

EDITORIAL



In 1980 at the time of the African Elephant & Rhino Specialist Group meeting in Nairobi, there were an estimated 15 000 black rhinoceros still surviving in a number of countries throughout Africa. Thirteen years later, that figure has plunged to an all-time low of less than 2 500.

In 1980 huge sums of money were voted for the protection of various populations by numerous government agencies and international NGOs. Not all of that money was channelled effectively. As the spotlight has turned from the rest of Africa and now sits squarely on southern Africa – in particular Namibia, South Africa, and more recently also Zimbabwe – we find increasing demands being placed on the Rhino & Elephant Foundation for assistance.

Looking at the past track record of non-governmental funding of rhino conservation, one may ask the question: "Is this justified and will pouring money into rhino conservation serve any real purpose in the end?" Take, for example, Zimbabwe. Since 1985 when it commenced the war against Zambian poachers, Zimbabwe has had millions of dollars poured into the country in an effort to prevent poaching – all to no avail it seems. Zimbabwe's black rhino population has nevertheless plummeted from an estimated 1 800 to possibly less than 300 today.

From a business point of view, this would indicate a pretty bad investment. What has gone wrong? Why have we been unable to stem the tide of poaching for this spectacular creature, whose ancestors roamed planet Earth some 45 million years ago?

The black rhino in South Africa, by con-

trast, appears to be in a satisfactory state. There are approximately 800 scattered throughout government reserves and three private sanctuaries. However, there has been a tendency over the past three to four years to knock the rhino because of the high profile the species enjoys and the impressive amount of money raised for that very reason. Due to changing political attitudes, comments such as "Are rhinos more important than people?" and "To hell with the rhino – plant a tree", have become commonplace. Of course rhinos are not more important than people, but is it necessary that they should suffer now because of the past indifference to fellow South Africans? Should rhino conservation be considered a luxury we can ill afford?

At the moment all non-governmental organisations involved in conservation activities are feeling the economic crunch currently assailing both South Africa and the world. This should not, however, be the basis for us to ignore the plight of the rhinoceros. Present rhino status appears to be satisfactory in South Africa, but for how long?

Back in 1980, the intentions were very good in terms of halting the slaughter, but it is now clear that this was wishful thinking and there is no reason to believe that the same fate may not befall the populations of rhinoceros, both black and white, that live in South Africa.

It is generally fairly easy to raise funds from a sympathetic public when a crisis situation faces a particular species. But in the case of the rhino in South Africa, this would appear not to be the case. With black rhino figures increasing and a white rhino population in excess of 5 000, one might ask why we are concerned.

The answer is simply that nowhere are rhinos safe! Within the first three months of 1993, a good many white rhinoceros were butchered within the borders of the Kruger



National Park; a park that not only makes a handsome profit, but boasts one of the finest security systems in the country. The Zululand reserves suffered no rhino losses in the corresponding period, but they too have their problems with overcrowded human populations surrounding their borders.

The Natal Parks Board has, over the years, been fortunate in finding ready buyers for white rhinoceros and, more recently, raised millions of rands from the sale of black rhino. One assumes that that money has enabled the Board to put in place adequate protection measures and to have stepped up good neighbourly relations to change the past colonial attitude of excluding people from any benefits derived from game reserves.

Underneath all this placid exterior is a melting pot of illegal trade in both rhino horn and ivory emanating from beyond the borders of South Africa and finding its way into this country and onwards to south-east Asia. When the rhinos further north finally disappear, will it be our turn next?

The Rhino & Elephant Foundation's experience has been that we are constantly being requested to provide assistance in one form or another. Many people are under the misconception that we can solve most problems besetting the species, but nothing could in fact be further from the truth. Responsibility for the protection of rhinoceros will always rest largely with the state, for the bulk of rhinos are to be found within state reserves; private owners of rhino in South Africa are themselves responsible for the welfare of their animals – this is not a concern of the general public. One may therefore pose the question: Is there any reason for the existence of the Rhino & Elephant Foundation?

Judging from the track record of rhino conservation in Africa as a whole, there seems to be little justification for supporting conservation organisations that spend vast sums of money but still fail to reach their objectives. If one takes the Zimbabwe situation as an example, it

would appear to have been a pointless exercise – *unless we learn from it*. Two obvious lessons emerge. One, protecting rhino in the face of systematic poaching pressure is extremely difficult. And two, yes, it *will* be our turn next.

The Rhino & Elephant Foundation is not an enormous organisation and operates without a massive infrastructure. It rarely embarks upon major campaigns involving millions of rands; the last was Operation Rhino in 1990, which raised R1.5 million to acquire additional land for Addo. The R200 000 raised in Hong Kong, primarily earmarked for a Botswana rhino survey and subsequent capture of the country's last remaining rhinos (of which there were only four successfully captured), would never have materialised had it not been for the involvement of a non-governmental organisation.

But the Rhino & Elephant Foundation is chiefly involved in numerous smaller scale and lesser known activities in rhino conservation. And in this respect the Foundation definitely does play an active role, and a vital one, coordinating with the work of government agencies, and providing financial assistance that can make a key difference when government budgets are restricted, as well as keeping the public informed. We need to make the public aware that whilst on the surface things appear to be satisfactory here in South Africa, hazards are creeping up on us. Management of rhino sanctuaries may be sound, but external factors clearly foreseeable could have a disastrous effect in the future.

The Rhino & Elephant Foundation needs your support. Every member's contribution can make a difference. The main responsibility of rhino conservation indeed lies with government agencies but the government also acts for us all, and it is the responsibility of every single individual in the country to do what we can for the rhinos. We should be striving to ensure that everyone is aware of the values inherent in this extraordinary creature. Let us not wait for a crisis to overtake us!

CLIVE WALKER

