



KARATASI

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Conservation in Action: Rhino Programs

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As long as people have been on Earth, rhinoceroses have shared our turf. These great lumbering beasts and their ancestors have inhabited the forests, savannahs, and wetlands of much of the world since well before recorded time. Although prehistoric rhino remains have been found in North America and Europe, the world's five remaining species of rhinos are found today only in limited areas of Asia and Africa. If we don't act quickly, these too will only be known to us from relics, photographs, and the occasional live animal preserved in a zoo.

Rhinos, despite their strong, confident demeanor, thick skin, and protective compressed hair "horns," are much more fragile than they seem. To keep their large bodies nourished, they depend on good forage and/or browse found in the wild in some of the most threatened tropical forest and savannah habitats in the Old World. As these habitats get swallowed up by human uses, rhinos get increasingly crowded into a few actively protected or suitably remote areas, and their populations become small and fragmented. Eventually these populations become small enough and distant enough from each other that finding suitable mates is problematic. When relatives start breeding with each other, genetic problems arise, and fewer viable offspring survive. This problem alone can cause the extinction of the remaining rhino populations on Earth.

But that's not the only threat to rhinos, bad as it is. Rhino horn, those distinctive protuberances on the rhino's snout, have long been sought by various Asian cultures for their perceived medicinal value. The fact that the pharmaceutical properties of rhino horn have never been substantiated by Western science has done nothing to slow the market for them. As the price of rhino horn has skyrocketed, so too has the poaching threat upon living animals throughout their range. (See Rhino Programs, Page 3)



Rhino Programs (Cont'd.)

Consider the facts portrayed in Fig. 1 (Rhinos of the World). Of the five different rhino species remaining, far more than half of the animals alive belong to a single subspecies, the southern white rhino. In contrast, the wild northern white rhino population includes only 30 individuals--all found in one national park in politically unsettled northern Zaire. The Javan rhino population, in entirety, includes less than 100 animals, split between two main areas in Vietnam and Indonesia. The Sumatran rhino, although greater in numbers, is even more fragmented, with tiny populations scattered widely throughout Indonesia and Malaysia. In 1989, a group of concerned conservationists and donors established the nonprofit International Black Rhino Foundation, which in 1993 grew to its more expansive mission as the International Rhino Foundation (IRF). White Oak Conservation Center has been actively supporting these activities since their inception. Today, White Oak, through its sister organization, the Howard Gilman Foundation, is a major supporter of IRF activities, and the Director of White Oak Conservation Center is the current President of the IRF.

The mission of the IRF is to "contribute to rhino conservation by providing technical, administrative, financial services, and support for programs which emphasize intensive management and scientific research both *in situ* (within its natural range) and *ex situ* (outside its natural range) as equally important components of rhino conservation."

Presently, the major conservation projects supported by IRF include:

Sumatran rhino sanctuaries: An intensive management and breeding center for Sumatran rhinos is being developed in Way Kambas National Park, Sumatra, in association with the government of Indonesia, the Indonesian Friends of Rhino Foundation, and other partners. When completed, this facility will include ten 25 acre forest enclosures where remaining Sumatran rhinos can be protected in natural conditions, and other Sumatran rhinos can be introduced to enhance genetic diversity of this fragmentary population. IRF is also helping coordinate and supplement a related Global Environment Facility project focusing on protecting rhinos in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Northern white rhino protection: Salaries and field expenses are provided for guards protecting the remaining northern white rhinos in Garamba National Park, Zaire. White Oak recently hosted a meeting of key Zairian government officials and international conservationists to help determine the best strategy for protecting and increasing the number of animals in this small population.

Zimbabwe rhino protection: IRF provides a helicopter used for black and white rhino conservation activities in Zimbabwe and paid the salary of the Zimbabwe Rhino Conservation Coordinator when that position was active.

Ex situ rhino conservation programs: IRF provides technical assistance for captive propagation programs and maintains the studbooks for rhinos in North American zoos. IRF also coordinates the Global Captive Action Plan and the Global Animal Survival Plan for rhinos. In addition, the IRF is

supporting a number of applied research projects which are needed to enhance the management, propagation, and conservation of all rhino species.

Through support of these and other planned programs, the IRF and White Oak Conservation Center, along with a number of zoos and other institutional and governmental partners, are doing their best to protect and conserve rhinos in Asia and Africa. Despite these efforts, the situation for rhinos on Earth is still shaky. Will rhinos remain? We're not "around the Horn" yet....

Rhinos of the World		
Species/Subspecies	Existing Range	Est. Wild Population
Sumatran rhino (<i>Dicerorhinus sumatrensis</i>)	Indonesia/Malaysia	< 500
Javan rhino (<i>Rhinoceros sondaicus</i>)	Indonesia/Vietnam	100
Indian rhino (<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>)	India/Nepal	1,900
Black rhino (<i>Diceros bicornis</i>)		
Eastern (<i>D.b. michaeli</i>)	Tanzania, Kenya	470
Southern (<i>D.b. minor</i>)	S. Africa, Zimbabwe	1,250
Southwestern (<i>D.b. bicornis</i>)	Namibia	600
Northwestern (<i>D.b. longipes</i>)	Cameroon	30
White rhino (<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>)		
Southern (<i>C.s. simum</i>)	S. Africa, Zimbabwe	6,740
Northern (<i>C.s. cottoni</i>)	Lesotho, Kenya, Namibia, Zaire	30

Fig. 1

Mkuzi Game Reserve

South Africa is now the best stronghold for both species of rhino in Africa. Approximately 94% of the white rhino and 43% of the black rhino surviving in Africa are in South Africa. Over 50% of both species in South Africa are in the province of Natal which has been primarily responsible for the miraculous recovery of the southern white rhino and now it appears, the black rhino. Mkuzi Game Reserve has the third largest population of black rhino and the fourth largest population of white rhino in South Africa. It represents a well-developed Intensive Protection Zone for both species. Despite this past success, the poaching challenge is intensifying in this country, and there have been several incidents of poaching over the last two years. Recognizing the importance of Mkuzi to the survival of rhino in South Africa, the International Rhino Foundation has donated 20 pairs of Pentax Porro Prism 8 x 40 PCF II binoculars along with 20 Trimble Ensign XL GPS units to help the guards to both monitor and track rhino in the field. Without the help of both Trimble Navigation and Pentax Corporation, a donation of this size would not have been possible.