

SERONDELLA NEWS

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RHINOCEROSES ... TO BE OR NOT TO BE? PETER HITCHENS

The rhinoceros has existed on earth for some 40 million years, but in less than a century, it's only predator – MAN – has reduced the world-wide populations to fewer than 10 000 animals. Killed mainly for it's horn, it is predicted that at the current rate of poaching, extinction of the species in the wild could be at the end of this century; seven years from now.

In Africa the decline of rhinoceros has been spectacular from an estimated 100 000 animals in 1960 to 8 000 animals in 1993 – at an average rate of 2 780 animals per year! The loss of rhinoceroses is not just a loss to the range states, but a loss of biodiversity to the world – with the African rhinoceros goes three species of fly, a tick species and eight internal parasites.

Botswana, like most rhinoceros range states in Africa has suffered losses of both black and square lipped rhinoceros at the hands of poachers over the last 10 years, but first one needs to look at the history of rhinoceroses in the country.

Square lipped rhinoceros

This species was formerly wide spread in northern and eastern Botswana; between 1880 - 1890 it became extinct where hunting was the most likely cause of the decline.

During the early 1960's the square lipped rhinoceros re-appeared in northern Botswana when stragglers wandered over the border from Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe where they had been re-introduced from the Republic of South Africa.

In 1967 the square lipped rhinoceros was formerly brought back from extinction in Botswana with the introduction of two males and two females in June and July 1967 to the Serondella



area in Chobe National Park. Introductions continued during 1974, 1976, 1980 and 1981 with a total of 71 animals reintroduced to Chobe National Park, 19 to Moremi Game Reserve (1974 - 1982) and 4 to the Maun Nature Reserve (December 1976) by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Okavango Wildlife Society and the Natal Parks Board.

The translocation was initially successful with the first birth of a square lipped rhino calf in Botswana this century being reported in 1971. However, by the mid 1980's the species disappeared along the ideal habitats of the Chobe river floodplain – poaching is believed to have been the main reason.

Black rhinoceros

Records of early hunters and travellers indicate that the black rhinoceros was fairly widespread in the north and east of the country where rainfall exceeds 400 mm per annum. By the end of the 19th century the black rhinoceros had disappeared over most of it's range in Botswana and only low numbers of scat-

tered individuals survived in the area north of the Okavango, along the upper Chobe drainage and along the Kwando river. Whilst excessive hunting of the species was undoubtedly a major factor in it's decline, a contributory cause was very likely also the extent of habitat change, and especially the drying up of permanent rivers and fountains.

During most of the present century occasional reports of sightings of black rhinoceros were from the western Caprivi border, Kwando / Linyanti, Savuti and Chief's Island in the Okavango. Estimates of numbers varied from 10 to 20 animals which were all largely wild guesses. The last recorded black rhinoceros poached was in May 1991 west of Savuti.

The black rhinoceros of the upper Chobe / Linyanti / Kwando region of Botswana, Caprivi in Namibia and in south east Angola has been described in 1964 as a subspecies; *Diceros bicornis chobiensis*. This nomenclature has been further substantiated by other taxonomists in 1967 and 1978 on the basis of skull measurements. However, more recent taxonomic

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work on the restricted fragment patterns produced from DNA extracted from tissue cultures indicated that the two black rhinoceros captured in the Caprivi / Kwando areas in 1989 differed, even if only slightly, from the black rhinoceros of Etosha National Park in Namibia (*D.b. bicornis*) and animals of East African origin. The tissue cultures were very similar to animals from Natal (*D.b. minor*). On balance, therefore, there is still sufficient evidence to recognise the subspecies *D.b. chobiensis*, however tenuously, and to seek to conserve these animals as a genetic unit pending some definitive taxonomic work of the future.

There is little doubt that both species of rhinoceros in Botswana are at extremely critical levels. With normal recruitment since their introduction the population of square lipped rhinoceros should be somewhere in the region of 220 animals and the status of black rhinoceros remains unknown but probably less than 20.

In September 1992 the Department of Wildlife and National Parks World Wildlife Fund and the Rhino and Elephant Foundation undertook a survey of rhinoceroses in a 15 000 km² area in part of Chobe National Park and environs. The results confirmed everyone's fears that the square lipped rhinoceros population was about 30 animals and black rhinoceros probably less than 10.

This indeed is a tragic state of affairs, not only for Botswana but for the World as a whole. Since the survey another ten square lipped rhinoceros have been poached in the Chobe National Park with reports of poachers operating in Moremi Game Reserve. It seems likely that Botswana will have the rare privilege of having the same species becoming extinct twice ... and all within 25 years!

There is little doubt that the extinction of a species, especially one of Africa's spectacular big five, is an embarrassment to the country concerned, the Government and its people. It is an unnecessary loss of a country's heritage whose custodianship was placed in trust with the powers that be. This trust of custodianship was not only for Botswana's future generations but also for the people of the World.

Botswana has a wildlife heritage that is rated as one of the best in Africa, it still has the potential of picking up the pieces and starting again. This will require a determined effort by Government and a substantial injection of Government funds to bring its wildlife back to the forefront with pride, discipline, toughness, ruthlessness and above all the setting of high standards that will not only benefit the wildlife but the citizens of Botswana as well.

It is sincerely hoped that the plight of **Botswana's rhinoceroses** are the key to the door to the path of light ... to be or not to be, the decision is yours.



POACHING OF RHINO AND ELEPHANTS

There is a major poaching problem in Botswana!

Although attention is only being focussed on poaching recently, it has in fact been going on for a long time. The authorities have simply not been aware of it, except for the last few months. In it only recently that a senior spokesman for the Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks has admitted that there is a poaching problem in Northern Botswana.

Between 1974 - 1981, some 90 White Rhino were imported from South Africa. Under normal conditions, natural breeding should have increased this number to about 225 animals. In a survey carried out by the Rhino and Elephant Foundation, only a handful of White Rhino were spotted from the air. Only two years ago, a senior biologist in the Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks quoted a figure of 172 White Rhino in the Chobe National Park/Moremi complex.

These figures indicate that there has been a serious poaching problem for some time.

The awareness of the latest bout of poaching was sparked by the discovery of a female Rhino, shot by poachers. The discovery was even more shocking and tragic because the dead animal was a Black Rhino, with a calf, which was never found, and surely also died. This was followed by a spate of findings of the carcasses of several White Rhino. In the last six months, the

carcasses of 10 White Rhino have been found. All were shot, and their horns removed. Considering the vast areas of the Chobe National Park, where Rhinos occur, the finding of so many carcasses is surprising.

Perhaps the Rhino in the more inaccessible areas have all been poached, and the poachers are now having to resort to poaching Rhino in areas more accessible to Anti-Poaching forces. If this is indeed the case, then what we are seeing is not only increased poaching, but also more obvious evidence of a long standing problem.

Officials in the Dept. of Nature Conservation in the Caprivi Strip, Namibia, sounded a warning that Northern Botswana would experience heavy poaching pressures towards the end of 1992. That is exactly what we are experiencing now.

In most of the instances of Rhino poaching, especially in the eastern part of Chobe National Park, the poachers come from Zambia. In both of the last two poaching incidents, two Rhino were poached, the poachers were tracked to the Zimbabwean border, and from there to the Zambezi River, where they crossed into Zambia.

In the last instance, the Zambian authorities, with the help of the South African Endangered Wildlife Protection Unit, set a trap. Four of the six poachers involved walked into the trap, carrying Rhino horns. One of the poachers had been slightly wounded in a skirmish with Anti-poaching forces, who had been tracking them from the Rhino carcasses. Present conditions of rain, long grass and thick bush make tracking a very difficult operation.

A capture operation is under way, using the assistance of the Natal Parks Board capture team to try and save the last few remaining Rhino by translocating them to the newly established Khama Rhino Sanctuary near Serowe, where they can be protected. The major problems during this operation will be due to the rain, thick mud and very dense vegetation. This operation should have been carried out at the end of last year, before the rains, when Rhino were still concentrated around water holes.

Once the Rhino problem is over, the Anti-Poaching forces of the Botswana Defence Force, and the Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks will have to turn to the problem of poaching of elephant. Elephant poaching has been going on quietly for many years, from both inside and outside Botswana's borders. With the demise of the Rhino, it is believed that the organised poaching gangs now operating in Botswana will turn their full attention to the poaching of elephant.

At present we have had several instances of elephant poachers crossing the Caprivi Strip (Namibia) and poaching elephants in Botswana, sometimes far inside the borders.

Ivory has been offered to visitors and residents in the area.