

Specialist Group Reports

African Rhino Specialist Group

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Martin Brooks

For the past decade, Africa's experts on rhinos and elephants had been operating together within the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG). The threats facing these species were very similar, especially poaching, and there were sound reasons to believe that there would be sufficient common features in the development of strategic action plans to warrant pooling resources.

At the AERSG meeting held in Gaborone, Botswana, in early July 1991, members were informed of the SSC Chairman's decision once again to split into individual groups; hence the African Rhino Specialist Group (ARSG) was reborn. While the threats remain similar, the conservation management programs now differ sufficiently to warrant this division. Rhino conservation should benefit as more time will be available to formulate appropriate conservation strategies and to address other key concerns in the detail they deserve.

The mission of the group is to promote the long-term conservation of Africa's rhinos and, where necessary, the recovery of their populations to viable levels; and this, like the terms of reference, remains essentially unchanged. Increased efforts will, however, be made to integrate any strategies and management guidelines that are developed into the management programs of the Range States. This will require increased participation by conservation managers who will act as the catalysts for action in their own countries. The philosophy of the Group is therefore clearly set, and the membership is currently being identified.

A number of issues were discussed in working group sessions during the Gaborone meeting. These included trade in rhino horn, the rhino conservation program being initiated by the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC), the need to identify priority conservation issues, and rhino population estimates.

The continental estimate for the black rhino *Diceros bicornis* for 1991 stands at about 3,450, which demonstrates a slowing in the rate of decline when compared with the early 1980s: population estimates for 1987 and 1984 were about 3,830 and 8,000-9,000 respectively. The numbers of southern white rhinos *Ceratotherium simum simum* have increased from an estimated 4,630 in 1987 to 5,200 today, and the single wild population of *C. s. cottoni* has increased from 18 to 28 over the same five-year period. These trends are encouraging, and demonstrate what can be achieved through intensive field programs.

*Martin Brooks
Chairman
African Rhino Specialist Group*

