

Reflection over years

Kes Hillman Smith

I should like to thank the wonderful pachyderms of Africa, their amazing habitats and the really cool people who work with them, for an incredible life experience over the many years that Pachyderm has been a voice for the Rhino and Elephant Specialist Groups.

As a young scientist in the early 1970s, I was working in Kenya when there was a major panic about the rate at which elephants were disappearing. With my first husband Chris Hillman, I vomited my way through several elephant total counts in the sweatier parts of Africa, with some of the wise *wazee* of aerial counting... people like Harvey Croze and Mike Norton Griffiths. Then as assistant to Iain Douglas Hamilton, one of the wilder pilots of the world, I learned to vomit less, counting elephants over Africa and vertically photographing them from door-less aircraft, as we did the first pan African Elephant Survey and Conservation Action Plan. The IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group emerged in strength from Iain's work and from many dedicated elephant conservationists.

What also emerged was the suffering of the rhinos in this poaching frenzy. Less to start with, their deaths meant proportionally more to their populations. David (Jonah) Western gave me the chance to do a similar rhino survey, supported by the then New York Zoological Society and through this process the IUCN/SSC African Rhino Specialist Group was born. I was its first Chairperson, but really more in the role of Executive Officer at that stage. We tried to start with at least one person on the protection side and another on research, usually one from a government agency and one non-government in each rhino range state. The rhino group has expanded over the years, with so many really great individuals, pulling together for the survival of rhinos. I am honoured to still be part of it and commend those who have led it.

The work of everyone in these two groups really brought elephants and rhinos back from the brink in those early years. There have been ups and downs, but pachyderm conservation has had very many successes and is a strong force to face the challenges.

Travelling and communicating throughout Africa, doing the rhino survey, was a great experience, and made far more so by doing it with the venerable Major Ian Grimwood. Ex Indian Army, ex Chief Game Warden of Northern Rhodesia and Kenya and initiator of Operation Oryx, he was a fantastic character, well known and respected wherever we went. Built like a stick of biltong he only drank water mixed with his whiskey and breathed clean air in the brief interludes between cigarettes, but he could still walk me off my feet in the bush. We had many an adventure, especially in his old Land Rover that frequently broke down.

From this we went into battle to raise support to save the Northern White Rhinos and their habitats. After studying the introduction of black rhinos to Pilanesberg and churning round Sudan and Zaire looking for northern whites, Fraser Smith and I started with the Garamba National Park Project. Although I had initially committed only to a year, Garamba, Zaire/DRC and the rhinos and elephants were our life for well over 22 years, followed by more rhinos in Selous.

Africa is never without its challenges, and that is part of what makes it so worthwhile. I have been arrested four times by AK 47 toting youth, and three times our aircraft have been hit by the bullets fired at us. We have had 'incidents' three other times too, but we have been lucky. Over the years we have lost many brave colleagues in the conservation battles. Politics and negotiating one's way through the myriad of what some call corruption and others consider a way of life, give times of frustration, depression, resignation and amusement! In Garamba we were always up against the challenge of the war in adjacent Sudan, and two wars in DRC disrupted efforts even more. However, the success of the first project aimed specifically at tackling conservation in war, backed by UNESCO and UNF, and the way that it brought together all the stakeholders in World Heritage conservation in Congo was especially thrilling, even though that success had to be measured in minimizing loss!

Most of all however the thrill came in finding each new baby rhino born, watching them grow, interact and gain their own territories or produce their children and grandchildren, running free in these beautiful wild places.