

THE KILLING FIELDS

A brief encounter with white rhinos leaves a haunting memory

BY MICHAEL MODZELEWSKI



AFTER TAKING A SAFARI to Kenya in 1988, I learned how fragile the existence of the mighty rhinoceros is.

Late one afternoon, while visiting Meru National Park, our guide, Robert Carr-Hartley, asked if the group I was with wanted to see rhinos "up close and personal." Being avid photographers and naturalists, we all jumped into the Land Rovers and headed for the depths of the park.

Suddenly, Robert stopped and pointed out the window. Only 50 yards away were five white rhinos.

They were huge—packed from heels to horns with enormous prehistoric power. Robert explained that the

white, or square-lipped, rhino is second only to elephants as the largest living land mammal. The white rhino's name, he went on to say, has nothing to do with its color; "white" is a corruption of the Afrikaans word *vet*, for *wide*, referring to the shape of the species' mouth.

Robert greeted two guards in Swahili. We walked closer... very slowly. My every instinct said to flee. Scenes from the TV series "Daktari" flew through my mind: ornery rhinos charging the hunters' trucks; horns knifing through metal doors. Here we were, on foot, shooting with motorized cameras!

The guards explained, via Robert, that the five white rhinos had been re-



White Rhino Survival Status

Scientific Name: *Ceratotherium simum*

Estimated Population: 4,600

Historical Range: The northern white, *C. s. cottoni*, occurred in southern Chad; Central African Republic, southwestern Sudan, northeastern Zaire, and northwestern Uganda. The southern subspecies, *C. s. simum*, inhabited southeastern Angola, southwestern Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana, eastern Namibia, and South Africa.

Current Distribution: A single population of 22 *C. s. cottoni* survives in Garamba National Park, Zaire; a number of populations of *C. s. simum* occur south of the Zambezi River, most of them in wildlife reserves. There are about 200 white rhinos in zoos.

Survival Problems: Poaching for its horns

Official Conservation Status:

- CITES—*C. s. cottoni* is on Appendix I (threatened with extinction); *C. s. simum* is on Appendix II (not currently threatened with extinction but may become so unless trade is strictly regulated)
- IUCN Red List of Threatened Species—*C. s. cottoni*, endangered (in immediate danger of extinction)
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—*C. s. cottoni*, endangered

located in 1962 to Meru from reserves in South Africa. White rhinos are not native to Kenya. This group and others were relocated to relieve overcrowding in the South African parks (see "White Rhino Survival Status"). Since the move, the rhinos had been under 24-hour guard. During the day, the rhinos grazed in the open, and then spent the night in a corral.

It was clear that after interacting with the guards for many years, the Meru rhinos had become semi-domesticated. There was a camaraderie between man and beast. The guards had pet names for the horned behemoths and guided them with gentle calls.



Meru guard with rhino by the tail—a scene from happier times. Not long after this photo was taken, this rhino and four others were killed by poachers who cut off their horns with chainsaws.

One of the guards asked if I would take his picture.

I nodded and lifted my Polaroid camera. He moved in tight, clasping the end of a rhino's tail.

Carr-Hartley laughed. "He thinks Nikons are cheap and useless, but your camera must be very expensive because it spits the picture out right away."

As we drove away in the fading light, I saw the guard slip the picture

into his breast pocket and button the flap. He patted it as if it held a treasured possession.

A few days after returning home from Africa, I read a newspaper item stating that the five white rhinos in Meru National Park had been slaughtered by poachers. I put down the paper and phoned a journalist in Nairobi, hoping the story wasn't true.

With mounting horror, I learned that on the evening of October 30, under cover of darkness, 30 armed poachers had sneaked into Meru. Some of them surrounded the warden's house and opened fire with machine guns. Others sprayed bullets

at the armory where the park rangers were sleeping. As the guards dove for cover, the rest of the gang charged into the corral and gunned down the five rhinos. Then they cut off the animals' horns with chainsaws and vanished into the bush.

In Meru National Park, there is a guard with no rhinos to protect. After 27 years, all he has is a picture of himself holding a rhino by the tail. □

Michael Modzelewski is a freelance writer based in San Francisco. His stories have appeared in Outside, Sports Illustrated, Oceans, and other national publications.