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SAVE THE RHINO

It will soon be too late to save the rhinoceros. The growing demand for rhino horn has resulted in an average of 2,580 of these



Above: rhino horn, ivory and weapons captured by the Luangwa Valley anti-poaching unit.
Right: black rhino

magnificent animals being killed every year — Kenya alone has lost over 90 per cent of its black rhinos. A steep rise in the value of horn is now making the situation even worse. *Steve Robinson*, a freelance writer and journalist living in Zambia, describes the desperate fight against big-time poaching.

The one predictable thing about the black rhinoceros is that in many parts of Africa it will probably, very soon, be extinct.

In just a few short years the illegal international trade in rhino horn has led to the devastation of almost all of the viable black rhino populations. Most of Africa's once great and widespread populations have already been reduced to a relatively few individuals - populations which, even with intensive protection, have little or no chance of survival. In short, in many areas the black rhino has already lost its fight against big-time poaching.

The Luangwa Valley

Serious efforts are now being made to save the rhino from total destruction. Perhaps the most viable population remaining in Africa inhabits Zambia's remote Luangwa Valley. Like others, this area has been hit hard by the organised poaching of both elephant and black rhino. In 1973 there were 100,000 elephants and perhaps as many as 8,000 rhinos. The elephant population is now around half the 1973 figure and the rhino number no more than 2,000.

Norman Carr, Zambia's veteran conservationist, makes the point that it is easier to appreciate the extent of damage being done if one considers such figures in terms of a daily toll. Poaching has increased greatly over the past few years and this means that as many as 20 elephants and one rhino are being slaughtered each day. Luangwa's rhino population still has a good chance of survival - but only if drastic action against poaching is taken now.

The anti-poaching units

Local conservationists have already taken up the challenge by forming a 'Save the Rhino' trust and they are now actively supported by the World Wildlife Fund and the Zambian Government. Two anti-poaching units (one in Luangwa and the other covering the Lower Zambesi and Luano Valleys) have been set up and fully equipped. Each unit consists of a team of armed Government Game Scouts and a highly experienced commander.

The anti-poaching teams are continually patrolling their areas, tracking down and arresting heavily armed poachers. They have been, in only a short time, very successful. But, sadly, their success figures prove only that the poaching has been much heavier than was originally thought.

Last year the Luangwa Valley anti-poaching unit made over 100 arrests (one poacher was killed) and captured numerous firearms (including some automatic rifles). 180 elephant tusks and 27 rhino horns were seized.

The poaching gangs

Phil Berry, the commander of the Luangwa team, explains that many of the poachers must by now have shot well over 100



In recent years, the increasing demand for rhino horn has resulted in the killing of about 2,580 rhinos every year, approximately seven rhinos a day

elephants each and are therefore highly proficient hunters. Over a period of two weeks, one of his patrols captured poaching gangs with 48 tusks and three rhino horns. A three day patrol found three poaching camps with evidence of 17 rhino horns having been 'processed' (after cutting off the horns the poachers heat them over a fire to remove the disc-shaped horn bases. These are worthless and are discarded). Another three day patrol found nine elephants and one rhino all freshly killed and yet another patrol recovered 11 elephant tusks and two rhino horns.

The poachers generally operate on foot, often leaving a long trail of destruction behind them - elephant and rhino carcasses littering the bush, each one intact except for its ivory or horn, testimony only to man's incredible greed.

Big business

Campaigns to prohibit or at least limit the international trade in worked ivory have had some success and it makes good sense to fight commercial poaching by destroying its market.

But the rhino horn market has a much

more deeply rooted social origin. It is sold for use in making traditional ceremonial dagger handles in the Yemen and as a magical fever-cure in the Far East. Apparently no amount of scientific evidence discrediting its claimed magical capabilities can change such primitive beliefs. As Norman Carr points out, this is perhaps understandable when one considers that most of us still think twice before walking under a ladder!

So the campaign to save the rhino has to be fought at the business end - not just by catching poachers in the act but by breaking

the organizations behind them. To this end, the Zambian Government has approved and supported the formation of an investigations team with special powers to carry out follow-up investigations. The team will have the time, expertise and authority to fully interrogate any offenders captured by the anti-poaching units with a view to breaking down the highly organized international poaching rings. A major problem in the past has been the relatively light sentences imposed on convicted poachers but it is hoped that stiffer sentences are on the way and, as an interim measure, the judiciary has been instructed to implement their existing powers to the full.

The fate of the black rhino

The campaign against the big-time poaching has been centred on the rhino simply because its situation is so critical. The Luangwa Valley still has the largest continuous elephant population left in Africa - despite the great decline in numbers over the past few years. If poaching is stopped the elephant still has an excellent chance of survival. But, unlike the elephant, the black rhino is of solitary habits and a relatively slow breeder. Despite its reputation for aggressiveness, the rhino is by no means difficult to hunt and regrettably, its horn is a most valuable black market commodity. Commercial poaching has therefore made a horrific impression on the few remaining rhino populations.

There is no doubt that the black rhinoceros is something of a remnant of the distant past - a rather dull-witted relic of a family that began life almost 50 million years ago. The family seems to have been dwindling ever since - only five species are left of which the black rhino is the only one that still exists in any number.

In recent times human settlement has been largely responsible for the rhino's decline. But now we are faced with the total and almost immediate decimation of this extraordinary animal - even within those very areas we have established as sanctuaries.

The present Zambian campaign is to last three years and has a budget of some three million US dollars. Here, a determined effort is being made to see that the rhino will remain a little longer. A difficult job for a developing country - but, nevertheless, we have a debt to repay and this is a task which demands the attention and support of us all.

The Fauna and Flora Preservation Society, together with the People's Trust for Endangered Species, have recently funded Nigel Leader-Williams, a Cambridge field biologist, with extensive experience with large mammals, to undertake ecological studies in Zambia. Although most of the funds have now been raised, £2,000 is still needed for the purchase of important equipment such as radio-collars. Please send your donations, however small, to the ffPS, c/o The Zoological Society of London, Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY.

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