

Even Shorn of Horns, Rhinos of Zimbabwe Face Poacher Calamity

By BILL KELLER

HWANGE NATIONAL PARK,
Zimbabwe

THE black rhinoceros wore a radio collar and her horns had been shorn with a chain saw to make her less valuable.

Even so, Million Sibanda shouldered an AK-47 assault rifle as he circled in, trickling dust through his fingers to make sure he was downwind. The gun was not for the rhino, but for poachers, who would kill the beast just for the pathetic stump remaining on her face — and would kill a park scout like Mr. Sibanda for being in the way.

Mr. Sibanda and Stewart Towindo, a park ecologist, crouched 40 yards from where the rhino and her bull calf stood browsing, like two gray frigates moored among the thorn bushes, and spoke in a whisper. "I'd rather have them with horns," said Mr. Towindo, gazing wistfully at the defaced animal, and shaking his head at what man has done to nature in the name of saving the rhino.

In the war for the future of the black rhinoceros, one of the planet's most ancient and endangered mammals, Zimbabwe has been an embarrassing rout.

Even the leaders of the conservation campaign use phrases like "spectacular failure" to describe the country's calamitous five-year decline from Africa's richest haven, with as many as 2,000 black rhinos, to a ravaged population of fewer than 300 today.

Beginning in May 1992, Zimbabwe darted every rhinoceros it could find with a tranquilizer gun and sawed off its horns, on the theory that poachers would bypass a hornless animal.

But so dramatically have Zimbabwe's tactics failed that the country now proposes a radical new approach: undercutting the poachers by legalizing trade in rhino horns, which are prized in Asia where they

A population of 2,000 black rhinos has plummeted to 300.

are ground into a fever-reducing potion and in Yemen for ceremonial dagger handles.

Mike Kock, the state veterinarian who oversees the rhinos in Zimbabwe, envisions state farms where herds of rhinos would be harvested like flocks of sheep. The horns grow back about three inches a year.

"This is one example of a ban that has failed completely, and it's failed because the demand is too great," he said.

In November, at a meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., of the rhino committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which is the main international treaty on wildlife trade, South Africa and Zimbabwe plan to support a resolution lowering the protected status of the more plentiful white rhino, as a first step toward legal trade in the horns.

Despite the new respect South Africa commands after the election of President Nelson Mandela, the committee is virtually certain to reject the proposal. The public outcry would be too great, and even among wildlife officials in southern Africa, where commercial use of wildlife is a favored method of conservation, there is debate about whether it would drive the price low enough to put poachers out of business.

Critics say the enthusiasm of Zimbabwe and South Africa for legalization has much to do with the fact that the two countries are sitting on tons of rhino horns, stockpiles amassed from contraband and dehorning which would be worth millions of dollars if the ban were to be lifted.

In Zimbabwe's case, the critics say, it is not the ban that has failed,



Photographs by M. Waller for The New York Times

The horns have been cut from black rhinos, like this female in Zimbabwe, in an attempt to save them.

but the Government, which has been unwilling to do the one thing that does seem to save rhinos: spend money.

"The Zimbabwe budget for national parks in 1981 was \$18 million," said Esmond Bradley Martin, a Nairobi-based consultant to the World Wildlife Fund, a conservation organization in Washington. "It is \$5 million today. Since the early 1980's, the Government has continually put less and less into their parks. That's why it's been a disaster."

As a special United Nations envoy for rhinoceros conservation last year, Mr. Martin pressed Zimbabwe unsuccessfully to do what most other countries rich in wildlife have done: raise park admission fees, at least for affluent foreign visitors, and earmark the money for conservation.

By spending money on protection, Mr. Martin said, South Africa has increased the number of black rhinos from a few dozen to about 900, now the largest number in Africa. Namibia and Kenya, which invested heavily in intelligence networks to foil poachers, have also made headway.

Thanks to those countries, the black rhino's plummet towards extinction, from 65,000 in 1970, is thought to have leveled off at around 2,500 today.

But Zimbabwe has not given its parks the same priority. It charges visitors a fraction of the fees demanded in other countries (or at the private resorts in Zimbabwe itself). Admission to this park, for example, costs \$2.50, and a cozy bungalow for two people rents for \$15 a night.

Wildlife officials here agree that

Zimbabwe has starved its parks, but say they have no incentive to lobby for higher fees. The money the parks generate goes to pay other Government expenses, including a growing military budget.

Glenn Tatham, the chief warden of Zimbabwe's parks, says his staff is demoralized by low pay, danger (four rangers have been killed by poachers in the last decade) and the lack of success. They are up against seasoned killers, who perfected their skills by exterminating the rhinos of

Zambia, then moved south across the Zambezi River in search of new hunting grounds.

Rangers here say the poachers may cross the long, poorly policed border, kill a rhinoceros, hack off the horn and disappear. Or they may camp and prey on a park for months before lugging their booty back to the well-established wholesale horn market in Lusaka, the Zambian capital.

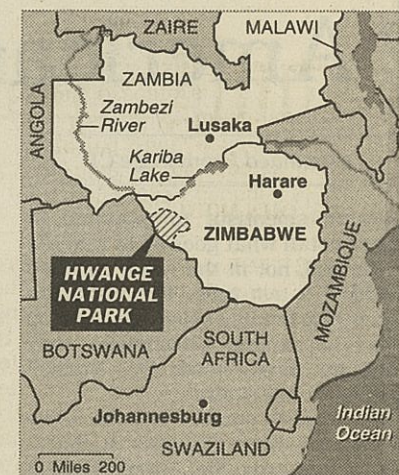
Mr. Tatham says the fact that no rhinos have been poached here since February is a misleading consolation. "Yes, there's been a de-escalation of rhino poaching," he said. "But there are very few rhinos left to poach."

Although in theory the dehorning might have deterred poaching, no sooner was it complete than the department ran out of money to pay its scouts for four months. Poaching gangs swarmed into this, the largest national park, slaughtering most of Hwange's dehorned white rhinos and many of the hornless black ones.

Dehorning, Zimbabwe learned, did not make rhinos invulnerable. Poachers killed for the stump. They killed to save themselves wasted time. They killed because in the thick brush they could not tell whether a rhino had a horn.

Although there is no evidence for it, Mr. Tatham and others speculate that horn syndicates may have ordered dehorned rhino killed to raise the value of hoarded horn. "When the last rhino gets shot, or dies from loneliness, the horn will be like diamonds," the chief warden said.

After watching Zimbabwe — and listening to the outcry from animal



The New York Times

Rhino poachers have swarmed into Hwange National Park.

lovers scandalized by the buzz-saw surgery — other countries with rhinos, aside from Namibia and tiny Swaziland, have declined to take up dehorning. Some studies have also suggested that dehorned mothers are less able to defend infants against predators.

Although most rhino specialists still believe dehorning can help reduce poaching, they agree it is useless without policing and a costly, periodic trimming of the stumps.

"What went wrong was they didn't spend the money to look after the rhino after horns were removed," said Mr. Martin. "And you have to re-dehorn. For Zambian poachers a year or year and half of horn is worth the risk."

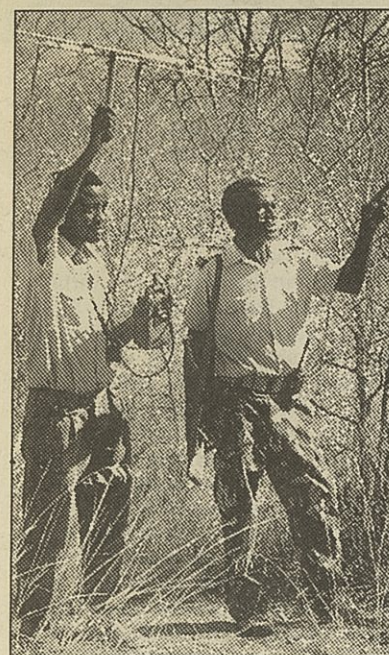
Zimbabwe's latest tactic has been to relocate the rhinos in smaller areas where they can be better guarded. Most of the country's black rhinos have been moved either to three preserves on private farms or to four public "intensive protection zones" like one here in Hwange, where the park service can concentrate its limited manpower.

"This is the last stronghold within the stronghold," said Mr. Tatham.

For easier guarding, all the rhinos who roam these zones are being fixed with collars holding transmitters that can be tracked with a directional antenna.

But Norman English, the warden who presides over the protection zone in Hwange, where perhaps 50 rhinos wander over 800 square miles, said the program is already falling short. Instead of the 67 scouts he expected to have patrolling his domain, he has 38. For this perilous work, a veteran scout earns about \$50 a month.

"You can have all the technology you like," he said. "It's not going to save rhinos unless you've got guys on the ground."



Stewart Towindo, left, and Million Sibanda tracking black rhinos wearing radio collars.