

WANKIE AND THE 'CRISIS CARNIVAL'

By Ian Parker

THERE is no accounting for human entertainment. Comedy seems straightforward enough with its laughter and release of tension, but paying to be frightened is not so easily explained.

The films "Jaws" and "The Exorcist" illustrate the point. Fright and the grotesque are saleable commodities. Circuses and carnivals have exploited them down the centuries and still do with chambers of horrors and showing off bearded ladies. And, ancient or modern, showbusiness has always had the same objective—profit!

Quite what this has to do with a conservation issue may seem obscure: but it isn't. For the past seven years or so matters concerning elephants and rhinos in Africa have been handled as showbusiness in grand style.

The name of the play was the Crisis Carnival. The impresarios were conservationists. The script chosen was simple and the theme well tried—goodies versus baddies. The aim was to fascinate the audience which, as all playwrights know, relieves one from the need to adhere strictly to truth. The goodies were, of course, conservationists; the baddies, a band of rapacious ivory and rhino horn traders.

This international mafia sought elephant tusks and rhino horns the length and breadth of Africa—mostly by foul means. These commodities were then sold to supply an insatiable international demand for ivory and to orientals seeking rhino horn as an aphrodisiac. And, so the script went, by so doing traders had brought both elephants and rhinos to the brink of extinction.

The audience reacted as planned. A conservation-conscious public in Europe and America rose up in wrath. Action was demanded. Pressure groups were formed. Politicians were harassed and laws passed to control trade in ivory and rhino horn. And, as was hoped for, a lot of money was raised. As with all successful shows, the Crisis Carnival enjoyed a long run.

Perhaps the most prominent backers of the Carnival were the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Both have impeccable credentials. WWF is an elite fund-raising body whose founding fathers included Princes of the Blood, captains of industry and leading conservationists. With their combined influence, they pledged themselves to raise funds for conservation.



Clive Walker and Markus Börner, delegates to the Elephant and Rhino Conference, lend helping hands to a private trapper who has obtained permission to capture baby elephants for export to a European zoo, in the course of a culling exercise in Wankie Park.

Photograph: Esmond Bradley Martin

IUCN was also founded in a similar spirit of philanthropy. Its aim was to apply the tenets of science to sound, sensible measures for conservation. This needed money and the roles of WWF and IUCN are obviously complementary. It is no surprise to find that they occupy the same building in Gland, Switzerland. Clearly both stood to benefit from the Carnival.

The Carnival's impact on the public was that much more dramatic for having a basis of truth in East Africa. By 1973, it was widely known to game wardens and professional hunters in Kenya that an unprecedented wave of poaching was underway. It was also documented by ivory traders. Tanzania and Uganda were also subjected to the same processes. The news put about by wardens, hunters and their clients received wide publicity and caused Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere to stop sport-hunting in his country. Wardens and legal hunters may not have counted all the dead animals they came across, but the evidence of poached elephants and rhinos was indisputable. By 1975, very much as "tail-enders" and "also-rans," scientists were trying to estimate how many elephants had been poached. However, many were happy to claim that they were responsible for bringing the sad events and happenings to public notice.

E. African evidence

The East African evidence was so compelling that any sensible person was justified in assuming that a crisis prevailed in the conservation of elephants and rhinos. Further, few sane people would have had objections to WWF and IUCN raising money to combat the trends—even if it did mean that they had to support the Carnival. However it would be intrinsic to such acceptance that (i) a genuine crisis existed, (ii) that money raised would be spent immediately and wisely and (iii) that the facts—such as were known—would not be distorted. Within these bounds, supporting the Carnival was acceptable as a means to an end.

IUCN established an "African Elephant Specialist Group" and an "African Rhino Specialist Group" to watch over the fate of elephants and rhinos in Africa and to advise it on appropriate action that might be taken. Each group was formed under a chairman selected by IUCN. In theory at least such chairmen should have been leading authorities

on elephants and rhinos and the members of their groups should likewise have been chosen from among the world's experts in these fields.

In practice this did not happen. The chairman of the Elephant Group had indeed made a pioneering study of elephant behaviour—and it was a very good study. However it might not qualify him in the wider aspects of elephant conservation, even though he was well known from his television profile and as a leading actor in the Crisis Carnival!

No experience

The chairman of the African Rhino Group lacked experience in both the conservation of rhinos, and of research into their biology. However, despite these short-comings, both groups worked hard at alerting the public to the African pachyderms' predicament. They acted well, the crowd was enthralled, it paid up, and the Show went on.

Of course there were sceptics. Some questioned the claims put forward. Others doubted that there was a crisis or, at least, the dimensions of the crisis being "sold." And, as those who are in touch with showbusiness know, the critics must be placated from time to time. Thus the managers of the Carnival arranged to have the status of elephants and rhinos established "scientifically". This silenced the critics, for the status surveys should have provided a firm, factual base for real conservation. Alas, when they were concluded and the results published they were as phoney and ersatz as the cold tea which simulates whisky on stage in some school play.

The "scientific" results of the survey on the status of the African elephant looked good and pressed the Crisis case. However, they have not stood up to any analysis. They were not presented in any normal scientific format. Methods for collecting data were not described. Analyses of the data were not presented. There was no formal discussion of results and no bibliography of references. The precarious situation of the African elephant was stressed and the "baddies" roundly condemned. However, if one read the survey results carefully the evidence suggested a rather different situation.

No less than 19% of Africa's elephant populations were classified as "safe"; 6% were "vulnerable"; 2% were "endangered" and 73% were of unknown status. This is not in keeping with a situation of crisis. If one assumes that

the large unknown proportion breaks down in conformity with the known—and logic dictates this is the only approach—then it would seem that 71% of Africa's elephants were "safe", 23% "vulnerable" and 6% "endangered".

The breakdown into safe, vulnerable and endangered categories was not the only surprise. Another was the statement that the minimum population of African elephants was 1.3 million in a range of more than 7 million square kilometres. On their own these figures are difficult to equate with crisis. Curious was the lack of any attempt to quantify the maximum population or the mean between maximum and minimum. Analysis of the scattered data in the survey results indicates no good ground for assuming a minimum of 1.3 million elephants. Indeed they suggest the population estimate should have been 2.4 million elephants. And such findings strained the credulity of even the most anti-crisis critics. Who on earth had supplied the information?

At the outset the "Action Plan" which describes the survey's results states that it had drawn its information from "hundreds" of informants about Africa. However, only 81 sources were listed in its compendium of tables. These 81 informants covered 35 countries. In 19 of the 35 there was only one informant listed. In 14 of the 19 countries the informants could only guess at elephant status and in 5 out of the 14 the informant was the same person.

One could carry the analysis further, but I shall sum it up by paraphrasing Churchill. Never in the field of African conservation has so much been spent by so few to such little effect. The African elephant survey was conducted as part of the Crisis Carnival.

Verily the tail wagged the dog! The impresarios were warned by some critics that WWF and IUCN's scientific credibility was at risk. Similar comments applied to the rhino situation. Backstage, at the show, alarm bells were ringing! And at the Elephant and Rhino Specialist Groups' meeting at Wankie (30th July—8th August 1981), the curtain was rung down on the Crisis Carnival.

A turning point

Though the meeting has received little international attention, I believe that it was a turning point for conservation, not only for the elephants and rhinos, but in a general sense. It could have been a shambles. Never has there been a more fertile field for recrimination, accusation, or destructive criticism. The Crisis Carnival has had so many entrenched interests supporting it and has been so successful that its demolition could have caused a host of emotional hurricanes. That these did not materialize and that the issues of elephant and rhino conservation were kept within the scientific briefs desired (but hitherto not enforced) by IUCN was due to the efforts of one man—Dr. David Cumming, Director of Research in Zimbabwe's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, who chaired the meeting. With great firmness and clarity of mind he held the meeting to its purpose—to determine, in as far as possible, the position of elephants and rhinos in Africa.

The proceeds of the Wankie meeting will no doubt be published fully in due course and I shall not describe them in any depth here. Suffice it that the African conservation situation was reviewed on a regional basis—Western, Central, Eastern and Southern. It was concluded that there were probably still

between 1.1 and 2.6 million elephants in Africa.

Conservation status was most wanting in West Africa, where there are no rhinos at all and elephants have been reduced to a series of islands a sea of humanity. Presently these islands are not being adequately protected.

Conservation status was least known in the Central block of Africa, where the greatest number of elephants are thought to occur and where rhinos did occur in some abundance in the recent past, but are thought to have declined in the last five years.

In Eastern Africa steep declines in elephants and rhinos have been reported from Kenya and Uganda over the past decade (the only countries in which this is known to have happened in this period—all other claims being unsubstantiated). However, the position is thought to have stabilized in the past two years.

In Southern Africa there were two countries for which no reliable data were available—Angola and Mozambique. In all other countries in the region the position of both elephants and rhinos (both black and white) was good. Elephants were at levels of abundance which called for culling to reduce numbers and both species of rhinos were increasing (to the point where it is thought that by the year 2,000 A.D. white rhino would have to be culled for want of room for further expansion!). The continental situation is one where causes for pessimism are balanced by grounds for considerable optimism. This is not to imply that there are no serious problems—for there are. However, conservation has not been the unmitigated failure that was depicted so widely in the Crisis Carnival.

The meeting also recognized that in many situations elephant conservation would not be either possible or worth attempting in the long run. It therefore, determined an order of priorities. Rhino warranted far more urgent attention than elephants. Parks and reserves were listed in an order of priority with the hope that meagre funds would be directed towards those which would produce the greatest conservation returns and not at low priorities where the prospects of successful conservation were grim.

The Northern white rhinoceros was considered to be in by far the worst position in numbers and distribution. The meeting advocated that all those presently in captivity should be brought together as a breeding herd. It will be interesting to see if the zoos involved will be able to subordinate their pecuniary interests to this common conservation goal!

The Wankie meeting was unable to address

itself to a number of issues which have emerged from the Crisis Carnival. Foremost among these is how WWF and IUCN should handle public opinion on the conservation of elephants. Many will see the outcome of the Wankie meeting as a complete volte face and be confused. Others will want to know how the balance of funds raised for elephant and rhino (\$2.4 million), and not yet unspent, will now be re-allocated. Yet others will feel that if the elephant situation was so out of hand as appears to be the case, how can they have confidence in WWF and IUCN in the future?

In its financial statements on the raising of funds for elephants and rhinos, IUCN states that it charges a 10% handling fee. One wonders quite what this is for because IUCN and its staff is surely funded by the Union's members and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to do just this sort of work? If this is so, what possible justification can be raised for taking \$240,000 out of the \$2.4 million raised? It seems to me that there is a substantial public relations task ahead—not on publicizing the "critical" state of elephants and rhinos, but on explaining how WWF and IUCN are going to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated.

Publicity 'tail'

The Wankie meeting did address itself to other aspects of conservation such as those concerning trade. To discuss these here would be to detract from its major achievement. They must wait for another article. At Wankie notice was served that a large, flamboyant, publicity tail must cease to wag a small conservation dog. The mood was clearly that conservation must be based on facts and on a rational appreciation of what is possible and what is not.

The play is over. One or two scientific reputations have been irreparably destroyed: but that is the risk scientists take when they double as actors. The point coming out of this is that appearance on a television screen, or one's photograph in the papers is not conservation, but showbiz! The presence of the WWF Director General's picture on no less than four pages of the June issue of WWF's news letter cost money to produce but, handsome profile or not, it didn't help the Northern white rhino one jot and illustrates the point. The Wankie meeting has perhaps given IUCN's new Director—Lee Talbot—reason to apply for a new broom. Let us hope that he uses it with vigour. Publicity for publicity's sake is out if WWF and IUCN are to survive. It is a great pity that Wankie didn't happen five years ago.



Elephant hides being dried at Wankie Park. The skins will be auctioned by the National Parks authorities. For many years, the Zimbabwe National Parks have raised considerable sums from the economic exploitation of meat, hide, bones and trophies from animals that had to be culled. A special tour was offered to the delegates of the Elephant and Rhino Conference to see the making of biltong and the drying of hide.

Photograph: Esmond Bradley Martin