

## CONSERVATION

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### Northern white rhino faces extinction in the wild

Despite the efforts of national and international conservation agencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the last remaining northern white rhinos in Garamba National Park are now on the brink of extinction due to a deadly 'cocktail' of poaching and politics. Listed as Critically Endangered, this is probably the most threatened rhino subspecies in the world. Occurring only in Garamba National Park – a World Heritage Site (currently listed as In Danger) in the north-east of DRC on the border with Sudan – the subspecies managed to survive, due to the valiant conservation efforts of the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) and its NGO partners, despite decades of conflict and instability. However, a rapid escalation of commercial poaching from mid-2003 onwards reduced the rhino population to an estimated ten individuals by the end of 2004.

In response to this crisis, an emergency strategy, incorporating both increased protection in the wild and a rescue operation to move five rhinos to a safe sanctuary in Kenya, was developed by ICCN and an impressive coalition of international organizations including UNESCO, the United Nations Foundation, Frankfurt Zoological Society, the Zoological Society of London, People and Parks Support Foundation, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), the lead NGO in Garamba since 1998. The current partners committed to an emergency budget of US\$1 million for protection of the rhino in Garamba. As part of this expanded partnership, IRF and FFI entered into a formal coalition, the Garamba Conservation Programme, to coordinate the NGO efforts.

Today's bleak outlook for the northern white rhino is in sharp contrast to the mood of optimism in January this year. During a visit to Kinshasa, under the auspices of ICCN, of an NGO delegation led by the IUCN/SCC African Rhino Specialist Group, the president and vice-presidents of DRC approved in principle a rescue package for Garamba's rhinos. The translocation to Kenya would have preserved a nucleus of the subspecies, which could have been used in the future to revitalise or re-establish a population in Garamba once the park was stabilised and secured. The evacuation of the rhinos was intended as only a temporary measure.

Unfortunately before a protocol could be formalised and signed by the DRC government, the issue of the translocation became ensnared by politics and by the local and national divisions that are sadly so characteristic of this troubled country. Despite the best efforts of the ICCN directorate to counter the rampant misinformation and rumour seemingly generated for political gain, by late February the proposed translocation had become such an explosive issue that local opposition around Garamba had been incited to a fever pitch. The result: conservation activities in the park itself were obstructed; ICCN and expatriate staff were threatened; and seizures of equipment attempted.

These events have not only prevented the rhino rescue operation from occurring, but compelled NGO partners, including FFI and IRF, to suspend conservation support to Garamba. Meanwhile whatever rhinos remain are defenceless at the hands of the poachers. Under these circumstances FFI and IRF have appealed to President Kabila and his government to urgently resolve the crisis, as with each passing day the chance of this subspecies surviving in the wild diminishes.

Another ten northern white rhino are maintained in two zoological institutions: seven (3.4) at Dvur Králové in the Czech Republic and three (1.2) at San Diego Wild Animal Park. The zoo animals have not been reproducing well, though a female calf was born at Dvur Králové in 2000, the first captive birth in this subspecies in a decade.

Adapted from a *Fauna & Flora International and International Rhino Foundation press release*

### Congo peacock captive status update

The European and American breeding programmes for the Congo peacock met in Kansas, U.S.A., in March to review the status of the captive population. Currently there are 86 (41.40.5) birds in 16 European institutions that take part in the EEP, and 28 (15.8.5) birds in ten American institutions that participate in the SSP. There are now six founders remaining and, after more than 40 years of breeding in captivity, it has been calculated that 77% of gene diversity has been retained in the captive population. The loss of genetic diversity can be slowed through increasing the population growth rate (which fluctuates from year to year), reorganising the breeding pairs and increasing breeding success of birds with genes that are poorly represented in the population. Since 2001 the emphasis has been on reducing the loss of genetic diversity, and future plans will continue to make this a priority.

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### Good news from the Philippines

The island of Cebu, the ninth largest island in the Philippines, has been severely degraded ecologically since the early 1900s. At best, less than 0.1% forest cover remains on the island, and

of the 39 native forest birds, 29 are considered locally extinct. One Endangered endemic species, the black shama (*Copsychus cebuensis*), was always rare, and by the early 1990s some estimates suggested a total population of c. 200 individuals.

In June–November 2004 the Cebu Biodiversity Conservation Foundation (CBCF) conducted a survey of the species' distribution and habitat use in Nug-as, a forest with a total area of 1,036 hectares comprising one 700-ha block with smaller patches radiating from it surrounded by scrublands and plantations. Despite its small size, this is actually by far the largest remaining forest block on Cebu. Astonishingly, the survey found shama densities in the order of 2.5/ha in some parts of Nug-as, suggesting a total population in the order of c. 6,650 individuals in this one area. The survey team also recorded other threatened birds in Nug-as forest, among them the Critically Endangered Cebu flower-pecker (*Dicaeum quadricolor*), the Endangered streak-breasted bulbul (*Ixos siquijorensis*) and the Vulnerable rufous-lored kingfisher (*Todiramphus wilhelmi*).

This news, however encouraging in itself, does not imply any improvement in the conservation status of Cebu's forests. At present, the survey team comment, there is so little forest left in Cebu that 'cutting even a single tree has a deleterious impact', and 'looking at the threats of forest degradation and reduction, it is highly possible that in the next ten years forest cover will reduce in size.' But in the short term, at least, this is a heartening story from a region where good conservation news is in very short supply.

Extracted from the CBCF report *Distribution and habitat requirements of the black shama (Copsychus cebuensis)* (P.G. Jakosalem, L.M.J. Paguntalan and O.B. Orlanes), with additional information and comment from William L.R. Oliver