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# Fresh surge of poaching hits Africa's beleaguered rhinos

BY LAURA HARTSTONE

Africa's rhinos are facing a new surge of poaching that is forcing a rethink about how to protect them across the continent. Many spokesmen for their protection say the wave of illicit killing is unprecedented. Helicopters, night vision goggles and expert marksmen are all being used as the price of illicit rhino ivory overtakes that of an equivalent weight of gold.

Despite their fierce appearance, rhinos have a wide geographic range, can tolerate many different habitats and pose very little competition to domestic livestock, especially the Black rhinos that browse rather than graze like their White sister species. There is no doubt that without human pressures, they would be multiplying, instead of facing the threat of extermination, as they do today.

Prior to the 1970s, the African continent was full of rhinos. Black rhinos (including all four subspecies) were estimated to number over 70,000 individuals. In just a short time, poaching changed this. During the 1970s and

1980s, poaching became an epidemic and by 1993, the Black rhino population had plummeted to just 2,475 individuals, a 96% decrease. The West African subspecies was completely eradicated, leaving only three remaining subspecies on the continent. The Northern White rhinos, though difficult to estimate due to their home range in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), were thought to number 2,360 individuals. By 2007, this number had decreased to only four individuals, a 99.8% decrease.

The Serengeti ecosystem, once home to between 500 and 700 Eastern Black rhino, saw a harrowing decline; in the Serengeti National Park, only two individuals remained by 1978. Similarly in Kenya, populations saw a massive decline and several animals from Tsavo were moved to South Africa to save them from poaching and to alleviate the human pressure that was causing their decline.

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Tanzania. Poaching has startled security officials and awakened politicians. Park authorities across the continent are re-evaluating their management schemes and organisations are doing their best to support these efforts.

David Mabunda, chief executive officer of South African National Parks (SANParks), said early this year that 2010 "will always be remembered as one of the worst years for conservation in the Republic of South Africa because of the ruthless assault on our rhino population". He said that in 2010 South Africa lost 333 rhinos with 162 suspected poachers being arrested.

Similarly in Kenya, poachers have targeted protected areas with the highest security. Authorities have realised that their fences are not impenetrable and that pressures from Chinese workers, now based locally while constructing superhighways, is helping drive demand for rhino horn (see SWARA 2009:03).

John Pameri, head of security and chief ranger at Lewa Wildlife

Rhinos in Ngorongoro Crater.

**\$60,000**

Price of one kilo  
of rhino horn

**2,475**

No. of Black  
rhinos in Africa in 1993

**70,000**

No. of Black rhinos, including all  
four subspecies, in Africa in 1970

**The WWF (World Wildlife Fund), in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), upheld a study released in 1983 by Hoffmann-La Roche, a pharmaceutical firm, that found no evidence that rhino horns had any medicinal value.**

Conservancy in Kenya, observed, "This is the first time we have seen such a rise in poaching. We've never seen anything on this scale."

Tanzania has been on edge ever since the arrival from South Africa in May 2010 of five rhinos that were repatriated to Serengeti as part of an effort to recreate a stronghold population in the area, an ecosystem indigenous to the Eastern Black rhino. Prior to the release of the five, security was heightened, rangers trained and a new Serengeti Rhino Protection Unit of highly skilled rangers was put in place. But the National Park was not immune to illegal hunting. At the end of December 2010, one of the

five was shot down and brutally hacked, solely for its horns.

Tanzania's President Jakaya Kikwete, who had been present in the Serengeti National Park for the arrival of the rhinos, was appalled by the incident. Dr. Markus Borner, the Frankfurt Zoological Society's (FZS) programme director for Africa, highlighted the president's concern, saying, "TANAPA (Tanzania National Parks Authority) and the police, under the personal direction of President Kikwete, have moved fast and effectively to apprehend the suspects." Borner's hope is that this incident will be a wake-up call for all wildlife agencies in Tanzania.

Tanzania is not alone – poaching in Namibia, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe continues to rise as well. One kilogramme (2.2 pounds) of horn is now being purchased for over \$60,000, a rate shockingly higher than that paid for a kilogramme of gold. The players

receiving the majority of the profit are not the locals who are sought out to do the killing. "We must educate our people from an early age about the importance of rhinos so that they do not succumb to any amount of payment that encourages them to assist in poaching rhinos. We never find the ones demanding these resources to be the ones doing the poaching. Unfortunately, it is our locals who are paid to poach," stated Ephantus Mugo, environmental education officer for the Laikipia Wildlife Forum. There is little doubt that security must be heightened and education expanded and improved.

The horns are not sought for use as an aphrodisiac, as many believe. They are traditionally used to cure fevers, high blood pressure and other ailments. They were once prized as good luck charms and used as dagger handles in Yemen and Oman, a demand that has declined in recent years. Apart from antique and medicinal uses, the rhino and its horn face no other demands from human populations.

Several research studies have been carried out to address the inherent "powers" rhino horn is believed to hold. The WWF (World Wildlife Fund), in collaboration with the International Union for

PHOTO BY: GUY MARRIS



Rhinos in Ngorongoro Crater.





PHOTO BY: FRANKFURT ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A rhino killed by poachers in the Serengeti.

Conservation of Nature (IUCN), upheld a study released in 1983 by Hoffmann-La Roche, a pharmaceutical firm, that found no evidence for any medicinal value in rhino horns.

Dr. Arne Schiotz, director of conservation for WWF, reported bluntly, "This proves that rhino horn is of no use to anyone except the original owner. You would get the same effect from chewing your own fingernails." The study was later confirmed again by the Zoological Society of London, which found no proven medicinal uses for the horn. Even in China, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1990, a study found no evidence to prove the horn has any curative properties.

The past year has tested security measures across the continent and has forced authorities to increase their efforts. Richard Moller, chief conservation officer at Lewa, stated that, "The demand and price for rhino horn is staggering. As a result, no rhino sanctuary, not even one with the manpower and resources of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, is immune from poaching." Poaching has become an incredibly sophisticated operation, with hunters using shotguns, some enhanced with silencers, VHF detection

devices and night vision equipment. The most professional marksmen even use helicopters to get in and out quickly. A CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) report, published

### 2009

The year four Northern White rhinos with breeding capabilities were relocated to Ol Pejeta Reserve in Kenya from their previous home in the Dvur Kralové Czech Zoo (SWARA 2010:01).

in 2009 found that "AK-47 assault rifles and .303 calibre rifles have been the most commonly used weapons but recently, heavier calibre arms (e.g. .375s and .458s) are now being used."

VHF radios, GPS and satellites have helped to increase security. Fencing has proven to be mainly ineffective, except where rhinos live in a small

sanctuary within a reserve. Intelligence and ground patrols can be effective if properly managed and ongoing training provided. The necessity for ongoing anti-poaching efforts in regions where rhinos are based is crucial. Support from local governments is critical and assistance from outside donors often helpful. Protecting rhino populations for years to come is in no way an inexpensive undertaking. Yet it is clear that if the efforts are carried out half-heartedly, they will fail.

Despite all efforts to increase security, enhance training regimes, establish additional security outposts, and keep strong positive relationships with local communities, there are still outlying risks associated with hosting rhinos. It is clearly the responsibility of those hosting rhinos to do all that they can to reduce the risk, but it is also incumbent upon authorities, in nations where demand for rhino horn is high, to educate their communities and stop the demand.

Translocating, repatriating, reintroducing, introducing and restocking areas are expensive undertakings. Fischer and Lindenmayer (2000) explored several similar efforts that incurred great costs. The California

**The success of rhinos for years to come will depend on collaboration. Governments must decide to protect wild lands rather than allow development to overtake them, thus sustaining suitable habitats.**

Condors' reintroduction efforts to the Grand Canyon National Park cost over \$1 million. After the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the United States forked out over \$80,000 for every individual sea otter that was rehabilitated and reintroduced, for a final cost of \$17 million. In Yellowstone National Park, Grey wolves were reintroduced after their importance as a keystone species to the ecosystem was discovered – the effort lasted eight years and cost over \$ 6.7 million.

Rhino relocations have become common to safeguard rhinos from disease, political instability and environmental problems. In late 2009, the last four Northern White rhinos with breeding capabilities were relocated to Ol Pejeta Reserve in Kenya from their previous home in the Dvur Kralové Czech Zoo (SWARA 2010:01). Richard Vigne, chief executive officer of Ol Pejeta, said this was truly the last hope for this species' survival. Northern White rhinos

are thought extinct in the wild, so these individuals in captivity hold the key to survival.

Similarly, the Serengeti Rhino Repatriation Project will no doubt be a costly initiative as it brings 32 rhinos from South Africa back to the Serengeti ecosystem. The hopes here go beyond tourists' demands to see the "Big Five". The overarching goal is to create a stronghold population for the Eastern Black rhino in their indigenous habitat.

Though risky, rhino relocations have proven to be highly successful in the past. In the early 1900s, Southern White rhinos had declined to a population of just over 20 individuals, all in South Africa. Successful efforts to encourage breeding and relocate the Southern White rhinos to their indigenous habitats increased the population to over 17,500 individuals.

"The Big Five" refers to the most prized trophies for hunters – elephant, leopard, buffalo, lion and rhino. Surprisingly enough, all of these are

still sought out by marksmen across the globe. White rhino trophy hunting is priced between \$50,000 and \$150,000 while Black rhino trophy hunting costs between \$250,000 and \$350,000. For those who are just interested in the sport of shooting a rhino, "green hunting" is available at a much lower cost (\$8,000 for White rhino and \$20,000 for Black). This type of hunting involves shooting a rhino with a dart gun, having your photo taken next to it and then giving it an antidote to wake it up.

It is difficult to know whether saving one species will save many. If efforts can generate large amounts of funding that in turn help preserve the ecosystems where these animals exist, it may be well worth the marketing angle of just saving one species. For instance, if we were to focus on the conservation of the Hornbill, it could mean that we would also help save many critical forest habitats. And if we "save the rhino", it would be a clear sign that we have also solved dire security threats.

But who are we to point fingers at? Those demanding rhino horn in Asia? Those poaching the rhinos in Africa? Governments lacking environmental and education curriculums?

The success of rhinos for years to come will depend on collaboration. Governments must decide to protect wild lands rather than allow development to overtake them, thus sustaining suitable habitats. Authorities must work to protect and manage these areas and keep them safe for animals and for tourists. Institutions must provide adequate education, both to professionals and to the general public.

Richard Emslie, scientific officer of IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group, observed that, "where there is political will, dedicated conservation programmes and good law enforcement, rhino numbers have increased in both Africa and Asia." ●



One of five rhinos transferred to the Serengeti in May 2010.

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