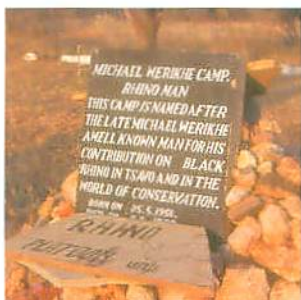


# Trouble in Tsavo East

It's been a difficult few months for Richard Kech and his team in Tsavo East National Park, Kenya.

Cathy Dean



In early June, poachers killed a Kenya Wildlife Service corporal and one ranger in two separate firefights at Tabakunji on the Yatta Plateau. The slain officers were part of routine Park surveillance team that encountered a gang of poachers, suspected to be in search of elephants and from a neighbouring war-torn country. The first clash occurred at about 5.00pm when one ranger and a poacher were killed. The team called for reinforcements and tracked the poachers throughout the night, making contact with them again at 8 o'clock the following morning. It was during this fight that the corporal and another poacher were killed. A helicopter and two fixed-wing aircraft were dispatched to Tsavo East in a massive operation assisted by the Kenya police to track down the poachers, but sadly this was unsuccessful. One G3 and an M16 rifle with 203 rounds of ammunition were recovered, and the rangers' remains were flown home where their colleagues accorded them a military send off.

Michael Wamathi, then the Director of the KWS, said: "So long as there is a market for ivory, the lives of elephants and the rangers who protect these magnificent creatures will always be at risk," and paid tribute to the rangers' commitment and bravery. Naturally, Save the Rhino sent its condolences to Martin Mulama, Rhino Programme Co-ordinator, who had only recently returned to Kenya after speaking at the UK Rhino Group's Mayday and opening Chester Zoo's new rhino enclosure, the Tsavo East Experience.

More bad news then came at the beginning of August, when Martin reported that one

male black rhino had been killed by poachers in Tsavo East. When we last heard, KWS rangers were working to track and catch up with the poaching gang to recover the horn.

Added to the troubles on the ground are financial and political problems facing the KWS. Michael Wamathi, formerly of IFAW who was appointed Director in January 2003, has been suspended from his post following allegations of financial mismanagement. It seems unlikely that he will return even if, as expected, his name is cleared. Exacerbating the KWS's problems has been the drop in income from National Park entrance revenues, following Foreign Office advice not to travel to Kenya and the suspension of BA flights. These have now

been restored, but significant long-term damage has been done to the KWS's fighting fund.

It's really important that NGOs and charities like Save the Rhino and Chester Zoo continue to fund rhino monitoring and anti-poaching operations in Tsavo East. To that end, Chester Zoo has just donated £4,400 to cover fuel costs for the patrol vehicle, number plate KAC 996G, and Save the Rhino's Trustees have added a further £2,000 to cover maintenance costs for the coming year.

