

# NOTES FROM THE AFRICAN RHINO SPECIALIST GROUP

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## Poaching upsurge in Garamba National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo

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In the second half of 2003 there has been a major upsurge in elephant poaching in Garamba National Park in the north-east corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (fig. 1), with a switch from meat to ivory as the driving force. The carcasses of two poached rhinos have been found with horns and meat removed, and a horn was offered for sale in Ariwara in June, which was earlier than the estimated date of death of the carcasses and therefore probably came from yet another carcass.

The park, which covers 4900 km<sup>2</sup> of rolling tall-grass savannah, bush and woodland and its surrounding 7527 km<sup>2</sup> of wooded reserves, has been recently supporting over 6900 elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) of a unique species intergrade, some 14,480 buffalo (*Synceros caffer brachyceros*), the last 30 northern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*), and it is the only location in DRC where the rare Congo giraffe (*Girafa camelopardalis congoensis*) can be seen. By virtue of its conservation importance, the park was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980, and like all the World Heritage Sites in DRC it is currently on the Danger list.

The protected areas in DRC are staffed by the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN). Since 1984 the conservation of the park has been supported technically and financially by the Garamba National Park Project, working in partnership with ICCN.

The work has been funded by a number of donors and the project is currently coordinated by the International Rhino Foundation. The Frankfurt Zoological Society provides an aircraft for logistical support and several other organizations, such as the United Nations Foundation/UNESCO, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Save the Rhino International, the Wildlife Conservation Fund (WCF) and the Zoological Society of London, are substantial supporters. Until August a reconnaissance aircraft belonging to WCF and the Garamba Project personnel did all the rhino and anti-poaching survey work and back up. In the current poaching crisis it has just been lost, fortunately with no loss of life.

In the six years before the start of the project, elephant numbers had dropped from 22,000 to a low of 4500 and rhinos from about 490 to 15. In the first eight years of the project, both elephant and rhino numbers doubled, proving the suitability of the ecosystem if protection can be adequate.

Since 1991 the threat to large mammals, generated largely by the side effects of the war in adjacent Sudan, has been gradually increasing and has moved down through the park towards the southern sector where the elephants and rhinos are found (fig. 2). This threat has recently escalated to crisis proportions that threaten the rhinos with extinction if we cannot urgently tackle it successfully. Three phases have led to the current situation.

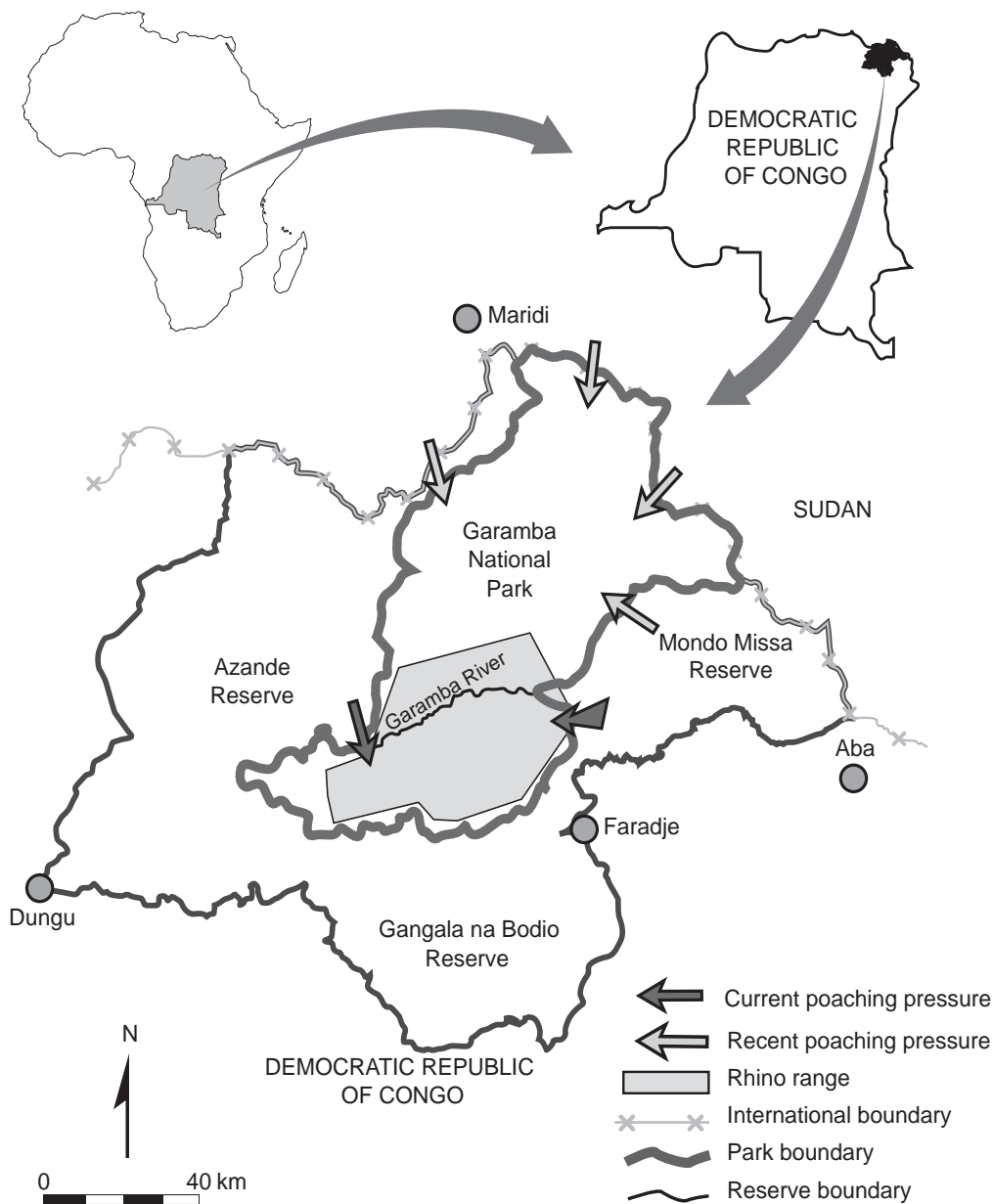


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Garamba National Park and the rhino range.

### Phase 1: 1991–1997

In 1991 the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) took the town of Maridi in southern Sudan, 30 km from the northern boundary of the park. This resulted in over 80,000 refugees fleeing Sudan and settling around the park and in military camps near

its northern border. The Sudanese brought with them arms and ammunition and have been involved in supplying meat for the commercial bushmeat trade. Poachers took mainly buffalo in the north and centre of the park, but despite strong resistance from the guards, they gradually moved south, with significant impact on the distribution and number of buffalo

## Phase 2: 1997–2003

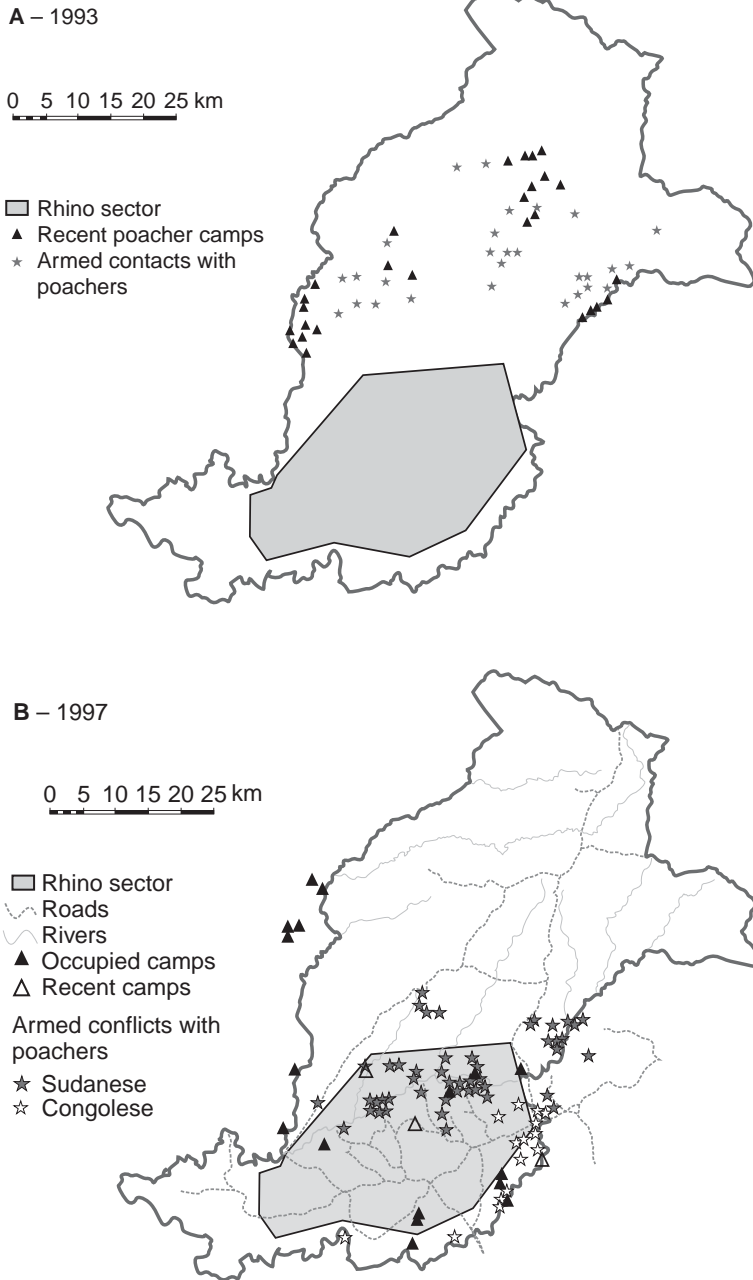


Figure 2. A) In 1993 most of the poaching was in the north and centre of the park, as law enforcement monitoring results show. The driving force was for meat, with camps for smoking it being relatively detectable. B) Despite active antipoaching activity, the front line of poaching moved south. During the main conflict of the liberation war in 1997 in DRC, poaching moved right into the southern sector, which supported the rhinos and in 1995 had the highest density of elephants in Africa. Over 70% of the armed contacts for the last 12 years were with Sudanese and the minority with Congolese.

The civil conflict in DRC, which has continued since 1997, precipitated an upsurge in poaching, because the guards were disarmed and anti-poaching was curtailed for several months. Poaching in 1997 reduced elephant numbers by half from 11,175 ( $\pm 3670$ ) to 5874 ( $\pm 1339$ ). This devastation proved the importance of active presence of field staff, and as soon as possible conservation activities in the park recommenced. When the second war broke in 1998, the committed partner projects and the ICCN staff of the five World Heritage Sites developed a project with the UN Foundation and UNESCO, which provided the money to keep paying the ICCN park guards, provided diplomatic support to facilitate working in a country at war and developed supportive collaboration between sites. The Garamba Project remained committed throughout to supporting the conservation of the park. The number of rhinos remained stable during this period with 12 births as well as losses. The commitment of the ICCN guards in eastern Congo during these difficult years led to the Society for Conservation Biology awarding them Distinguished Service Awards in 2001 in recognition of their continued work in the face of danger and difficulty. Much of the equipment, vehicles, radio communications and patrol observation posts were looted or destroyed.

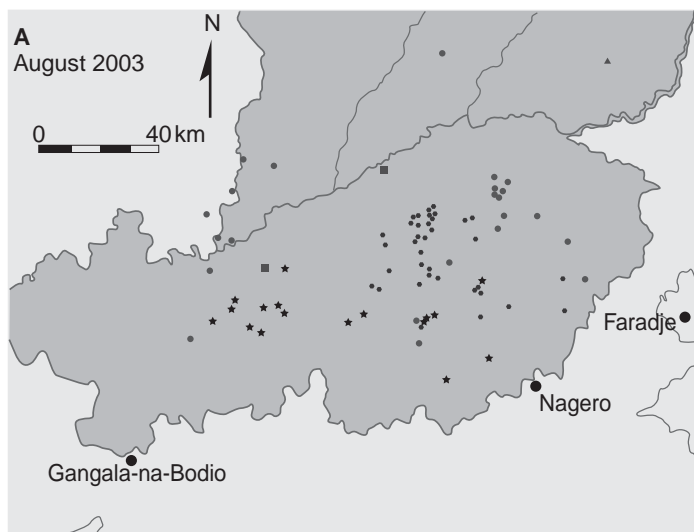
Major rehabilitation is getting under way and the project is trying to raise more support for redevelopment. However, through this war period virtually all wildlife was eliminated from the north and centre of the park and the buffering effect of the meat poaching of buffalos has been lost. All pressure is on the southern sector, the Intensive Protection

Zone of the rhinos and elephants. In 1999 a group of Sudan People's Liberation Army regulars was sent across the border at the request of the local civilian authorities, because local people were being harassed. Initially their weapons recovery had a positive effect on reducing poaching and two mixed operations were held jointly with park staff, local authorities and the SPLA. But at the end they refused to return, and they and the military camps on the border have been the main force behind the poaching now moving well into the southern sector from east and west.

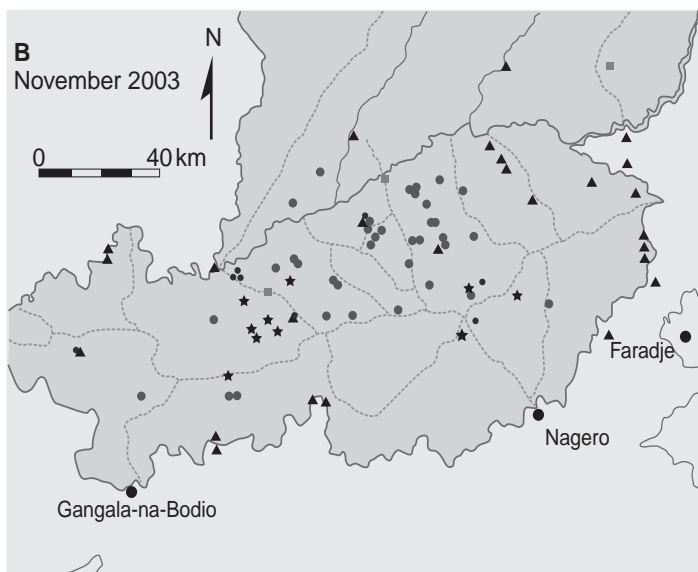
### Phase 3: Late June 2003 to date

Since late June 2003 poaching in Garamba National Park has changed focus from meat to ivory. The level of poaching of elephants has exploded, with poachers taking only the tusks and leaving the meat. Reports indicate that ivory is traded in exchange for equipment as well as for arms and ammunition to resupply rebel factions in Sudan. A survey in August showed 34 fresh elephant carcasses and 2 rhino carcasses gunned down by the automatic fire of AK 47s. There are almost certainly more live rhinos than the 22 seen as one never sees them all at one time and the survey was not fully comprehensive but focused on key areas. The area of high density of elephant carcasses, however, was an area (Nambira/Matakpe) of rhino concentration throughout the war periods. Some of the individuals from there were seen elsewhere, others were not and it is believed that at least 3 rhinos have been killed. However, a new calf was also found in August, and another in November. Infant of 5dF, Jengatu, the August calf was named Keba, which means 'Beware!' in Bangala. The latest calf is to 3eF, Etumba.

A survey and anti-poaching reconnaissance back-up in November found that fresh elephant carcasses are now as far west as the Nangume River and right at the edge of the second rhino area (fig. 3).



- ★ Rhinos seen
- Fresh and recent elephant carcasses
- Patrol posts
- Towns



- ★ Rhinos seen
- ▲ Poachers seen
- Fresh and recent elephant carcasses
- ▲ Recent and occupied poaching camps
- Patrol posts
- Towns
- Park roads
- ~ Rivers

Figure 3. Since June 2003, the nature of poaching has exploded from commercial meat to commercial ivory poaching. Rhinos seen and fresh elephant carcasses found on aerial reconnaissance A) in August 2003 and B) in November 2003.

In November, 47 fresh and recent (stages 1 and 2) elephant carcasses were found, plus a further 7 stage 3. Five groups of poachers were found in and around the park and 15 recently occupied camps. Several air and ground operations were carried out, including one where a group of poachers was found cutting tusks from a freshly dead elephant and a carrying a further 8 tusks. One of the mobile patrols was dispatched using the vehicle recently donated through the project by the International Elephant Foundation and was guided from the air. We then found they had killed a further three adults including two tuskless females, wounding one of their juveniles and orphaning another. Successful armed contacts continue, but with grass the 2 metres tall at present, these are difficult and not enough to eliminate all the poacher penetrations.

Now that the poachers have entered the heart of the park, the threat to the last few northern white rhinos is greater than it has been in the last 20 years. Despite their tough antipoaching stance and motivation, the guards are finding it difficult to repel the well-armed and determined poachers, who are largely southern Sudanese military and military deserters. The current situation in Garamba is being actively and urgently addressed by an emergency strategy developed jointly at the park and approved by the administrateur directeur general of ICCN. The aim is to stop the poaching in the southern sector, prevent any more deaths of key species and allow numbers to rebuild before it is too late, then gradually to regain control of the whole park by

- developing and implementing a full-scale effective training and retraining operation from a training base that has been built in the park, using an expert professional trainer and assistant working with ICCN trainers and project personnel
- revising and implementing an effective anti-poaching strategy to protect the southern sector in the immediate term and to regain control of the whole park in the long term

- providing technical, logistical, maintenance, equipment and ration support necessary, increasing aerial support, raising awareness, and raising further support on the basis of successful actions
- carrying out a major diplomatic and pressure initiative to inform the Sudanese hierarchy and UN peace-keeping forces of the true situation and request their action and support
- increasing communications and collaboration with the surrounding communities and encouraging local diplomatic initiatives

Several diplomatic actions have taken place including an excellent meeting with the SPLA commander, who promised to recall the troops in DRC who are doing the poaching. However, another meeting at local level ended in an agreement between the SPLA and local authorities that their withdrawal should be delayed by 2 months and be dependent on payment of USD 10,000 by DRC government authorities. The recent aerial survey and anti-poaching recce indicated that the Sudanese are making the most of this period to take as much ivory as possible, and this situation is being taken up again at high level.

Twenty-two more young guards have been recruited and trained by ICCN trainers who have followed the African Field Ranger Training Services course. More intensive and active field training and leadership starts in January. The radio relay looted twice during the wars has been reinstalled and there is now full radio communications. Small tents and uniforms have been flown in to resupply foot patrols and enable greater coverage by smaller groups, with six groups of 10 men each out all the time. More equipment and vehicles and a suitable replacement aircraft are being actively sought.

Now is the time, with peace coming to both DRC and Sudan and more chances of support, to focus all resources on addressing this threat and rebuild the effective conservation of the park.