

Rhinos Trapped In a Strange Web of Ritual And Economics

By PHILIP SHABECOFF

BE MASAI MARA GAME RESERVE, Kenya very quiet," warned John, the guide, as he switched off the ignition of the Land Rover. He pointed to a wooded knoll about 300 yards away. "Rhino," he whispered.

There, just below the crest, was the dark, massive form of a black rhinoceros. Behind it, barely visible in the tall grass, was a baby rhino, born perhaps eight days before.

The sun was starting to sink toward the distant hills. The party had spent most of the day traversing the rolling green plains of this game reserve near the Tanzanian border in search of rhinos. But until now not one had been sighted.

Until the last few years, the African black rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis*, had been relatively abundant on these plains. But over the last decade both the black and the larger white rhino, *Ceratotherium simus*, have been disappearing rapidly here and throughout the continent.

Since the early 1970's, the great armored mammal has fallen victim to intensive poaching, despite the best efforts of Kenya and other African governments to protect them. And this illegal slaughter forms a strange and complex story of African poverty, folk medicine in East Asia, rites of manhood in Yemen and, as it turns out, the rapid rise in the world price of oil following the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

One of those who helped unravel the once-mysterious tale is Esmond B. Martin, an American living in Kenya, who has investigated the fate of the African rhino since 1978.

The immediate cause of the wave of slaughter of the African rhino was the rapid rise in the price of rhinoceros horn starting in the early 1970's, Mr. Martin said. The price of horn on the world market went from around \$35 a pound in 1972 to approximately \$250 a pound by 1978. Since black rhinos have two horns, each weighing four pounds or more, more than \$2,000 could be made from a single rhinoceros, more than the average Kenyan or Ugandan or Zambian earns in several years.

Rhino horns, being much smaller than elephant tusks, were easier to smuggle out of game preserves and national parks and ship to overseas markets, Mr. Martin said. Accordingly, African poachers turned from elephants and other species to rhinos.

Half the Rhinos Gone in 10 Years

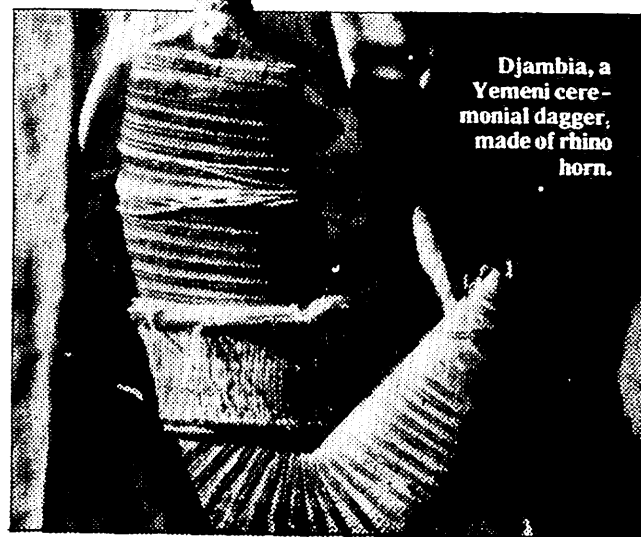
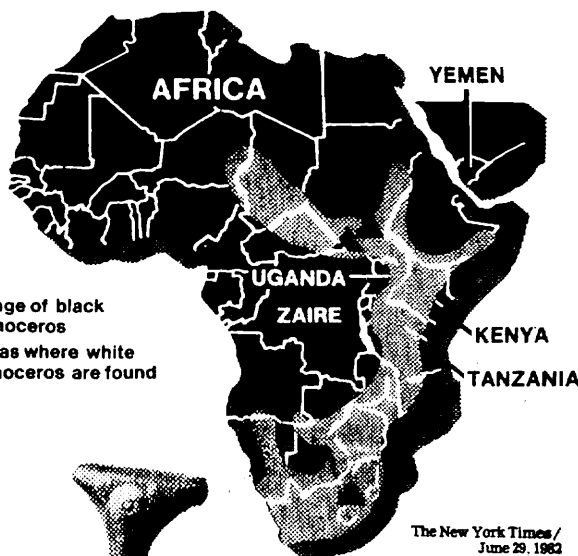
Mr. Martin said that the number of black African rhinos outside of zoos is estimated at about 15,000 and that there are about 3,000 white rhinos

(both are actually shades of gray). Although there were no reliable counts until recently, conservationists believe the African rhino population was cut in half during the 1970's, he said. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania the rhino population is believed to have dropped by 90 percent, though in Zaire a fairly sizable population still exists.

The world price of rhino horn began to rise dramatically in the 1970's, for reasons no one at first could understand.

East Asian countries, particularly China, Korea and Japan, had long imported rhinoceros horns and meat for use in their folk pharmacopeia. Contrary to popular belief, Mr. Martin said, the horn is not widely valued as an aphrodisiac. In most of Asia the horn, and other parts of the animal, are steeped in boiling water and used to treat fever.

But while traditional medicine shops in Asia continued to stock the horn and dried meat of rhinos, the demand for the products on that continent has not soared, Mr. Martin found. The explanation for price leap in rhino horn therefore lay elsewhere.



Djambia, a Yemeni ceremonial dagger, made of rhino horn.

The answer, Mr. Martin found by looking at trade patterns, lay in the south Arabian country of Yemen. The Yemenis were importing rhinoceros horns to make handles for the ceremonial daggers, called djambia, worn as a token of reaching manhood.

"They are worn by 90 percent of the men in the country — it is a sign of status after adolescence," Mr. Martin explained. "They wear a dagger the way I wear a tie."

Yemen was once a poor country. While rhino horn was the preferred material for djambia handles, few Yemeni families had the money to buy the expensive horns. Then, in the early 1970's, OPEC was formed, world oil prices shot up, and crude oil production in the Middle East rose sharply. Yemenis found work in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states, and began to send their earnings home.

As a result, the Yemenis could afford more and more rhino horn and the demand drove the price up. Yemen now imports about 40 percent of Africa's annual rhino horn production, with most of the rest still going to Asia, according to Mr. Martin.

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He and other conservationists agree that if the present pattern continues, the African rhino is doomed to extinction. But there is little agreement on what to do about it.

Norman Myers, a British conservationist and author of "The Sinking Ark," a book about the extinction of species, believes that traditional methods of fighting poachers are doomed to failure. Mr. Myers, a resident of Nairobi, noted that some \$2 million to \$3 million is now being spent each year in Kenya alone to protect rhinos, without success.

One Guard Per Rhinoceros

Mr. Myers said the effort had reached such an extremity that many individual rhinos in Kenya have been assigned guards. "If conservation comes down to that we might as well admit defeat," he said. The problem is, he said, that frequently the guards are bribed by the poachers.

"It's understandable when they can make more for a few minutes of looking the other way than they earn in a year," he said.

Mr. Myers favors diplomatic efforts

to persuade Yemen to bar the import of rhino horns. If necessary, he said, the issue should be taken to the United Nations. "If the Yemenis got up to speak at the U.N. and everybody walked out, maybe they would get the message."

"This is not traditional conservationist policy, which is to get on a white horse and go charging off to put the bad guys in jail," he said.

Mr. Martin plans other nontraditional methods to try to preserve the rhinoceros. He is organizing a project concentrating on Asia, still the largest market for the illegal rhino take. He hopes to persuade the governments, importers, physicians and pharmacists to stop buying rhino horn and meat.

"We want to go to the source of the trade," he explained. "Rhino is only one of hundreds of products used in traditional medicine in Asia. We think if we explain the consequences of trade in rhino products, people will be willing to stop it. There are alternatives to rhino, such as Saiga antelope from Siberia, which are plentiful and are regarded as having the same properties."

If the African rhinoceros goes, there is little hope for the survival of rhinoceroses anywhere on earth. The three other existing species, the Indian, Javan and Sumatran rhinos, have been nearly wiped out. Their future is precarious. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, there is now a population of 1,135 Indian rhinos, 45 to 54 Javan rhinos, and an unknown number, probably only a few hundred, of Sumatran rhinos.

If the current depredations in Africa continue, therefore, the rhinoceros, like the unicorn whose legend it may have inspired, may someday be a creature of art and fable only.

As the Land Rover rolled back past herds of wildebeest and zebras and families of graceful giraffes toward the campsite along the swiftly flowing Mara River, a passenger asked John if we would be able to see rhinos if we came back in a few years.

The guide shrugged. "Maybe," he said.

