

RHINOS PAST, PRESENT—AND FUTURE ?

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INTRODUCTION

RHINOS HAVE APPEARED in many forms through the evolutionary ages. There have been rhinos as big as houses; little rhinos, more like pigs; long and low rhinos like hippopotamuses; smooth rhinos and hairy rhinos; rhinos with horns and rhinos without.

Today there are just five rhino species left, totalling a few thousand animals — all that remains of an incredible abundance and diversity that can be traced back for the best part of sixty million years. Where have all the rhinos gone?

Few readers of this book will need to be reminded of the terrifying slaughter of both African and Asian rhinos that has taken place in recent decades — slaughter that conservation agencies seem powerless to halt.

But the decline of the rhinos is only partly a poaching problem. Rhinos have been the innocent victims of a lengthy evolutionary and historical process. This process is now being compounded by exceptional human greed and callousness.

Several important causes have been involved. The first, and slowest-acting, factor has of course been natural extinction, which accounted for the vast majority of all former rhino species. However, the rate of natural extinctions may have been speeded up considerably by prehistoric hunters, flexing their intellectual powers against an apparently hostile world.

The destruction of habitats also began in these prehistoric times as the pressure of growing human numbers was felt first in Asia, then in Africa. Even then, large animals were being forced into shrinking areas of remaining wilderness.

Then came colonialism, agricultural development and the commercial hunters who, seeing an apparently inexhaustible supply of wildlife, virtually eliminated rhinos over enormous tracts of Africa.

The past hundred years have seen the explosion of many indigenous human populations, irresistible demands for land for subsistence agriculture and accelerated rates of habitat destruction.

The signs were already there long ago, for those who could see them. In Africa alone rhinos declined from perhaps a million animals in the early 1800s to 100 000 in 1960. It only remained for the decline to be accelerated by the rhino-horn poachers who have swept through Africa and Asia in the past three decades. Today all five of the world's rhino species probably total less than 10 000 animals.

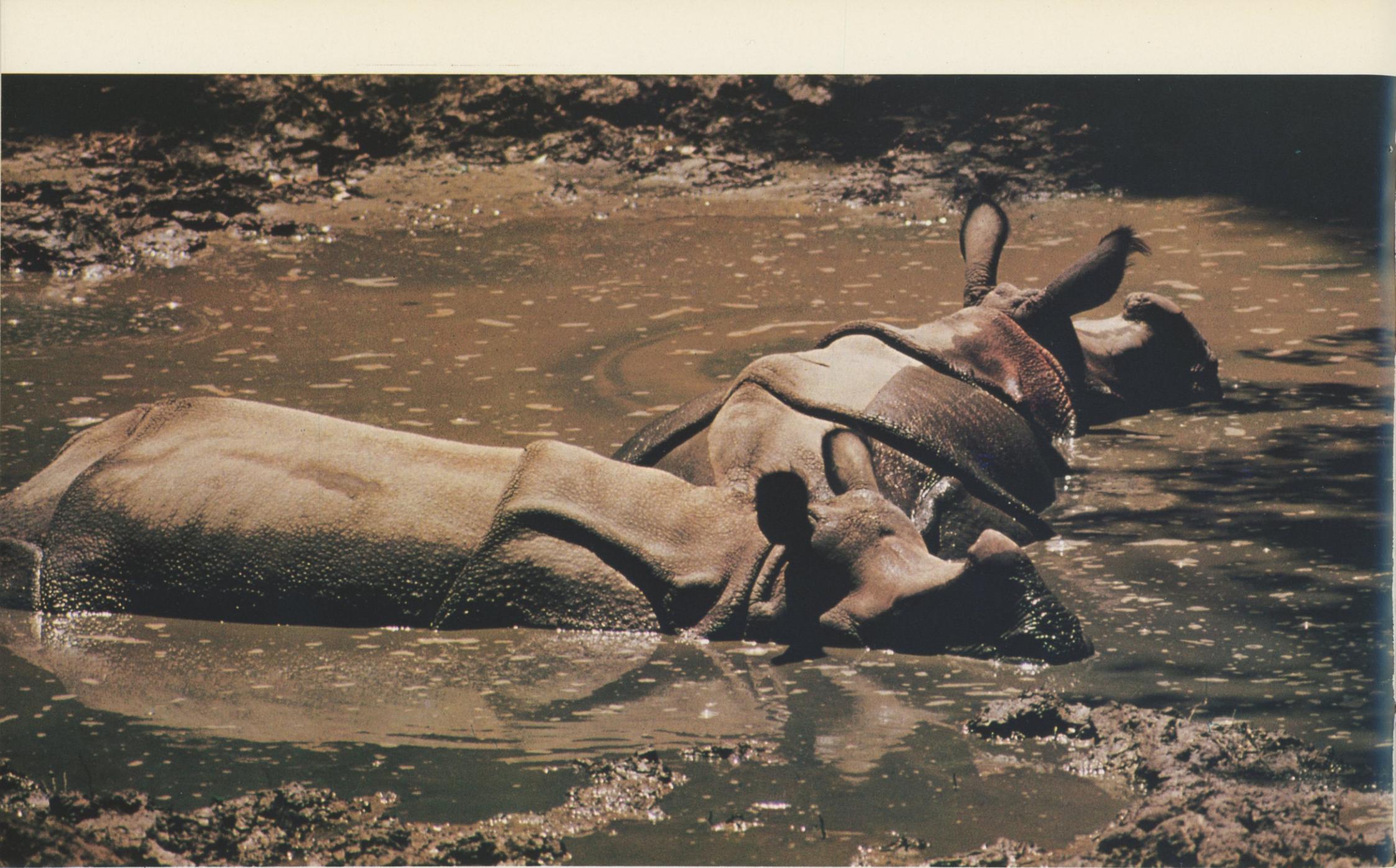
In current circumstances no thinking wildlife conservationist can avoid the question: what can we realistically hope to achieve?

There is hardly any such thing as genuine "wilderness" any more, in Asia or Africa. Instead, there are fragments of former wildernesses in the form of national parks and other conserved areas set aside by government, or game ranches established by private enterprise.

Most of these areas are surrounded by swiftly-expanding human settlement. Thus the option — or dream — of rhinos once again roaming free over vast areas of wilderness is doomed. Even the possibility of maintaining rhinos in substantial national parks is fast disappearing.

Developments in breeding techniques and growing genetic knowledge mean that the five surviving rhino species can probably all be saved from total extinction in zoos or small, heavily-protected sanctuaries. If all else fails, this may have to be the shape of the future. We will be manufacturing arks to enable wildlife to survive the storms of the imminent "demographic winter" of human population pressures.

But somewhere in this dismal progression there is a sticking-point for the lover of wildlife and wilderness. It probably comes at what might



be called "obvious artificiality". Today most national parks and game ranches are highly managed entities, but at least the illusion of wilderness is usually preserved. Descend the scale to the sanctuary or zoo, and that illusion is lost.

Perhaps this is the point at which the stand has to be made. The sanctuary and the zoo are important conservation tools, but their acceptance as the norm would have tragic consequences for the many attractive — albeit highly managed — parks and other areas that do still remain.

The rhino is often central to the survival of these areas. It is often a "flagship" species, and its protection enables thousands of other species to survive in its shadow. Lose the rhinos in African parks, and the elephant will follow. This is already happening in many places. Lose the

elephants, and many will say: why keep the parks at all?

Wildlife conservation has become an extraordinarily complex topic. In the case of rhinos, the more general problems of ignorance, habitat loss and the reconciliation of conflicts with humans are compounded by naked greed and ruthlessness. And the killing is not confined to animals. In Zimbabwe, where about 800 rhinos have been killed between 1985 and 1989, five parks officials and 80 poachers have also died in gun-battles fought with military weapons.

This book does not pretend to have any novel solutions to the problems. Its message is simple. Rhinos may not become totally extinct, but if they are to survive in the wild, the economic and social costs are going to be very high indeed. Who is going to pay? And on whose terms?

Can rhinos survive in the wild—or will future generations know them only as "museum pieces" in zoos? Indian rhinos in New York's Bronx Zoo. Photo: R Morsch (Bruce Coleman Inc, NY, USA).

POSTSCRIPT

THE COUNTERBALANCE to the historical decline of wildlife is a hesitant but slowly growing global awareness of the importance of conservation, not solely for aesthetic reasons, but also for human survival. We are gradually becoming more aware that today's rapid loss of species is more than just a minor tragedy. It is symptomatic of a sick planet.

In the short term the survival of rhinos depends largely on solutions to the problems already outlined. We can secure the species and buy rhinos a breathing-space. But the long term survival of wild rhino populations is far from guaranteed under current circumstances of habitat loss and human population growth.

Neither rhinos nor any other endangered species can be considered in isolation from the way in which mankind chooses to view his entire world. Today we stand at a watershed. We can join hands internationally in a genuine effort to redress the immense damage already done to our global environment, or we can continue down the path to destruction. We still have the choice, but it has to be made very quickly.

Environmental damage is slowly gaining its rightful place as the most important problem currently facing us. But it is unlikely to be remedied by mere tinkering with existing structures and institutions. It requires a radical reappraisal of priorities and a rectification of global economic and social imbalances. This has been highlighted by leading agencies such as the World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Few of the people who kill rhinos are case-hardened criminals. Far more often they are victims of poverty, risking death for a few hundred dollars. We need to create a more equitable world order and tackle Third World rural poverty at its roots. The genuine criminals behind the killing probably won't go away, but they will find it very much more difficult to find willing pawns to do their dirty work for them.

Certainly we can preserve rhinos like museum-specimens in foreign zoos and pitiful little captive groups, but is this what we really want? And even this is often merely one more form of exploitation, as one leading Zimbabwean biologist points out. The Third World provides the rhinos, but the First World adds the value and gains the financial benefits.

Most Third World governments are deeply committed to the long term conservation of rhinos and other wildlife in unspoilt habitats. But their ability to do so depends largely on how far the developed world is ready to moderate its own demands and to permit a fair redistribution of resources to the Third World. Effective wildlife conservation needs cash sums the like of which have only been dreamed of in conservation circles.

And it also implies the disappearance of the term "conservation", meaning a way of thought somehow apart from the rest of life. It calls for the rise of a paradigm in which "conservation" becomes *the way of life itself* and hence needs no distinguishing label. Rhinos, and all other wildlife, would form an essential part of such a world.

At least we have a chance with the rhino. This is more than can be said for the many spectacular species already extinguished by mankind and the thousands of unknown species being lost every year in the tropical and temperate forests of the world. But time is short, and global revolutions take a little longer.

Some may be tempted to suggest that most available resources should be directed to captive and semi-captive breeding. Certainly these techniques are a vital insurance. But if wild populations are more or less abandoned, then — as has already been pointed out in our introduction — we risk a continuing process of attrition until the remaining wild places are lost. And wildernesses would probably be impossible to replace.

But global imbalances in trade and wealth will take a long time to



alter, if they alter at all. Who is going to provide the immediate cash need to help protect rhinos in their habitats? There seem to be few options. Most of the money will continue to come from the limited resources of Third World governments themselves. They must be free to make economic use of rhinos and other wildlife, if they wish.

Their efforts will often depend heavily on voluntary donations and international aid. The governments of Norway, the United States and Canada make substantial contributions to wildlife conservation under their NORAD, USAID and CIDA programmes respectively.

Voluntarily international fundraising agencies such as WWF are heavily committed in both Asia and Africa. Local agencies including Rhino Rescue (Kenya), Rhino Survival and SAVE (Zimbabwe) and Save the Rhino (Namibia) have also raised millions of dollars.

Commitment to wildlife conservation is easy when you live close to Africa's wildernesses. I once got to know a wild black rhino quite well. He lived in a beautiful woodland near Mana Pools, on the Zambezi. In the mornings he used to browse the scrub behind his woodlands; in the afternoons he drank at the river; and in between, during the heat of the day, he would find a shady mahogany and lie down and sleep. Nothing would have been easier than to creep up on him and shoot him where he lay. Eventually someone did exactly that.

Such an event is an immediate and powerful spur to action. But a lot of money for rhino conservation comes from thousands of people who may never see wild rhinos. They believe their world would be a poorer place without wild animals and wilderness. Above all, they trust Africa to spend their money wisely. This is one of our greatest encouragements.

Black rhino often rest or sleep during the heat of the day.
Photo: D Pitman.