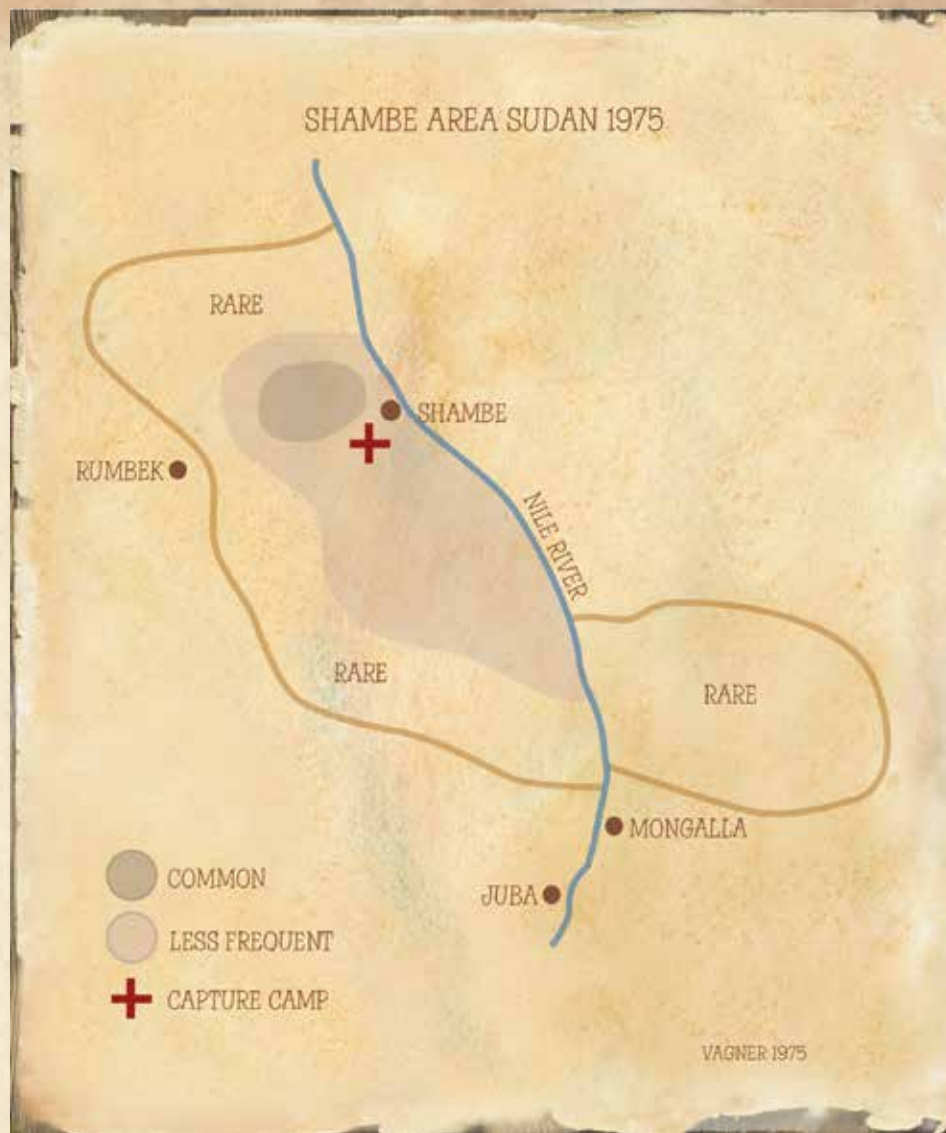
SUDAN

In the early **1970s** when **Josef Vágner** first put in a request to the Sudanese government to capture some white rhino on behalf of his zoo in Dvůr Králové, Czechoslovakia, not even he could have foreseen that the fate of this animal today rested entirely upon the success of that venture! (4).

He was granted permission to procure six animals (two males and four females) in the Upper Nile Province of today's South Sudan. A capture camp was built near an existing road 14km from the village of Shambe on the west bank of the Nile and in January 1975 10 animals, ranging in age from two to five years old, were successfully captured (four males and six females). A two-year-old male died at the beginning of March and one male and two females were sent to the small state zoo in Juba.



The journey of the six animals destined for Europe was a truly astonishing one! After three days by raft up the Nile to Juba followed a lengthy road trip to Mombasa in Kenya via Nimule in South Sudan and the Karamoja district in Uganda. A freighter then took the rhinos round Africa to Hamburg in West Germany, where they were reloaded onto barges and transported up the Elbe River to the zoo in Dvůr Králové.



Vágner also thoroughly surveyed the entire area from both the ground and the air over a period of two months and estimated the total rhino population at 770 animals (380 in the Shambe region alone, an area which he proposed as suitable for the establishment of a national park). Of particular interest was his estimate of a population of 30 on the right bank of the Nile north of the village of Mongalla.

According to Kes Hillman (5), flights over the Shambe region in 1980 still revealed substantial numbers (200 to 300 animals) and although heavy poaching was apparent, the idea of a national park was still being mooted.

Shockingly, however, during an aerial survey in April 1981 covering 15 200km² of the Shambe and surrounding area, only dead rhinos were seen (6).

By 1983 only a handful were believed to persist in the north-western parts of the Shambe region and the species probably disappeared shortly thereafter (7).



A somewhat unlikely, but nevertheless exciting report surfaced on 28 November 2009 when two Russian helicopter pilots reported seeing three rhino from the air (8). The writer cannot ascertain even the rough location of this 'sighting' and as there seems to be no evidence of any follow-up, it is doubtful whether it was given much credence at the time.



'Sudan', 22 May 2015.
Photo © Kenya/Stuart Price

DRC

The northern white rhino made a final stand in the wild in the Garamba National Park in north-eastern DRC. A healthy population in excess of 1 000 animals in 1960 was decimated during post-independence political disturbances and fell to as low as 100 in 1963 (9). Under protection and with both international and national support, the population recovered to around 500 in the **mid-1970s** before a continent-wide onslaught on Africa's rhinos began, reducing the population in Garamba to 15 in 1984. The herd crept back up to 30 in 2003 before finally being obliterated by northern Sudanese horsemen a couple of years later, sadly an all too common denominator throughout the carnage.

Arguments raged to and fro in the fight for the animals' survival. In-situ protection won against translocation until it was too late (in fairness, this rhino had a very poor track record as far as captive breeding was concerned).

A proposal in 2005 to rescue five animals and relocate them to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya was politicised and with it went the final opportunity of saving any remaining Garamba rhino (10).

| GARAMBA | | | | | | | |
|---------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1984 | 1988 | 1991 | 1995 | 2000 | 2003 | 2005 | 2006 |
| 15 | 22 | 30 | 31 | 30 | 30 | 4 | 2 |

In August 2005 the remaining four animals consisted of a solitary male and a group of one male and two females.

No animals have been seen since 2006, nor any sign of any since 2007.

A final valiant attempt was made in **2006** by the late **Lawrence Anthony** of *The Elephant Whisperer* fame, a man of great courage and vision, and a man of action (11). Garamba had effectively been abandoned and the newly formed African Parks had moved in under the auspices of the ICCN (Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature). Both organisations seemed strangely reluctant to embrace his plan to rescue whatever was left, leaving Anthony extremely frustrated and bemoaning the 'hubris and self-interest', which he believed to be the curse of so many conservation efforts the world over.

It was, in any event, too late – they were already gone.



Lawrence Anthony (17 September 1950 – 2 March 2012).



"Humankind will never be able to repay animals what we owe them."

– Josef Vágner

Photo © Steve Tum



Translocation of Northern white rhinos crossing the equator on route to Ol Pejeta Conservancy, central Kenya.

Photo © Michael Dalton-Smith/Digital Crossing Productions.

CAPTIVITY

The only, and extremely limited, breeding success in captivity was achieved at Dvůr Králové. Every conceivable effort was made, including an unsuccessful loan of some animals to the San Diego Wild Animal Park as well as the final transfer of the four remaining rhinos to Ol Pejeta in Kenya.

This final transfer included the iconic male ‘Sudan’, who was one of the original young males captured by Josef Vágner in 1975. What an incredible life journey!



Dr Morné de la Rey –

With only two females left on the planet, scientists in Italy have successfully created two northern white rhino embryos using in vitro fertilisation (12). The embryos will be frozen and transferred into a surrogate southern white rhino at a later date in the hope that a new northern calf will be born.

According to embryo specialist **Dr Morne de la Rey**, who was present when ‘Sudan’ was put down, this is backed up by the fact that genetic material from seven bulls and more than 20 cows has been safely banked over the last 30 years or so. This is more than sufficient to re-create a healthy population of these animals!

Photo © Meldt van der Spuy

One last chance for Homo sapiens to redeem themselves?

For more information, contact John Mackie:
johnbmackie@gmail.com



Scan the QR code or visit

<https://youtu.be/d8-jj-aPfe0> to watch the video: ‘The last of a kind’. Jonathan Vigliotti reports on ‘Sudan’, the last male northern white rhino, who spent his final days at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. Published by CBS Sunday Morning.

References

1. Savidge, J. 1961. *The Introduction of White Rhino into Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda.*
2. Savidge, J. 1964. *Catching and Carting White Rhino in Uganda.*
3. White Rhino Extinct in Uganda, Edroma E L, Oryx 16:4, June 1982.
4. Vágner, J.A. 1975. *Occurrence and Catching of White Rhinoceros (Ceratotherium simum cottoni) in the Province Upper Nile, South Sudan.*
5. Kes Hillman. Chairman, IUCN/SSC Africa Rhinoceros Group.
6. Kes Hillman. June 1981. *An Aerial Reconnaissance of the Shambe area, Southern Sudan, April 22nd to April 26th 1981.*
7. Kes Hillman and Fraser Smith. *Survey of the Status of the Northern White Rhino (Ceratotherium simum cottoni, Lydekker) in 1983.*
8. Wikipedia. Retrieved 14/10/19.
9. Curry-Lindahl. *War and the White Rhinos*, 1966.
10. Kes Hillman and Fraser Smith. *Wildlife and Warfare: A case study of pachyderms in Garamba National Park DRC. Pachyderm No 59, July 2017–June 2018.*
11. Anthony, L. 2012. *The Last Rhinos.*
12. www.savetherhino.org. Retrieved 14/10/19.