



COULD OL PEJETA BE A NEW START FOR THE WORLD'S RAREST?



By KES HILLMAN

The Northern White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) is a different subspecies from the Southern Whites (*C. s. simum*) and they have been physically separated by over 2000 km throughout recorded history.

When William Powell Cotton first “discovered” the Northern Whites in Sudan in 1900, the Southern White Rhinos that had once existed over vast tracts of southern Africa were themselves facing possible extinction. Apparently, they were reduced to two tiny pockets, one of which had been encompassed in 1897 in the Umfolozi Game Reserve in South Africa. Then, in the 1920s, concern was raised for them. Intensive protection in the fenced Umfolozi and Hluhluwe Game Reserves enabled them to become so numerous that by the 1960s, they began to be translocated to other protected areas throughout their former range. Now there are over 17,500 throughout Africa.

Top: Fatu follows Najin out of the bomas into a small bit of big wide Africa

In the early 20th century, the Northern Whites probably numbered in the thousands and were distributed from West Nile Province in the corner of Uganda throughout south Sudan west of the Nile, northern Belgian Congo (later Zaire, then Democratic Republic of Congo), Central African Republic to even the southern edge of Chad. When I travelled throughout Africa between 1977 and 1983, rhinos and elephants were being hard hit by poaching. I was working then on the first pan-African survey and conservation Action Plan for elephants with Dr Iain Douglas Hamilton and, as chair and developer of the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group, doing a similar survey of rhinos, much of it with the venerable Major Ian Grimwood.

Based on information from knowledgeable people in the field, we initially came up with an estimate of less than 1,000 Northern

Whites, but by 1983, after several ground and aerial surveys, this was refined to less than 100. They were probably already extinct in Chad, West Nile in Uganda, most of CAR, much of Sudan except for pockets remaining in Southern National Park and the Shambe area, and from Zaire, except in Garamba National Park. They were then, and even more desperately now, classified by the IUCN Red Data List as Critically Endangered.

We found that while conservation of Southern White Rhinos was well supported in well managed and protected areas, the Northern Whites existed in areas that were receiving almost no support and yet were some of the most wild and spectacular protected areas with impressive populations of other valuable species. So, both for their own intrinsic value and for their value as “flagship species” giving a much broader conservation benefit, Northern White Rhinos



became the highest priority in the African Rhino Action Plan, and we set about raising funds to support them. At that stage the two focal areas for conservation were the Shambe Game Reserve in Sudan and Garamba National Park in Zaire.

Shambe was where many of the rhinos in captivity had been caught, including Sudan. But although on our first surveys we had seen rhinos there, by the time of an intensive survey in 1983, all we could find were carcasses. It was also becoming clear that what had seemed like the end of a long civil war in Sudan was merely a lull and started fighting again. So we focused on Garamba and developed a project there for conservation of

the park ecosystem with the rhinos as a key species. I was asked by the Scientific and Technical Director of the Zaire Wildlife Department, the then Institut Zairois pour la Conservation de la Nature (IZCN), to work at Garamba setting up monitoring. I said, "Well, maybe for a year".

Twenty-two years later, we are still there. Immediately prior to this I had been working on the introduction of black rhinos to Pilanesberg Game Reserve (now National Park) in Bophuthatswana, and Fraser Smith, who was a ranger there, drove up with me to do the Northern White survey in 1983. We were married at Garamba, raised our kids there and dedicated ourselves to its conservation for

Below:
Pete Morkel, Kes and Mbayma fitting a radio collar on a sub-adult Northern White Rhino in Garamba National Park

over two decades. In the 1983 aerial and ground survey of Garamba, we estimated 13 to 20 rhinos, but the carcass to live ratio had been 1 to 9 -- more dead than alive.

I built up a picture of how many rhinos there were by individual recognition using regular surveys and studies from the air and on foot. Over time we knew there had been 15 and they were reproducing. There was a staff of IZCN rangers and officers struggling with lack of funds, no vehicles or equipment and salaries of less than \$10 per month. But poaching was stopped in the Southern rhino and elephant sectors, and in just over eight years, the rhino and elephant populations doubled.

Systems of monitoring the rhinos, ecosystem and law enforcement were running, with everyone contributing. We knew all the rhinos by natural or ear-notch characteristics and their ranges, social dynamics and all the maternal lineages, and they all had names. The project worked and supported

We found that while conservation of Southern White Rhinos was well supported in well managed and protected areas, the Northern Whites existed in areas that were receiving almost no support





The history of the Northern White Rhino has been beset by war, killing and a plethora of easy arms and ammunition. In the 1960s there were estimated to be as many as 1,300 in and around Garamba but after independence the country dissolved into civil war and over 90% of the rhinos were killed. With re-development of the conservation authority, numbers rose again to nearly 500 in 1976. Then the wave of poaching throughout Africa struck, and rhinos dropped to 15 and elephants from 22,000 to 4,500. Again with international support they doubled, but Garamba is on the border with Sudan and in 1991 the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) took the Sudanese town of Maridi near the border and over 80,000 people flooded across, with enormous numbers of weapons.

Top:
David & Joseph
giving Suni his
morning brush

Pictures:
Berry White, Kes
Hillman and Fraser
Smith

our Congolese counterparts. Since the monitoring guided and facilitated the rhinos' protection, in 1992 we got permission to put on radio transmitters. This was the first time we really got to know Dr Pete Morkel, the vet who has now brought these four rhinos to Ol Pejeta.

In 1995, following a Northern White rhino meta-population meeting in USA with representatives from Dvur Kralove and San Diego, the two zoos holding Northern White Rhinos, we found ourselves designing a new idea for horn transmitters, with Drs Pete and Billy Karesch, (the field vet of Wildlife Conservation Society), in the freight shed at New York airport, where Pete was transporting some Sable antelope. The transmitter was to be inserted in the base of the horn, and up a long hollow in its centre for the antenna.

The wild Northern White Rhinos were the first to receive this new design, which with modern smaller size is basically the same as that used on the rhinos now at Ol Pejeta. The antenna hole had to be drilled down the centre of the horn from the tip to meet a transmitter hole drilled from the side of the base, and all had to be

done in minimum time in the bush with a portable generator while also taking all other measurements, ear notching, blood samples, tooth impressions and monitoring vital signs.

Illegal killing was an insidious presence, especially when SPLA training camps were established just across the border. Rhino numbers stabilised at around 30 and elephants at around 11,000, even though the rhinos continued to reproduce at an average rate of 9.7% per annum. It was so exciting each time we found a new calf, and especially so as the young females grew up to have their own babies.

Even when the 'Liberation War' in Congo struck, with Laurent Kabila moving through the country to take Kinshasa from Mobutu and the AFDL forces arriving at Garamba in February 1997, to oust the mercenaries who had been occupying it, rhino numbers did not fall. The number of young born replaced the adults killed, although at the same time half the elephants, two-thirds of the buffalo and three-quarters of the hippos disappeared. Under the new regime of the Democratic Republic of Congo, conservation began to recover and a minimum of 29 rhinos remained.



But in August 1998 a second civil war erupted. This time all of us working in the five World Heritage Sites of the DRC were able to pull together to develop and implement a big UN Foundation/UNESCO project for Conservation of Biodiversity in Armed Conflict. This was the first time such a programme to keep conservation going during war had happened. Despite a divided country, this project kept the rangers receiving salaries and able to work with political support, through the flexibility of the NGO projects.

But in August 1998, a second civil war erupted. This time we were able to pull together with field staff of all five World Heritage Sites in DRC to develop and implement a big UN Foundation/UNESCO project for Conservation of Biodiversity in Armed Conflict. This was the first time such a programme to keep conservation going in war had happened. Despite a divided country, this project meant the rangers received salaries and were able through the flexibility of the NGO projects. Garamba's project at that time was supported almost entirely through the International Rhino Foundation, with the back up of a Frankfurt Zoological Society Cessna 206, which Fraser flew, and our own Piper Super Cruiser that we both flew. This UNF programme was really key and countered the effects of war for all five sites and for their five rhinos, gorillas and elephants.

Despite the challenges, the rhinos continued to breed well and numbers stayed stable, until mid-2003. The civil war in Sudan had a ceasefire around this time and there was probably less control of the armed rebel fighters who had never known anything but life by the gun. From 30 rhinos in our survey in April, by August I could only find 22 and fresh elephant and




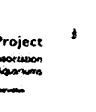
THE TRANSLLOCATION OF THESE FOUR NORTHERN WHITE RHINOS (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC TO THE OL PEJETA CONSERVANCY IN KENYA WAS DONE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

WE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE FOLLOWING ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO MADE THIS TRANSLLOCATION POSSIBLE:

Matsarol Foundation, Australia

Whitley Animal Protection Trust Prince Bernhard Fund for Nature The Chandramohan Family Foundation (Zoomungus World Foundation) Tudor Investments (Paul Tudor Jones) Montague-Panton Charitable Trust

Ministerstvo životního prostředí České republiky **PHL** SUPPLY CHAIN  **SD Pomáháme**

some rhino carcasses littered the inner core of the southern sector. An emergency plan focused on training, equipment, recruitment and trying to get more support.

The training and more focused anti-poaching went well until in May 2004, when the fierce northern Sudanese 'muharekeen' horsemen were able to penetrate the previously SPLA-held border area and enter the park. Skilled marksmen on wiry horses, who have traditionally lived as elephant hunters and would die rather than face dishonour, they were a fearful enemy for guards on foot. Whole groups of elephants and many of the rhinos were gunned down. It was finally accepted by the wildlife department (ICCN) that up to five of the Northern White Rhinos should be brought out of Garamba for safe-keeping until they could go back, hopefully having reproduced in the meantime.

Several options were examined. Ol Pejeta was chosen as the holding site, with protection, good habitat and reasonable proximity to facilitate eventual return, plus backing from its financial support and a partnership with FFI. Despite agreement from 90% of key people, post war politics reared its ugly head and this rescue of some rhinos from Garamba never happened. African Parks Foundation now partners ICCN in running Garamba but no rhinos have been seen there for the last two years, though I still hope that some exist, despite the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) having

Top: Partners who helped in supporting the translocation of the rhinos

Article: Kes Hillman Smith PhD. Born in England, Kes came to Kenya in 1973. With a BSc and PhD in Zoology she worked on various projects, including the first pan-African Elephant Survey. She was asked to do a pan African Rhino Survey and Action Plan, starting the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group and becoming its chair. From this, Northern White Rhinos became priority and led to 22 years in Garamba National Park in D.R.Congo

been in the area, killing hundreds of civilians and even 10 ICCN staff and families. With the captive animals getting older and time running out for the species, the Czech zoo made the bold decision to send them back to Africa to be in their natural conditions for a last chance and for the species to survive.

The rhinos chosen were those most likely to breed. The female Nesari remaining at Dvur Kralove is very old, as is Saut, the male who is Fatu's father. The male at San Diego is also very old and not breeding, while tests on the two females there have shown they would be unlikely ever to be able to breed. But Najin successfully gave birth to Fatu and, aged nine, there is no physical reason why she should not have a long, reproductive life ahead. Already, they are showing signs of natural rhino behaviour, with Sudan, clearly the dominant male, spray-urinating and foot-dragging and wanting to mate, Suni as a nervous subordinate male, who will need his own territory in order to breed, and Fatu taking confidence from being with her mother.

With an understanding of the normal, social dynamics we observed in Garamba to guide their management and good protection, there is every chance of success with the hope that we will not lose the rarest large mammal on earth or its natural habitats, and that one day their progeny can be re-introduced to their true, wild home. ●