

Rhinos in
captivity
form a key
element in
the battle
to save the
species

It was in 1960 that I met my first captive rhino. She was a six-month-old female white rhino of the northern race known as Abongi, and she was an orphan, her mother having succumbed to injuries she received during a translocation operation which moved rhinos at risk from the West Nile district of Uganda to Murchison Falls national park. She was a delightfully comely animal, reintroduced to the wild at four years of age, who lived to produce a calf of her own but died on the spears of a poacher. Her calf survived that tragedy but died, along with all the other black and white rhino in Uganda, from the bullets of the Kalashnikov rifles of the army of Idi Amin Dada. In just 30 years the northern race of the white rhino has been cruelly reduced, from a population numbering over 5,000 to a mere 33 carefully protected animals in the Garamba national park in eastern Zaire.

The echo of rifle fire has been heard almost everywhere that rhino occur. The carnage has taken place throughout Africa, often in locations once thought to be safe havens for these splendid creatures. The greed of a few hunters, in just a whisper of time, has destroyed an evolutionary success story which had lasted millions of years.

In February this year I was looking at a group of black rhino in the Western Plains Zoo at Dubbo, New South Wales, Australia. Captive yes, but safe from the marauding poachers, part of the worldwide co-operative programme of captive breeding which may prove to be a lifeline for future generations of rhinoceros. Although such relocations of rhino can prove costly, both in financial terms and occasionally through accidental death, yet those animals that were successfully moved are alive and snorting now – not bones being bleached white in the African, Indian or South-east Asian sunshine.

We all agree that the best place to save species is in their wild habitat, but the fact is that the rhino in managed populations in captivity are, sadly perhaps, an increasingly important element in the battle to save the species for the future, a battle which continues in protecting animals in their wild state in national parks and similar reserves, or in specially protected reserves in the lands of their occurrence.

It is probable that, where rhinos have disappeared from countries such as Uganda, their eventual return will have to be from one of these sources. It is more than probable, for example, that in the national parks of Uganda the northern race of the white rhino will be replaced by the southern and that these will come from captive or semi-captive sources, from zoos and wildlife parks.

Zoos and wildlife parks worldwide are committed to playing their part in rhino conservation through captive breeding, research and environmental education, as well as support for in-situ activities.

All people of goodwill know that the world will be much diminished if this fascinating family of animals is lost.

A Zoologist SPEAKS

By Professor Roger Wheeler, director of Edinburgh Zoo

SAVE THE RHINO, INTERNATIONAL