

Chairman's Report

A LOOK AT ELEPHANT AND RHINO CONSERVATION PROBLEMS AND PROGRESS

The IUCN specialist groups are reviewed at each General Assembly every three years, and although AERSG was convened a year after the 1981 assembly in New Zealand, giving us only a two-year stint I felt obliged to hand on the position at the November General Assembly in Madrid, rather than stand in for a further three years. I took on the chairmanship specifically to see AERSG underway, and now that it is, I must return to my own conservation interests, which have stood back-burner in the meantime, but I hope still to actively support AERSG.

This is a convenient point to review what AERSG has done in the two years, and to suggest what lies ahead.

Where it is easy to say what should be done, it is hard to claim real progress when by definition conservation is holding the animal realm constant against the steady stream of universal change. The only real solution is to monitor regularly the number and distribution of elephants and rhinos, the trade in their products, and to assess the patterns and causes of change. This we have managed to do. Esmond Bradley Martin's rhino horn trade studies have been summarized in previous *Newsletters* and the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit, which we commissioned to do a detailed ivory update in 1982, has continued to produce regular reports. So, based on the field and trade studies, where do we stand? If the animal world is viewed restrictively as the protected areas, then, though regrettable, it is understandable that elephants and rhinos are fast losing ground elsewhere in Africa. What is more worrying is that our largest land mammals are also disappearing within their allocated realm: the 1.2 million square kilometres of Africa enclosed within some 360 conservation areas. These are the conclusions of the 1983-84 surveys summarized in this *Newsletter*.

Douglas-Hamilton, taking only those regions, mostly sanctuaries, with repeated counts over a number of years, shows most of Africa to have lost large numbers of elephants in recent years far more than human increase alone can explain. Given the better protection of sanctuaries and the resulting immigration of elephants from more vulnerable areas, the trend outside will be exaggerated. The field evidence is supported by the population modeling of Pilgram and Western (this *Newsletter*). They suggest the sharp downturn in the weight of tusks entering the world market since the late 70s indicates heavy overhunting. If we reckon that the number of elephants contributing to the annual 800 or so tonnes has increased from some 45,000 to 70,000 over the last eight years when mean tusk weights have declined from around 9 kg to 6 kg, we can compute that there could not have been many more than a million elephants in Africa when the tusk-weight decline began. That is close to the 1.3 million estimated by Douglas-Hamilton in the late 70s and 1.19 given by the Wankie Workshop in 1982. When we add ivory used within Africa (presently being surveyed by Bradley Martin), last year's ivory export may have reached 1,000 tonnes, representing 90,000 or more dead elephants, almost twice the 5% annual offtake that the million or fewer elephant can sustain, and sufficient to halve the population in less than ten years.

Rhinos have fared far worse. Black rhinos have declined

from around 13,000 in 1980 to less than 9,000 in 1984. Trade figures produced by Bradley Martin's 1983 Asian surveys show North Yemen, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea to be acquiring most of that horn. Northern white rhinos have declined from around 700 to less than 30 over the same time, and the last remnants, a confirmed 13, survive in Garamba National Park in Zaire. Only the status of southern white rhinos, which have increased from around 3,000 to 4,000 in recent years, give any reason for optimism.

There can no longer be any reasonable doubt that commercial hunting is making heavy inroads into elephant populations, just as it has indisputably exterminated rhinos over most of Africa. Douglas-Hamilton has stated the case *clearly* (*Newsletter* 2), and the close correspondence in the disappearance of both elephants and rhinos (Western and Vigne, this volume), points to a common commercial trade.

We have complemented field and trade studies with elephant population models designed to test the consequences of various hunting methods, offtake levels, and trade regulations (Pilgram and Western, this volume). The models are already helping us to explain existing trade patterns and suggest methods for improving the commercial harvest without wiping out the elephant population. One far reaching conclusion shows that present hunting methods are unsound economically and that alternative methods could more than double the profitability to African governments and traders alike, while simultaneously improving the status of elephants.

As a result of the field, trade and computer modelling studies we are now far better placed to pin-point the problem areas, to suggest practical remedies, to coordinate conservation activities and to monitor progress. But, though now better placed to plan and coordinate conservation in future, we also undertook to promote action on the recommendations of the 1982 Wankie meeting of the joint elephant and rhino specialist groups, chaired then by Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Kes Hillman.

How successful have we been? We were in a position to act on some 32 of 36 proposals. We got underway on each by writing letters to all relevant African heads of state and government wildlife agencies signed by the Director General IUCN, drawing the attention to the Wankie action plan. We also enclosed the publication "Elephants and Rhinos in Africa: A Time for Decision", and outlined the priorities relevant to each country. The government follow-up has been mixed, but good in some important cases. Most improvements since 1982 are directly due to government action, rather than to international conservation agencies, though they have played a strong supporting role. This is as it should be.

On specifics, we were most concerned about the continued rhino horn trade and asked various agencies to intervene to stop traffic into the remaining free-trade countries: North Yemen, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea in particular. African Wildlife Foundation successfully got North Yemen to ban imports, but the trade continues unabated. At our request, WWF/UK lobbied Singapore, and CITES has recently informed me that this country has banned horn imports and will soon sign CITES. We have had no success yet with Taiwan and South Korea, despite diplomatic initiatives. Hong Kong, which can legally re-export its stock of old horn has shipped all but 289 kg of 3,000 kg and is no longer a glaring loophole. There has, according to Bradley Martin, been a slow-up in the Far East trade, so signs are encouraging, but still inadequate. We have asked IUCN to press more strongly for effective trade bans where the loopholes still exist, particularly North Yemen, South

Korea and Taiwan. Namibia, the only remaining African state continuing legal rhino horn exports, agreed to discontinue doing so, as a direct result of a letter from AERSG.

We have been partly successful too on dubious ivory transactions, by mounting an international publicity campaign which contributed to Sudan's export ban (but only after levels rose in excess of a quarter of Africa's total shipments and destroyed most of the country's elephants), and by getting Japan to agree to some voluntary constraints on ivory imports.

Other Wankie priorities, and subsequent issues which cropped up, have also been tackled by AERSG, including the initiation of a forest elephant study, which Richard Barnes is about to begin in Gabon, negotiation of rhino shipments from South Africa to Texas, and efforts to direct funding to the three most important elephant and rhino ecosystems – Selous, Garamba and the Luangwa Valley, and to desert elephants and rhinos in Mali, Mauritania and Namibia.

Following a resolution by the African countries attending the Brussels CITES/TEC meeting to establish annual ivory export quotas, AERSG is advising the consultant, Rowan Martin, who is helping producer countries formulate the quotas and improve methods of marking and monitoring tusks. Our field surveys and computer models have a crucial role to play in setting target figures and monitoring procedures.

We have also played a key role in initiating field surveys of the northern white rhino, and follow-up research in Garamba National Park where the last few survive; both studies have been undertaken by Kes Hillman. Based on reports received from Garamba, AERSG at its September meeting in Botswana again urged IUCN to approach President Mobutu of Zaire with the intention of securing greater protection for the remaining 13 animals, and specifically to urge that they be placed in secure captive breeding herds. Various possibilities have already been worked out in the event that Zaire agree to our recommendations. The IUCN delegation will meet President Mobutu early in January. We have simultaneously promoted a captive management programme for the northern white rhinos scattered throughout the world. Frankfurt Zoological Society has agreed to coordinate international zoo efforts.

Finally, we have been successful in promoting national rhino plans, especially in Kenya, by drawing attention to the rapid fragmentation of remaining stocks and advocating herd consolidation for greater security and biological integrity.



Black rhino Amboseli National Park, Kenya
[C.A.W. Guggisberg]

On balance, AERSG has made a good start and can claim real progress on most priority elephant and rhino issues, in as far as our voluntary nature and advisory role permit. Where we have undoubtedly failed is in addressing the West African fragmentation and disappearance of elephants, and in the

wholesale killing of elephants and rhinos in C.A.R. and surrounding countries.

Future priorities, which were worked out at the Botswana meeting, will continue to centre on the rescue of the northern white rhino and the most significant ecosystems, the survival of important races and ecological types of elephants and rhinos, the promotion of national rhino (and perhaps elephant) plans, continued monitoring of both field and trade statistics, the technical evaluation of data and conservation strategies, identification of priorities, and their promotion by national and international conservation agencies. Our two highest priorities are to promote a world-wide ban in rhino horn trade and action on elephant conservation in West and Central Africa.

Regular six-monthly meetings in Africa have enabled specialists to discuss conservation issues and priorities, and to arrive at a consensus. Though frequent meetings pulled in most members at one time or another, and built up momentum, it should in future be possible to hold meetings less often, perhaps once a year. The six-monthly *Newsletter*, which has been an extremely successful way of keeping members and other interested parties informed about elephant and rhino conservation, could play a far greater role.

I mentioned earlier that the main purpose of AERSG is to monitor the status of elephants and rhinos, pin-point problems, recommend practical solutions, coordinate programmes and keep track of how successful they are. These roles should be clearly distinguished from conservation and political activism – which is the function of national and international agencies. The distinction is fundamental to the impartiality and credibility of AERSG, and one that has been blurred in the past. I have tried to retain the distinction and bring about a more technical and advisory role, knowing full well how frustrating it is to both group members and those who would have it play a more active part. But we cannot credibly do both, and should recognize our strengths and limitations. At times we have become activists, by, for example, lobbying Sudan to impose an ivory export ban. We then did so only when there was some urgency and when we failed to get any response from IUCN. And here, I feel, lies the greatest weakness of the IUCN-SSC linkage.

The easiest task for AERSG is monitoring and recommending projects, the hardest is getting action, particularly out of IUCN. The northern white rhino is a case in point. It took nearly five years to launch a conservation programme, by which time the animals had dwindled from 700 to less than 30. IUCN claims they are too under-staffed to respond to any but the most urgent issues, yet recently, at the Madrid General Assembly, declared the northern white one of the world's dozen most endangered animals. If this isn't an emergency conservation issue, then what is?

What is the solution for AERSG? I suggest the best remedy in future is for the group to take IUCN at its word, to accept that it is too under-staffed to respond to recommendations, and to approach other international and national organizations directly on all urgent projects. Whichever organization takes the ball and runs is doing a service to the northern white rhinos of this world. And it is after all, the interest of elephants and rhinos which our specialist group is trying to serve.

David Western

LATE PRESS: DAVID CUMMING HAS ACCEPTED
CHIRMANSHIP, AERSG